The Vanity of Small Differences

Grayson Perry

An exhibition from the Arts Council Collection

Education information pack
The Vanity of Small Differences exhibition venues, 2018:

Royal Hibernian, Dublin; 18 January - 18 March 2018
Bristol Museum and Art Gallery; 30 March - 24 June 2018
2021, Scunthorpe; 07 July – 08 September 2018
The Grundy, Blackpool; 27 September - 15 December 2018

Front cover image:

Grayson Perry
The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal (2012) (Detail)
Wool, cotton, acrylic, polyester and silk tapestry
200 × 400cm
© the artist
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How to use this pack

This pack is designed for use by teachers and other educators including gallery education staff. As well as providing background information about Grayson Perry and the creation of the tapestries, the pack explores the tapestries through a number of different themes inspired by the work, offering ideas for educational projects and activities. The tapestries provide particularly rich inspiration for learning in art, geography and citizenship. There are also many links to literacy.

The activity suggestions are targeted primarily at Key Stage 2 and 3 pupils though could be adapted for older and younger pupils. They may form part of a project before, during or after a visit to see the tapestries. Ideas are informed by National Curriculum requirements and Ofsted subject guidance. Much of the information in this pack will also be of relevance to pupils at Key Stage 4. In particular, the essays included at the end of the pack provide more detailed insights into the work that will of value to GCSE and ‘A’ levels students.

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This pack was commissioned by the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre and was researched and written by Fiona Godfrey, Arts & Education Consultant (www.fionagodfrey.org.uk).
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Background to the exhibition

The six tapestries in the exhibition *The Vanity of Small Differences* came about as a result of Grayson Perry making a series of documentaries with Channel 4 called *All in the Best Possible Taste*; screened in summer 2012. Perry had worked previously with the director Neil Crombie and the idea formed as result of discussions between them, as described by Perry:

‘We’d been talking about making a series of TV programmes about taste and it seemed sensible for some art works to come out of the series. We were wondering what sort of art works would be fitting. Pots would have seemed a rather small-scale outcome; whereas tapestries, being large, could work on a public scale. We could produce a series that would fit with the number of programmes we were planning – 3 social classes, 3 programmes, 6 tapestries. Also, compared with pots, tapestries are actually relatively quick to produce.’

The three Channel 4 programmes followed Perry as he investigated the taste of those traditionally considered working class, middle class and upper class. Perry’s investigations involved him visiting working class communities in Sunderland, middle class communities in Tunbridge Wells and upper class families living in grand homes in the Cotswolds.

Perry’s particular interest was in the emotional attachments we make to objects, and how the judgments we make about our own and other peoples’ taste are often delineated along class lines. In order to gather material, he spent time in the company of different groups; interviewing them, photographing them and making sketchbook drawings and notes. In each of the three locations he gained further insights by dressing up as a woman of the class group he was visiting.

In Sunderland, he was curious to investigate aspects of working class taste that are sometimes deemed ‘tacky’ or ‘tasteless’. He observed the pleasure that women took in dressing up for a night out on the town, and the enjoyment the young men took in displaying their cars. He noticed how these displays create an almost tribal sense of belonging. He discovered how much emotional affection people have for the objects in their homes and he also saw an enduring and nostalgic allegiance to the industries that had given the town a sense of unity in the past.

In middle class Tunbridge Wells Perry discovered two distinct ‘taste tribes’. The first group he spent time with was the new affluent middle class whose homes were filled with signs of wealth. Here the emphasis was often on owning brand new, designer things. People in this group seemed concerned to fit in by surrounding themselves with objects that conformed to a social norm typified by smartness and newness. In contrast, the second middle class group Perry identified gravitated more towards the individual; surrounding themselves with all things vintage, shabby-chic, hand-made and organic. He sensed among this group a desire to be individual; yet this individuality still had to fit within a particular set of norms. Among this group he noticed a lot of anxiety about health and the environment. He also noted that the second group placed more value on owning books than the first group.

Among the upper class estates in the Cotswolds, Perry found a sense of poverty and decay. This was a group of people who seemed content to live with the shabbiness of
antiquity. Here he met families burdened by their assets; crippled by taxes and lacking the money needed to stop the decay of their buildings or to lavish on their own comforts. He sensed the huge weight of responsibility bestowed on this class by their inheritance. He also met those determined to find new ways to bring new life, creativity and investment to the historic buildings and countryside in their ownership.

The photographs and drawings that Perry made as a result of these investigations were amalgamated into a series of compositions.

Each of these six compositions was then interpreted as a tapestry; designed on Photoshop and then woven by computer operated machinery at the Flanders Tapestries in Belgium. The labour of making the tapestries was in the designing, with Perry taking around two weeks to turn his drawings into compositions. It then took three months to adapt his computer files, and programme the computers that control the looms. Yarns had to be specially sourced and dyed to carefully match the colours in Perry’s drawing. Different yarn combinations had to be trialled to ensure a good colour match. Threading a loom ready for weaving took about 4 days. With the design finalised, the actual process of weaving each tapestry then took about 5 hours. Several copies of each tapestry were produced; each run of the same design is known as an ‘edition’. An edition of six was produced of each design,
plus two trials, known as ‘artist’s proofs’.

Perry’s decision to immortalise his visits and observations in a series of tapestries was partly inspired by the history of tapestry making as a traditional means of recording stories, as well as by their associations with wealth and grandeur. Interviewed for Channel 4, Perry said:

‘Why tapestries? I always work with traditional media. Each historic category of object has accrued over time intellectual and emotional baggage. I depend on this to add inflection to the content of the works. Tapestry is the art form of grand houses. On my television taste safari I only saw tapestries hanging in stately homes. They depicted classical myths, historical and religious scenes or epic battles like Hannibal crossing the Alps. I enjoy the idea of using this costly and ancient medium to show the commonplace dramas of modern British life.’

Perry’s six tapestries tell a story of twenty-first century social mobility. In them we see Tim Rakewell; a man rising from a working class birth, making money, marrying into the middle classes, experiencing the crippling financial burdens of the upper classes, and finally dying an untimely death.

Perry’s tapestries make direct reference to the series of paintings called *A Rake’s Progress* by William Hogarth (1697-1764), which hang in the John Soane Museum in London. Hogarth has long been an influence on Perry’s work. The eight paintings in Hogarth’s series tell the story of Tom Rakewell, a young man who inherits a fortune from his father and who thenceforth goes on to squander his inheritance on fashionable pursuits. Tom marries for money, gambles away his second fortune, is imprisoned for his debts and finally ends his life in ‘the madhouse’.

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The tapestries also pay homage to early Renaissance painting; another favourite art form of Perry’s.

For those interested in more detailed commentary and analysis, the essays at the end of the pack provide further insight into Perry’s investigations, reflections and working processes.

The *Vanity of Small Differences* is owned by the Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre and the British Council Collection. It is a gift of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery with the support of Channel 4 Television, the Art Fund and Sfumato Foundation with additional support from Alix Partners.
Grayson Perry biography

Grayson Perry came to public attention when he won the Turner Prize in 2003. He was born into a working class family in 1960, and spent the first years of his life in Chelmsford, Essex, attending Broomfield Primary School. When he was five his father left home, leaving his mother to marry the milkman with whom she had been having an affair. They had two more children, a boy and a girl. At this point Perry’s father disappeared out of his life. When he was eight he moved with his mother and stepfather to the village of Bicknacre and he changed schools to Woodham Ferres C of E Primary.

Perry’s secondary schooling was at King Edward VI Grammar School in Chelmsford. During this time, the family moved again to a new house built by his stepfather in Great Bardfield. Shortly after this, Perry renewed contact with his father, at which his mother threw him out, insisting he go and live with him. Unfortunately this didn’t work out either, and he returned to his mother and stepfather’s until he was 18. He joined the Art Foundation course at Braintree FE College and then applied for a BA in Fine Art at Portsmouth Polytechnic, believing he was unlikely to be accepted by the top London art collages. He left with a 2:1 degree in 1982. During these years, he was welcome at neither his mother nor his father’s homes and spent much of his holidays living in squats in Portsmouth and London, getting involved in a life where creativity pervaded all aspects of existence, from conversations to parties, dress and décor.

Perry talks openly about how the difficult times of his childhood and how these experiences have fed into his work. His stepfather created a world of violence and fear and Perry’s survival tactic was to retreat into an imaginary world of play; a world of island kingdoms, wars and rebellion, in which the central hero was his teddy bear Alan Measles. (Alan Measles now has his own website and twitter account.) In this world, Perry’s creative spirit flourished as inventor, maker and designer – of guns, planes, cranes and vehicles. Between the ages of five and fifteen, this became Perry’s place of refuge from the unstable and sometimes violent world of his family. He also discovered his ability to represent this world through his skills in drawing. Another influence on Perry’s creativity was the early memory of his father’s shed. This was a world of cobbled together cupboards and drawers; with mismatched drawer knobs, improvised tools and a colourful wall where his father tried out different paints. In his autobiography, Perry describes how these experiences shaped his appreciation and enjoyment of his own creativity.

“My own creativity and art practice has been a mental shed – a sanctuary as well as a place of action – where I’ve retreated to make things. It gives me a sense of security in a safe enclosed space while I look out of the window onto the world.”

When he about eleven, Perry began to become aware of his enjoyment of women’s clothes and discovered the thrill inherent in dressing up. He has become almost as well-known for his sub-personality Claire as for himself, as he often publicly dresses as Claire in outrageously girly costumes and frocks. This discovery was somewhat at odds with his more conventional teenage interests in model aeroplanes, motorbikes, punk music and

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2 Jones, Wendy Grayson Perry, Portrait of the Artist as a Young Girl, Vintage 2007 p23
girls. For a while he wanted to train as an army officer. Instead he was encouraged to pursue his abilities in art.

Another influence on Perry's work during his time at art college was the work of so called 'outsider' artists. An exhibition called Outsiders was shown at the Hayward Gallery in 1979. The exhibition comprised pictures and sculptures by people with no formal art training; many living on the fringes of society. Perry saw the exhibition and was particularly drawn to the work of Henry Darger; a reclusive eccentric, much of whose childhood had been spent in a psychiatric hospital. Perry describes the influence of Darger on his work.

‘Darger is the artist I identify with most in terms of his creative pathways. I feel a kindred spirit with how his imagination worked, the way he sought refuge in a fantasy world in the same way that I secreted my imagination and artistic practice into a shed where I retreated to do my work in an enclosed, secure environment while observing the world. I see in Henry Darger’s work that the real world was too painful to bear, so he made an alternative.’

Perry’s first experience of success as an artist came in 1980, at the end of his first year at art college, when he made a small sculpture that appeared something like a gutted fish or a boat, with a wigwam roof. This was accepted for an annual exhibition of art student work organised by the Institute of Contemporary Arts called The New Contemporaries.

On leaving art college, Perry moved back to a squat in London with fellow students from Portsmouth, living on the dole and supplementing this income by life-modelling. During this time he became involved with a group called the Neo-Naturists, who staged anarchistic nude performance art events, revisiting the spirit of nudism that had been alive in the 1960s. During this time, Perry remained committed to becoming an artist, and had been continuing to make small sculptures from junk as well as filling sketchbooks with detailed collages.

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3 ibid, p.126
'The collages’ obsessive detail, busyness and horror vacui\(^4\) set the tone for the work I make now: even it is a pot that doesn’t have detail on it has to have a texture; it has to have marbling or crackle. I find it difficult to leave empty space, my instinct is to cover up emptiness and always elaborate, to my detriment sometimes. It’s part of my psychological make-up that I’m a detail freak.\(^5\)\n
In 1982, Perry decided to join a pottery class, and took great delight in the skills, techniques and possibilities of ceramics, as well as discovering a wealth of examples of decorative pottery, such as in the V&A museum, including slipware. Perry’s work at this time was provocative and angry; sculptural pieces incorporating bits of broken pottery and glass. This work was shown in a mixed exhibition in a little gallery opposite the British Museum.

It wasn’t until the 1990s that Perry really began to realise that pottery was his métier. He had thought that the glamorous world of film-making might be more in keeping with his lifestyle. However, part of the attraction of pottery for Perry was its low status as an art form and also its British wholesomeness, against which he could play with being provocative. Pottery also has wide associations in folk art and is a form on which stories have often traditionally been told, as in for example the vases of Ancient Greece.

His work developed into making the large pots for which he is perhaps best known, and which sell for many thousands of pounds. These are one-off pieces, often on large scale, hand built with the traditional method of coiling. He uses colourful glazes and underglaze colours, lustres and photographic transfers to decorate his pots with motifs and figures that often suggest narratives, maps and family trees. These symbolic combinations often sum up experiences of the absurdity, curiosity and pain of everyday human experience. He describes in his autobiography how he never likes to do trials. Trials take place on the pot itself, maybe in a new combination of colours, glazes and transfers. He often ‘bodges’ with gold lustre when something goes wrong. He sees ‘bodging’ as part of being human.

\[^4\] A term used in art to denote the filling of an entire space with detail, from the Latin meaning ‘fear of the empty’.
\[^5\] Ibid, p183
Though pottery continues to play a central role in Perry’s work, he also makes work using a wide range of other art forms including printmaking, film and embroidery. His first work using tapestry was in 2009. The Walthamstow Tapestry is a detailed depiction of modern day life, including hundreds of familiar brand names.

Grayson Perry
The Walthamstow Tapestry, 2009
wool and cotton tapestry
300 x 1500 cm
Courtesy the Artist and Victoria Miro, London
© the artist

Perry’s first solo exhibition was in Amsterdam in 2002, followed by a solo show at the Barbican in London in the same year. He has also had solo shows in Pittsburgh (2006), Japan (2007) and Luxembourg (2008). In 2008, Perry curated the exhibition Unpopular Culture, selecting works from the Arts Council Collection. In 2011, he curated the exhibition The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman at the British Museum. This combined Perry’s own work in pottery, textiles and sculpture with objects by unknown craftsmen and women from the museum’s collection. In the same year, he was elected a member of the Royal Academy of the Arts.

Perry lives in London with his wife Phillippa and their daughter Florence, as well as spending some of his time near Eastbourne where he has a cottage and studio.
The six tapestries

This section provides detailed information on each of the tapestries, along with explanations of the art works that inspired them. The quotations in italics are Grayson Perry’s own descriptions.

All the tapestries measure 200 x 400 cm. All works are reproduced courtesy Arts Council Collection, Southbank Centre London and British Council Collection. Gift of the artist and Victoria Miro Gallery with the support of Channel 4 Television, The Art Fund and Sfumato Foundation with additional support from Alix Partners. All photographs copyright Grayson Perry.
‘The scene is Tim’s great-grandmother’s front room. The infant Tim reaches for his mother’s smartphone – his rival for her attention. She is dressed up, ready for a night out with her four friends, who have perhaps already ‘been on the pre-lash’. Two ‘Mixed Martial Arts’ enthusiasts present icons of tribal identity to the infant: a Sunderland A.F.C. football shirt and a miner’s lamp. In the manner of early Christian painting, Tim appears a second time in the work: on the stairs, as a four-year-old, facing another evening alone in front of a screen. Although this series of images developed very organically, with little consistent method, the religious reference was here from the start: I hear the echo of paintings such as Andrea Mantegna’s The Adoration of the Shepherds (c. 1450).’
Text (in the voice of Tim’s Mother): ‘I could have gone to Uni, but I did the best I could, considering his father upped and left. He (Tim) was always a clever little boy, he knows how to wind me up. My mother liked a drink, my father liked one too. Ex miner a real man, open with his love, and his anger. My Nan though is the salt of the earth, the boy loves her. She spent her whole life looking after others. There are no jobs round here anymore, just the gym and the football. A normal family, a divorce or two, mental illness, addiction, domestic violence... the usual thing.... My friends they keep me sane... take me out... listen... a night out of the weekend in town is a precious ritual.’

**Historical art references**

Perry’s composition was inspired by Mantegna’s painting *The Adoration of the Shepherds*. Mantegna was an early prodigy of the Italian Renaissance, and this painting was made when he was only in his early twenties. Artists at the time were just working out how to use perspective to create a sense of distance. Although the perspective is flawed in some places (for example the bars on the building) we can see Mantegna experimenting with and demonstrating his skills. He also shows off his skills by foreshortening the figure of the infant Christ. He uses architectural detail in the foreground to show closeness and a carefully detailed landscape to show distance. The way the scene in shown is typical of a trend at the time that encouraged worshippers to think about biblical scenes in everyday terms. Hence shepherds are tatty in dress and ugly in appearance. The way he depicts the holy family also shows his love of the ‘classical’ art of the Ancient Greeks, who had been interested in the ideals of human beauty, excellence and architectural perfection.

In the scene, Mary worships her new-born, while Joseph sleeps in the left of the painting. The bare tree that stands out above the shepherds in the right of the painting perhaps suggest the cross on which Jesus’ life will end. The orchard on the left has been read to symbolise Mary’s fertility.

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6 The description ‘classical’ come from the Latin word ‘classis’ which means of a superior class.
The Agony in the Car Park

‘This image is a distant relative of Giovanni Bellini’s The Agony in the Garden (c. 1465). The scene is a hill outside Sunderland – in the distance is the Stadium of Light. The central figure, Tim’s stepfather, a club singer, hints at Matthias Grünewald’s Isenheim Altarpiece. A child-like shipyard crane stands in for the crucifix, with Tim’s mother as Mary – once again in the throes of an earthly passion. Tim, in grammar school uniform, blocks his ears, squirming in embarrassment. A computer magazine sticks out of his bag, betraying his early enthusiasm for software. To the left, a younger Tim plays happily with his step-grandfather outside his pigeon cre on the allotments. To the right, young men with their customised cars gather in the car park of ‘Heppie’s’ social club. Mrs T and the call centre manager await a new recruit into the middle class.

Text (in the voice of the Tim’s stepfather): ‘I started as a lad in the shipyards. I followed in my father’s footsteps. Now Dad has his pigeons and he loves the boy [Tim]. Shipbuilding bound the town together like a religion. When Thatcher closed the yards down it ripped the heart out of the community. I could have been in a rock band [above graffiti of Sunderland band The Futureheads]. I met the boys’ mother at the club. I sing on a Saturday night between the bingo and the meat raffle. Now I work in a call centre, the boss says I am management material. The money’s good, I could buy my council house, sell it and get out. I voted Tory last time.’
Historical art references
This is Bellini’s painting from which Perry took his inspiration. Brother-in-law to Mantegna, Giovanni Bellini was also an Italian artist who worked in Venice from around 1459 onwards and who continued painting until not long before he died in 1516. One of the most important Venetian artists, Giovanni Bellini came from a family of artists and was admired for his sensitive paintings of the Virgin. He and Mantegna both painted versions of the Agony in the Garden, and it has been suggested that they both worked from a drawing by Bellini’s father Jacobo, who was also an artist.

![Giovanni Bellini](image)

The Agony in the Garden, c.1465
Tempera on panel
National Gallery, London UK / The Bridgman Art Library

Giovanni Bellini (c.1430 - 1516)

The painting portrays Christ kneeling in prayer on the Mount of Olives, knowing of his impending arrest and crucifixion, while Judas and the soldiers approach across the distant landscape. An angel appears in the sky, holding a cup, as a symbol of strength and comfort. Although the central focus of the painting is Christ on the rock, the white Italian city at the left of the picture is also a focus, perhaps suggesting the heavenly city. Meanwhile beneath this heavenly scene, the more earthly disciples Peter, James and John sleep close by with all their human flaws; too tired to stay awake. Bellini was particularly skilled at depicting the effect of light, and the dawn light creates an unearthly atmosphere, which creates a more hopeful effect that in Mantegna’s harsher version.
Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close

‘Tim is at university studying computer science, and is going steady with a nice girl from Tunbridge Wells. To the left, we see Tim’s mother and stepfather, who now live on a private development and own a luxury car. She hoovers the AstroTurf lawn, he returns from a game of golf. There has been an argument and Tim and his girlfriend are leaving. They pass through a rainbow, while Jamie Oliver, the god of social mobility, looks down. They are guilty of a sin, just like Adam and Eve in Masaccio’s The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (c. 1425). To the right, a dinner party is just starting. Tim’s girlfriend’s parents and fellow guests toast the new arrival.’

Text (in the voice of Tim’s girlfriend):

‘I met Tim at College, he was Such a Geek. He took me back to meet his mother and Stepfather. Their house was so clean and Tidy, not a speck of dust... or a book, apart from her god, Jamie. She Says I have turned Tim into a Snob. His parents don’t appreciate how bright he is. My father laughed at Tim’s accent but welcomed him onto the sunlit uplands of the middle classes. I hope Tim loses his obsession with money.’

Historical art references

In figures of Tim and his girlfriend, Perry make’s direct reference to Masaccio’s painting Adam and Eve banished from Paradise. Masaccio was another early Renaissance artist who only lived to the age of 27. The name Masaccio is a nickname meaning ‘hulking Tom’.
During his short life, his particular interest was in the mastery of the human figure, creating the effect of solidity through the use of light and shade.

These frescoes of the Brancacci Chapel in Florence, painted with Masolino in the mid-1420s, are considered to be his masterpiece. In this fresco, Adam and Eve are expelled from the Garden of Eden, having tasted the fruit they were forbidden to eat. Above them hovers an angel pointing to the outside world. Eve clearly experiences grief as well as shame at her nudity, while Adam covers his face in remorse. Masaccio’s work typified a new movement in art at the time, from rather static depictions of human figures to a greater emphasis on emotion, expression and muscularity.
'Tim is relaxing with his family in the kitchen of his large, rural (second) home. His business partner has just told him that he is now an extremely wealthy man, as they have sold their software business to Richard Branson. On the table is a still life demonstrating the cultural bounty of his affluent lifestyle. To the left, his parents-in-law read, and his elder child plays on the rug. To the right, Tim dandles his baby while his wife tweets. This image includes references to three different paintings of the Annunciation by Carlo Crivelli (the vegetables) Matthias Grünewald (his colleague’s expression) and Robert Campin (the jug of lilies). The convex mirror and discarded shoes are reminders of that great pictorial display of wealth and status, The Arnolfini Portrait (1434) by Jan van Eyck.'

[Text (in the voice of Tim’s business partner):]

‘I have worked with Tim for a decade, a genius, yet so down to earth. Tim’s incredibly driven, he never feels successful. He’s calmer since his mother died. He’s had a lot of therapy. He wants to be good.’

(on copy of The Guardian used to wrap organic vegetables): ‘A Geek’s Progress, Tim Rakewell: risen without trace’

(on iPad): ‘Rakewell sells to Virgin for £270m’]
Historical art references
In this tapestry, Perry makes reference to the famous Arnolfini Marriage by Jan van Eyck, which makes a conscious display of wealth. The mirror and the chandelier are centrally placed, and attention is given to the rich fabrics in which the couple are dressed. Oranges (under the window) were a very expensive and prized fruit at the time. The small dog is a symbol of loyalty, and its rare breed (an Affenpinscher) also suggests wealth. The text above the mirror literally translates from Latin as ‘Jan Van Eyck was here’, which also links to Grayson Perry’s use of text in the tapestries.

Jan van Eyck (c.1390 - 1441)
The Portrait of Giovanni (?) / Arnolfini and his Wife Giovanna Cenami (?) / (The Arnolfini Marriage), 1434
Oil on panel
National Gallery, London, UK / The Bridgeman Art Library

In this tapestry Perry also makes reference to three different paintings of the Annunciation. His inclusion of fruit and vegetables references this detail from Carlo Crivelli’s painting on this theme.

Carlo Crivelli (1430/5 - c.1494)
The Annunciation, with Saint Emidius, 1486
Tempera and oil on canvas
The National Gallery, London / The Bridgeman Art Library

The expression on the face of Tim’s colleague is influenced by Matthias Grünewald’s Painting of the Annunciation. The painting is one panel of twelve that made up an altarpiece that hung in the monastery of St Anthony in Isenheim. The outer wings of the altarpiece
were opened for important festivals, and the Annunciation is on the left wing. In it, the virgin is shown in a chapel, reflecting the sacred nature of the event.

Mathias Grünewald (1475 - 1528)
The Annunciation
Detail from the Isenheim Altarpiece, c1515
Oil on panel
De Agostini Picture Library / The Bridgeman Art Library

The jug of lilies makes reference to Robert Crampin’s version of the Annunciation. Many of the objects in his painting were chosen for their symbolism. Here, the lilies in the ceramic jug represent Mary’s virginity.

(Detail)
Master of Flemalle, identified as Robert Campin (1375-1444)
Central panel of Annunciation Triptych (Merode Altarpiece), 1425
Oil on panel
De Agostini Picture Library / The Bridgeman Art Library
‘Tim Rakewell and his wife are now in their late forties and their children are grown. They stroll, like Mr And Mrs Andrews in Thomas Gainsborough’s famous portrait of the landed gentry (c. 1750), in the grounds of their mansion in the Cotswolds. They are new money; they can never become upper-class in their lifetime. In the light of the sunset, they watch the old aristocratic stag with its tattered tweed hide being hunted down by the dogs of tax, social change, upkeep and fuel bills. The old land-owning breed is dying out. Tim has his own problems; as a ‘fat cat’ he has attracted the ire of an ‘Occupy’-style protest movement, who camp outside his house. The protester silhouetted between the stag’s antlers refers to paintings of the vision of Saint Hubert, who converted on seeing a vision of a crucifix above the head of a stag.’

**Historical art references**

In *The Upper Class at Bay* Tim Rakewell and his wife stroll like Mr and Mrs Andrews in Gainsborough’s famous painting *Mr and Mrs Andrews*. Painted soon after the Andrews’ marriage, Gainsborough shows the couple at Auberies, their estate on the Suffolk-Essex boarder, near Gainsborough’s native Sudbury. It is a conversation piece, a genre fashionable in the eighteenth century, showing groups of people in a rural or domestic setting. The large area of meadows and rolling hills on the right allowed Gainsborough to demonstrate his skill as a landscape painter, which was unusual at the time. Mrs Andrews
sits on an elaborate bench and it has been suggested that the unfinished section of her lap might have been intended for a child. Behind the couple stands an oak tree, a symbol of stability and continuity, and, to their left, sheaves of corn, a symbol of fertility. Gainsborough was, with Reynolds, the leading portrait painter in eighteenth-century England. This is an early work, executed before he developed his later more feathery brushwork.

Thomas Gainsborough
(1727-88)
Mr and Mrs Andrews, c.1748-9
Oil on canvas
National Gallery, London, UK / The Bridgeman Art Library
'The scene is the aftermath of a car accident at an intersection near a retail park. Tim lies dead in the arms of a stranger. His glamorous second wife stands stunned and bloodstained amidst the wreckage of his Ferrari. To the right, paramedics prepare to remove his body. To the left, police and firemen record and clear the crash scene. Onlookers take photos on their camera phones to upload to the internet. His dog lays dead. The contents of his wife’s expensive handbag spill out over a copy of Hello magazine that features her and Tim on the cover. At the bottom of Rogier van der Weyden’s Lamentation (c. 1441), the painting that inspired this image, is a skull; I have substituted it with a smashed smartphone. This scene also echoes the final painting of Hogarth’s A Rake’s Progress, where Tom Rakewell dies naked in The Madhouse.’

[Text (in the voice of a female passer-by): ‘We were walking home from a night out, these two cars, racing each other speed past. Middle aged men showing off, the red one lost control. The driver wasn’t wearing a seatbelt. He didn’t stand a chance. The female passenger was okay but catatonic with shock. I’m a nurse. I tried to save the man but he died in my arms. It was only afterwards I found out that he was that famous computer guy, Rakewell. All he said to me was “Mother”. All that money and he dies in the gutter.’]

**Historical art references**
Perry’s final tapestry *Lamentation* draws on Rogier Van Der Weyden’s painting of the same name, painted around 1441. The Virgin Mary and John the Evangelist hold the body of the
crucified Christ. Mary Magdalene looks on, also mourning. The skull in the foreground reminds us that we are at Golgotha (which translates as 'place of the skull').

Rogier van der Weyden (c.1399-1464)
The Lamentation, c.1441
Oil on panel
Royal Museum of Fine Arts, Brussels

Van der Weyden was apprenticed to Robert Campin and came to be renowned for the pathos and naturalism he used in his portraits and religious subjects. Late medieval religious art often depicted the humanity of Jesus in a way that was intended to evoke empathy and understanding in the viewer, leading them to greater sense of devotion.
Looking at the tapestries

When looking at the tapestries in the gallery, you may find these suggestions for general discussion points and activities useful.

Discussion points

- Use the sentence stem ‘I can see…’ to invite pupils to look really carefully into the detail of each of the tapestries. Challenge pupils to keep finding more and more detail. (This starting point is good for developing the powers of careful observation.)

- Use the sentence stem ‘I feel…’ to invite pupils to share their emotional reactions to one or more of the tapestries. (This starting point is good for encouraging pupils to acknowledge their felt response and express their own responses.)

- Use the sentence stem ‘I think…’ to invite pupils to share their ideas about the tapestries. (This starting point is good for encouraging pupils to express their opinions and ideas about art works and how and why they were made.)

- Use the sentence stem ‘I wonder…..’ to invite pupils to pose questions about the tapestries. Support pupils by suggesting question words they could use such as ‘where…’, ‘how…’, ‘who…’, ‘why…’ etc. (This starting point is good for encouraging curiosity and further research.)

- Talk about the different classes represented in the six tapestries. Find out what pupils themselves understand about class and discuss their own thoughts about the taste of each class. What understanding do they have of different social classes? What associations or prejudices do they have about with the three classes Perry deals with in the tapestries?

Activity ideas

- Ask pupils to go and stand by the tapestry they like the best. Ask them to respond to the objects and environment in the tapestry in terms of what interests or appeals to them. Pupils could make drawings in sketchbooks of the objects they are drawn to. Observe how pupils group themselves. Invite each group to talk about and note down what they like in the tapestry they’ve chosen. Do their choices link them in some way? What words would they use to describe the world depicted in the tapestry they’ve chosen?

- Ask pupils to find and sketch all the different facial expressions that can be found in the tapestries. Pupils could be asked to annotate these drawings with words describing the emotions and / or the personalities of the people they’ve sketched. Ask them to make speech bubbles and thought bubbles telling more of what they think is going on in the minds of the people represented in the tapestries.
• Ask pupils to choose one of the tapestries and create their own story idea from it. Ask them to identify what style of story the tapestry might suggest. Get them to think about title, characters and plot. They could be challenged to tell an improvised story on the spot, or they could tell a story by going round the group and adding a sentence each. Their story could be written in more detail back at school.

• Pupils could be provided with postcards or prints of the historical art works that Grayson Perry made reference to when designing the tapestries, including the paintings from Hogarth’s A Rake’s Progress. Ask pupils to see if they can work out which elements of each of these paintings Perry makes reference to in the tapestries.
Themes and project ideas

This section of the pack outlines some of the themes explored in the tapestries that might be investigated further through classroom projects. Each section provides background information and offers ideas for discussion points and activities.

Activity ideas are geared primarily at Key Stage 2 and 3 pupils.

The themes are as follows:

- The tapestry making tradition
- Objects, choices, tribes and belonging
- The human figure - character and emotion
- Places, local traditions and culture
- Imaginary worlds and stories
The tapestry making tradition

Curriculum links:  art, design and technology, geography, history

Keywords:  Ancient Greece, castles, textiles, The Tudors, weaving

Ideas to explore

Tapestry is a form of weaving. In a woven piece of cloth, warp threads run top to bottom and weft threads run horizontally. In many woven cloths, the weft threads continue from one side of the piece right across to the other edge, creating stripes or checks. In a tapestry the threads fill blocks of colour to create shapes and images. Tapestry usually refers to a woven piece cloth in which this method is used to create a picture.

Traditionally, tapestries were hand-woven on a loom. However, fabric pieces made by embroidery have also, confusingly, been described as tapestries. For example, the famous Bayeux tapestry was stitched onto a background fabric. Needlepoint is also often described as tapestry. This is a technique where coloured yarns are used to stitch through a stiff open weave fabric. There are clear similarities, in that the ‘under and over’ process of sewing is very similar to the ‘under and over’ process of weaving. In needlepoint, the two are perhaps at their most closely related.

The tradition of making tapestries can be traced back in time and across cultures. Tapestries exist that date back hundreds of years, fragments having been found during the excavation of Ancient Greek sites.

In Homer’s Odyssey, Penelope whiles away three years waiting for her husband Odysseus’ return by weaving a burial shroud for her father-in-law Laertes. She agrees that she will accept another suitor’s hand in marriage when her weaving is finished. To keep these other suitors at bay, she undoes a little of the weaving each night.
Tapestries were particularly popular in Tudor times. By the 16th century, Flanders had become the centre of European tapestry production and it was here that tapestries were woven for Henry VIII. It was also Flemish weavers who had come to Norfolk in the 12th century and established the woollen industry there. The name comes from the French word *tapisser* which means to cover or carpet. Many French tapestries followed the *mille Fleur* tradition (literally meaning ‘a thousand flowers’); a stylistic convention in which the background was carpeted in flowers.)

One of the reasons that tapestries have been popular is that they can be taken down, rolled up and carried around. Tapestries have been associated with castles and stately homes, where they fulfilled a role both for decoration and insulation. In churches, tapestries were brought out for special religious occasions. Traditionally, tapestries have been associated with wealth. The tapestries that hung in Henry VII’s apartments at Hampton Court would have cost about the same amount as a battleship to produce!

In the early 19th century, the French weaver Joseph Marie Jacquard first demonstrated his mechanical loom, now known as a Jacquard loom. Grayson Perry’s tapestries were woven on Jacquard looms by the company *Flanders Tapestries*. Traditionally, this loom operated by a series of punched cards, each of which corresponded to a row of weaving. The holes in the card would determine where hooks could penetrate to pick up the harness carrying the weft thread. In this way blocks of colour could be created. The use of punched cards for the Jacquard loom was instrumental in the early evolution of the computer! Modern Jacquard looms are operated by computers. Compared to the laborious process of hand-weaving, these work at incredible speed.

**Discussion points**

- Invite pupils to talk about the textiles that can be seen around them. Which are woven? What other ways are there of constructing textiles (eg knitting, crocheting and felt-making)? Which are the most commonly found? Why do pupils think this is so?

- Find out what pupils know about tapestry. Discuss where they’ve seen tapestries and what they know about their history and how they’re made.
Activity ideas

- Pupils could research the history of tapestry (for example tapestries in Tudor times) or the wool and weaving industry in the UK. They could create a presentation, for example using PowerPoint. Alternatively pupils could undertake geographical research into different tapestry traditions across the world and in different cultural traditions.

- Pupils could be invited to try different weaving techniques. Get them to time themselves completing a given size, or measure how much weaving they’re able to produce in a given time, say 15 minutes. Invite them to use their maths skills to calculate roughly how long it would take them to produce a tapestry the size of Grayson Perry’s.

- Pupils could be invited to imagine that they live in a castle or stately home and asked to design a tapestry to hang on a wall in their home. They could use felt tips for their design (as Grayson Perry does) or collage to experiment with bold blocks of colour. They could take inspiration from the *mille fleur* tradition. Invite them to look at their designs from a distance as well as close up to assess their visual impact.

- Pupils could explore how different coloured warp and weft threads can combine to create new colours, in the style of a Jacquard weaving. This is a useful way to explore colour mixing. Using for example coloured pencil, felt-tip pen or watercolour paint, pupils could make sketchbook experiments combining warp and weft threads. They could start with the same colour for the weft and then experiment with adding different colours for the warp.

- Pupils could be invited to create their own needlepoint designs by drawing with coloured felt tip pen on binca and then use tapestry wools or embroidery silks to fill in their design.

- Pupils could create large scale tapestry designs by weaving into plastic mesh (such as the sturdy plastic pond mesh available from hardware stores) using recycled materials such as cut-up strips of coloured plastic bags. They could create a bold coloured painted design first on paper using large brushes to use as a guide for filling areas of their weaving.

Useful resources

Examples of different tapestries can be found in the V&A’s online collection at: [http://collections.vam.ac.uk/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/)
Objects, choices, tribes and belonging

Curriculum links  Art, citizenship, geography, literacy, PSHE

Key words  Class, fashion, portraits, taste, tribes

Ideas to explore
In his tapestries, Grayson Perry examines the different tribes to which we may belong and how our choices in dress and possessions give us a sense of allegiance or kinship.

The first two tapestries denote working class taste. Women dress up for a night out, while the men display their cars. People collect objects for their homes that have a sentimental attachment for them. They enjoy making a statement and putting on a display.

The second two tapestries depict middle class taste. This class is divided in their cultural choices. On the one hand there are those who enjoy buying smart houses and belongings, belonging to the golf club and wearing designer clothes. For this group, there is an element of conformity, of neatness and perfection. Then there’s another group; those who seek individuality in the home-made, the vintage and the organic.
The fifth and sixth tapestries in the series depict the taste of the upper classes. Often it would seem, upper class taste is based on what is old and has been in the family for years. Age old traditions and understated wealth count more than shows of ostentation.

Among all three classes, the objects people choose to have around them give them a sense of belonging to a particular group or tribe. It seems that whether we choose to wear the colours of a particular football team, drive a particular car or fill our kitchens with a particular style of utensil, more often than not we are consciously or unconsciously influenced by the particular tribe to which we feel we belong.

There are many examples in art history of portraits where the sitter is painted either in an environment, or surrounded by objects, that tell the viewer something about their wealth, status or interests.

There are also similarities with how different tribes around the world denote their allegiances. There are traditions in many countries where tribal belonging is denoted by particular forms of dress, jewellery, tattooing or scaring.

**Discussion points**

- Pupils could be invited to discuss the choices they make in terms of the clothes, décor and objects they surround themselves with. What objects do they cherish that say something about who they are? Who influences their choices? Their friends? Their family?

- Pupils could explore their thoughts about what they consider fashionable and desirable, or bad taste or undesirable? How do pupils think they have come to hold these views? What influences their choices? Do they for example prefer old things or new things? Is there agreement across the group? Do they respect difference or hold a prejudiced view about other peoples’ taste?
• Pupils could discuss their own experiences of feeling they belong to a group or of being an outsider. Discuss how groups and gangs at school form their own sense of belonging, perhaps through dress, language or behaviours.

• Discuss with pupils the ethics of tribal marking. In Nigeria for example, children are scarred at an early age to denote the tribe to which they belong. The Nigerian government has made moves to outlaw the practice. What do pupils think about outlawing ancient traditions? What views do pupils have about tattooing in our own country?

Activity ideas

• Pupils could be asked to paint a self-portrait wearing clothes and surrounded by belongings that say something about them. They could look at Jan van Eyck’s Arnolfini Marriage painting as a starting point and find out about the objects in the picture that denote wealth and status.

• Pupils could be asked to look at the still life tradition and put together a still life arrangement of objects that mean something to them. They could work in groups to agree on a selection of objects that says something about their life today. As a sketchbook / homework pupils could be asked to draw objects in their home or bedroom that they consider particularly special to them.

• Pupils could be asked to bring in an object that has a particular value for them (such as an old teddy bear or a special birthday present). They could draw their object and write about the stories and associations that give this object value for them.

• Pupils could research the tribal traditions of a particular country, including contemporary and ancient practices. How do people across the world denote their sense of belonging? They could work in groups focusing on different themes such as dress, shoes, jewellery, body-markings or make-up.

Useful resources

Images of objects from different cultures can be found in the British Museum collections database at: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/search_the_collection_database.aspx
Curriculum links: art, drama, literacy, PSHE, RE

Key words: emotion, life drawing, human figure, narrative painting

Ideas to explore

In his tapestries Grayson Perry uses both posture and facial expression to capture the mood, feelings and personality of the characters he depicts. An example is the club singer depicted in *The Agony in the Car Park*, pouring out emotion in his song. To capture these moments of feeling and drama, Perry worked from photographs of the people he met as they went about their lives.

There is long history in art of artists attempting to capture emotion in their work. Perry depicts a whole range of emotions; from love, affection and pride to nostalgia, anxiety, horror and sorrow.

Some artists have focused on capturing human suffering. Many paintings in the Christian tradition (including some of those that Perry was inspired by in designing the tapestries) sought to help ordinary people get in touch with the suffering that Christ went through. There are also many artists in more recent times who’ve attempted to capture feelings of sadness and suffering. Think of Frieda Kahlo’s self-portraits which capture the physical pain she endured, Edward Munch’s famous *Scream*, or Picasso’s *Weeping Woman*. Other artists have sought to draw people’s attention to the suffering inflicted on humans by each other. Examples are Goya’s depictions of war or the powerful drawings and woodcuts made by German artist Käthe Kollwitz.

(Detail)

**Masaccio, Tommaso** (1401-28)

*Expulsion for the Garden of Eden* c.1427

Fresco Brancacci Chapel, Santa Maria del Carmine, Florence

The Bridgeman Art Library
There are also many artists who have sought to capture the emotions of peace, love, affection and joy. Good examples are Marc Chagall and Gustav Klimt, who often depicted lovers. In the Christian tradition, there are many examples of art depicting religious feelings such as saintliness, ecstasy and serenity. In the tradition of Russian socialist art, expressions of contentment, happiness and pride were used as propaganda, in an attempt to persuade people of the glories of living in the Soviet regime. We can think too about how positive emotions are often depicted in advertising.

**Discussion points**

- Discuss with pupils how good they think they are at judging people’s emotions. Can they describe the facial changes that create different expressions and moods?

- What emotions do pupils think they can identify in Perry’s tapestries? Discuss with pupils the emotional stories and dynamics depicted in the tapestries. What details of posture and facial expression create the impression of different emotional states?

- Discuss with pupils the ethical issues that are raised when the depiction of emotions are used to persuade people of a particularly viewpoint, as for example in propaganda art and in advertising. How do these examples compare to the kind of religious paintings that Perry has taken inspiration from in his tapestries?

**Activity ideas**

- Using sketchbooks, pupils could be asked to make drawings of all the different facial expressions in Perry’s tapestries and annotate these with notes about the feelings represented. Ask them to use their process of drawing to try to work out how Perry has created a particular expression.

- You could invite pupils to look at the Grayson Perry tapestries and choose a single character. You could ask them to use their imagination to write a written description of this person, aided by the clues given in the tapestry.

- Pupils could search the internet for examples of art works in which people are depicted in a way that captures mood or personality. Pupils could also be invited to collect examples of faces showing different emotions from newspapers and magazines (the sports pages are great for this.) Using sketchbooks, pupils could make drawings of each other or of themselves (using a mirror) to practice drawing faces that show different emotions.

- You could invite pupils to dress up as different characters and strike a pose that captures something of the mood or personality of that character. Using a timer, invite pupils to make quick, expressive drawings of each other that attempt to capture this.

- Local churches usually contain all sorts of art works depicting different emotions (for example pain, love, horror and adulation). You could use the idea of moods and emotions as the focus for a visit to your local church. Take sketchbooks in order to find and record all the different emotions depicted in for example carvings, gargoyles, paintings and tapestries.
• Pupils could be challenged to design a poster that uses facial expression and emotion to persuade an audience of a particular viewpoint.

Useful resources

The National Portrait Gallery has an online collection which is a good starting point for looking at and comparing portraits. http://www.npg.org.uk/collections.php

Among the thousands of examples of paintings on the Art UK website there are many portraits. https://artuk.org/

You can gauge your ability to judge emotions from looking at facial expression and body posture on a number of free online tests including:
http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/ei_quiz/
http://www.dnalc.org/view/867-Reading-Faces.html

In 1980 psychologist Robert Plutchik invented a wheel illustrating all the different emotions and their variations.
http://whatis.techtarget.com/definition/Plutchiks-Wheel-of-Emotions
Curriculum links: art, citizenship, geography, history

Key words class, community, industry, locality, place

Ideas to explore
Each of the tapestries depicts and celebrates a locality and its history. The first two tapestries (The Adoration of the Cage Fighters and The Agony in the Car Park) were based on Perry’s visit to Sunderland. The town is famous for its football team, which unites the town in their loathing for rival team Newcastle United (also known as The Mags). Sunderland is populated by large working class communities.

Sunderland’s industrial heritage includes a strong history of ship building, with records of ship building companies going back to the 14th century. The town is also known for its history of glassmaking, with records going back to the 15th century, hence being the location for the National Glass Centre.

Perry’s second two tapestries (The Expulsion from Number 8 Eden Close and The Annunciation of the Virgin Deal) are based on his visit to Tunbridge Wells in Kent. Here, he was particularly interested to visit Kings Hill, a new development of housing that began in 1989. Kings Hill was identified by The Guardian newspaper in 2004 as one of the wealthiest places in Britain in terms of average household income.

Unlike many more established communities, Kings Hill has no dedicated parish church, though many other amenities were integrated into the development including a pub, supermarkets, two primary schools, a doctor’s surgery, restaurants, a health club, a cricket club and a golf club. Public art works were also commissioned as part of the development. On his visit, Perry heard how homeowners in Kings Hill are generally expected to keep their houses and gardens tidy and well-maintained.
For the fifth of his tapestries (*The Upper Class at Bay, or An Endangered Species Brought Down*) Perry travelled to the Cotswolds. Here he met the occupants of several stately homes including Hilles House, Chavenage House and Frampton Court, all in Gloucestershire. He also visited Longleat in Wiltshire; home of the Marquess of Bath. Here he met families living a much more isolated existence. With each estate occupying large swathes of countryside, miles from its neighbours, their occupants rely on cars to travel to the nearby towns for food and services.

**Discussion points**

- Discuss with pupils what kind of place they think each of the tapestries depicts. What can they tell from the tapestries about each of the localities that Perry visited?

- Discuss with pupils some the issues that characterise each area that Perry visited. Talk about the changes that have taken place and why. For Sunderland this might focus on the loss of industry. For Tunbridge Wells this might focus on the building of new towns from where people can travel to London for work. For the Cotswolds this might focus on issues around funding the preservation of the UK’s stately homes.

- Discuss with pupils what their local area is famous for? What are its particular associations? What major changes have taken place in the area’s history? What people or groups is their area known for? What might be included in a tapestry depicting the pupils’ own local area?

**Activity ideas**

- Pupils could be provided with access to maps and / or aerial photographs of each of the areas that Perry visited and use their map-reading skills to study the characteristics of each of these three areas. They could also identify the three locations on a map of the UK. They could write descriptions of each of the three areas from looking at the maps and compare their findings with how the localities are depicted in the tapestries. Why do pupils think each of the three areas developed as it did? They could compare and contrast the three localities, identifying similarities and differences in the features of these areas; looking for example at the proximity of rivers to the locations of towns or how this may have been dictated by topography.

- Pupils could look at promotional websites for the places that Perry visited. What gets emphasised, and what may have been left out? What features and stories would pupils focus on if they were asked to create a brochure or website promoting their local area? How would they describe their town or area to maximise its appeal?

- Pupils could research and make a collaborative textile piece depicting and celebrating their local area. This could depict notable buildings, people, attractions or
something of the local history of the area. They could experiment with compositions first using drawing or collage. They could include themselves within the piece.

- Pupils could be asked to find unusual maps that don’t adhere to standard conventions. These might include maps from across different times and cultures or maps by artists mapping localities in more imaginative ways. They could be set the challenge of making an unusual map of their own area.

- Pupils could work collaboratively to invent and draw a map of a locality that would be ideal to them; including the amenities that are important to them. They could use their knowledge of mapping symbols to create their map, or invent their own and provide a key.

**Useful resources**

There are many examples of contemporary artists making artworks based on maps on the Axis database of contemporary art. (Search for ‘map’ in ‘artworks’.)

http://www.axisweb.org/

*The Agile Rabbit Book of Historical and Curious Maps* (Pepin Press, 2005) is a collection of unusual maps from across times and cultures and includes a CD of images.
Imaginary worlds and identities

Curriculum links: art, citizenship, geography, history, ICT, literacy

Key words: imagination, island, narrative, story, superheroes

Ideas to explore
Tapestries have long been associated with the telling of stories, whether real or imaginary. Famously, the Bayeux Tapestry shows a cartoon like version of the Norman invasion of Britain and the Battle of Hastings in 1066. As in Grayson Perry's tapestries, words are used to add detail and explanation to the scenes depicted. The Flemish series of six tapestries known as The Lady and the Unicorn depict the senses. The Devonshire Hunting Tapestries are a series of four huge 15th century tapestries depicting hunting scenes. A series of tapestries that hang in Zamora cathedral in Spain depict the story of the military deeds of General Hannibal.

In each of his six tapestries, Perry creates the impression of a world by amalgamating fragments that he has observed and photographed. His drawings are an important part of the process. He works in felt tip pen, playing with and filling out his compositions with objects, buildings, people and colour; at the same time experimenting with how details of his sketches might be altered or exaggerated.

From when he was young until the age of fifteen, Perry spent much of his time creating stories around an imaginary world. His teddy bear Alan Measles was a central character who reigned supreme, with Tortoise (a knitted tortoise toy stuffed with cardboard) second in command. Perry projected onto Alan Measles many of his ideals about masculinity, achievement and love. Perry's world consisted of four islands; a cold, fish-shaped island called Shark Island, a round mountainous island called Round Island, an empty desert island called Elfin Island and a forested European Island called Tree Island (Alan Measles'
home). This island held the secret valley (Grayson Perry’s bedroom) where Alan Measles lived in an underground house with his army camped out around him. One of Perry’s key roles was to design and make the instruments of war and rebellion, according to Alan Measles’ command. Another part of Perry’s role was as reporter and documenter of Alan Measles’ exploits and adventures. It was into this illusory land that Perry escaped from the difficulties of his childhood and puberty.

There are many of artists who’ve based their work on imaginary places. Scottish artist Charles Avery has based all of his art on his explorations of an imaginary island. Paul Noble, another Scottish artist, creates detailed technical pencil drawings of his own fictitious town Nobson. These are intricately rendered, similar in some ways to the disturbing realism of artists Hieronymus Bosch or Richard Dadd. Outsider artist Henry Darger, who Perry was very inspired by, also depicted imagined landscapes.

As he became a teenager, Perry found a new escape in his interest in cross-dressing. Perry is well known for his female alter-ego Claire, who dresses in flamboyant feminine clothes.

**Discussion points**

- Discuss with pupils which of Perry’s tapestries they would like to inhabit and why? What would they enjoy and not enjoy about living in each of the worlds depicted? What adjectives could be used to describe the worlds depicted in each of the tapestries?

- Discuss with pupils how artists sometimes depict the real world in their work, while others create imaginary worlds. Sometimes artists choose to distort or exaggerate the real world, playing with our perceptions of reality. Discuss with pupils which elements they consider to be real, imagined or exaggerated in Perry’s tapestries.

- Discuss with pupils what imaginary games they play inside their heads or with others? Discuss with pupils how Perry created his own imaginary world as an escape from the things he found difficult as a child. How do pupils find their own escape from the challenges of the real world when they need to? What do they do to relax or reduce their own anxieties?

- Discuss with pupils what they feel about Perry’s enjoyment of dressing up as Claire. What styles and genders do they favour when playing with costume or fancy dress? How do they feel when wearing clothes that are different to what they usually wear? What opinions and feelings do they have about men dressing as women, or women dressing as men?

**Activity ideas**

- Pupils could be invited to write stories based on the Grayson Perry tapestries, or based on other historical tapestry examples. They could create a storyboard that shows the scenes before and after the moment captured in each tapestry.

- Taking inspiration from the way Perry tells the story of Tim Rakewell through his six tapestries, pupils could be given a story (a traditional tale for example) and asked to tell the story in a series of six drawings, paintings or collages. How can they isolate
the key dramatic moments to tell their story?

- Pupils could dress up and stage scenarios linking to a theme (a history topic for example). They could photograph these scenes and use art software to create a fictitious background onto which to superimpose their photographs.

- Pupils could work together individually or in groups to create drawings of imaginary islands they would like to inhabit. They could also create these as 3D models. What will the climate and topography of their island be like? What services and amenities will they need or want on their island? How will they defend their island from attack? How does their imaginary island reflect their character and interests? As ruler of their island, what laws will they impose?

- Pupils could be asked to find examples of art works that depict real, imaginary or distorted worlds. Pupils could create their own altered version of the real world using collage or using ICT. This could be a vision of their world in the future, or how they would like to make changes to their environment.

- Inspired by Perry’s teddy bear Alan Measles, pupils could be asked to draw or paint a favourite toy, superhero or fantasy sub-personality. They could identify the qualities and achievements they see in this character. Perhaps some of these are qualities they have in themselves or aspire to?

- Pupils could be asked to photograph their face and then combine this with collage or painting to depict themselves as their fantasy character or superhero. (Pupils may also be interested to see the work of artist Cindy Sherman who dresses up and photographs herself as many different characters.)

**Useful resources**

Examples of the work of Henry Darger can be found at:  
[www.folkartmuseum.org/darger](http://www.folkartmuseum.org/darger)
Additional essays

The Vanity of Small Differences

Grayson Perry

The artworks in this book came out of making a three-part, documentary television series for Channel 4 called All in the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry, directed by Neil Crombie. When we were filming the series, one of the encounters that most haunted me was with Jayne Newman, who lived on a new housing development called King’s Hill near Tunbridge Wells in Kent. I wanted to talk to her because she had bought one of the show flats, fully furnished and decorated by the developer. When she moved in, it even had a bathrobe that the interior decorator had chosen hanging on the back of the bathroom door. She had decided to give up a right seen as sacred by most middle class people, the right to express one’s individuality through one’s home. The few items she had added to the flat fitted in seamlessly. She said she had bought it because there was so much choice out there and she had a fear of getting it wrong. The show flat had been kitted out in an okay style: neutral tones, unfussy sofas, bland knick-knacks. On her own she might have made a hash of it – she might have, God forbid… bad taste! This was a revelation to me. I had spent a lifetime enjoying control over my aesthetic choices, revelling in it; here was someone admitting to a wholesale avoidance of such decisions.

Ever since I was a child I have been very aware of the visual environment people build around themselves and when I got older, I wanted to decode their choices. Why did my Nan’s front room, with its brass ornaments and pot plants, look like it did? Why do middle-class people love organic food and recycling? Why does the owner of a castle and 6,000 acres wear a threadbare tweed jacket? People seem to be curating their possessions to communicate consciously, or more often unconsciously, where they want to fit into society. Ask people about taste and they are very happy to list what they regard as bad taste. A middle-class person will talk of their revulsion for taste choices they regard as vulgar or working-class. Their dislike, their desire to define themselves against what they regard as an awful ‘other’, is so embodied that they often express physical disgust. Ask them to list things they regard as good taste, and people are much more reticent. To ally oneself with a style choice is to make oneself vulnerable to criticism. Taste is a tender subject. What really fascinates me about the topic of aesthetic taste is that people really care. The British care about taste because it is inextricably woven into our system of social class. I think that – more than any other factor, more than age, race, religion or sexuality – one’s social class determines one’s taste. Anthropologist Kate Fox, in her brilliant and hilarious book Watching the English (2004), observes that, even amidst the homogenised dress codes of youth, class plays a part. A middle-class teenager may still wear a hoodie but it will be a more cotton-rich brand, or they will sport a toned down version of the fashionable haircut, such is the pervasiveness of bourgeois regard for authenticity and restraint.

I am not an anthropologist, though; neither am I a sociologist or a design historian. I am an artist, so I wanted to use the opportunity of making the TV series to research a series of artworks about class and taste. I chose to make a series of six tapestries. I usually choose
a medium because of the resonances it has acquired; tapestries are grand – they hang in the vast saloons and bedchambers of ancestral piles, they often depict Classical myths or military victories. A lot of the status associated with tapestries, historically, was due to their huge cost and the enormous amount of skilled labour needed to produce them. The antique examples I encountered in stately homes such as Berkeley Castle in Gloucestershire, or Blenheim Palace in Oxfordshire, would have taken teams of workers many months, if not years, to weave.

Tapestries are still expensive to make today but, ironically, one of the attractions of using tapestry now is the relative speed with which I can produce a substantial artwork, compared to other media in which I enjoy working, such as ceramics or etching. Like many historical tapestries, mine were made in Flanders but, in the digital age, I designed them using Photoshop software and they were woven at dazzling speed on a huge computer controlled loom that can produce a four-by-two-metre tapestry in just five hours. Skilled labour is still involved, but is performed by specialist computer technicians, who converted my drawing into the vast digital file that controlled the loom.

Because of its large scale and the ease of transportation, tapestry also works well as a public artwork, and I am truly delighted that this series is now able to tour under the auspices of the Arts Council and British Council Collections.

I thought it refreshing to use tapestries – traditionally status symbols of the rich – to depict a commonplace drama (though not as common as it should be): the drama of social mobility. As a working-class, grammar school boy from the tail-end of the ‘baby boomer’ generation, social mobility is a theme close to my heart.

Politicians sometimes talk of a classless society, but I think the class system still thrives, though perhaps in a more hydra-headed form than in the days of flat caps, bowlers and toppers. As recently as twenty years ago, most people would describe themselves as definitely working class. Now, depending on the economic climate, between half and two-thirds define themselves as middle class, and this seems to depend on whether the survey includes the category ‘upper working class’ as an option for those insecure about their status. In the boom times, a plumber who has bought his council house in Manchester, an accountant in a suburban villa in Birmingham and a media executive in a trendy flat in London might all describe themselves as middle class. They may all earn similar, middle-class incomes, but they are still likely to be separated by a gulf of taste.

As we oiks climb the greasy pole, we may pick up a deceptively authentic-looking set of middle-class predilections: a book-lined study, a modest grubby car, a full wine rack and original window frames. All the while, from deep inside our urbane metropolitan exterior, an embarrassing former self wails from his oubliette: ‘I want a gold Porsche’. As we will see, such a primal desire for the gew-gaws of one’s culture of origin lead to the downfall of my hero, Tim Rakewell.

Class is something bred into us like a religious faith. We drink in our aesthetic heritage with our mother’s milk, with our mates at the pub, or on the playing fields of Eton. We learn the texture of our place in the world from the curlicue of a neck tattoo, the clank of a Le Creuset casserole dish, or the scent of a mouldering hunting print. A childhood spent marinating in the material culture of one’s class means taste is soaked right through us. Cut me and, beneath the thick crust of Islington, it still says ‘Essex’ all the way through.
As with many aspects of our behavior, a lot of the interesting stuff happens when we think we are not even making a decision. It’s those default settings we all have, those unexamined ‘natural’ and ‘normal’ choices, which often say the most about us: where and when we eat, when and where we might expose a bit of flesh, the kind of curtains we buy, what you watch on TV, how you bring up your children. We often only become aware of these unconscious choices when we move between social classes. I think my middle-class wife screamed when I first came into the kitchen without a shirt on.

I have called my series of tapestries The Vanity of Small Differences. This title comes from a phrase ‘the narcissism of small differences’, used by Sigmund Freud in Civilisation and its Discontents (1929-30), alluding to the fact that we often most passionately defend our uniqueness when differentiating ourselves from those who are very nearly the same as us. Middle-class people are often the ones who put most store in being seen as ‘individual’. Many an aspirational consumer ‘knows’ that it is their unique eclectic taste that pioneered the bowl of polished pebbles that hints at their deep spirituality; it was their infallible eye for cool that alighted on that vintage-style Union Jack cushion, quirky African fabric, or classic Eames chair. All the other people with unique, eclectic taste were, of course, just fashion victims. Growing up in a middle-class family, with its reverence for education and culture, gives these consumers the tools and the power with which to define what they see as ‘good taste’. A big part of middle-classness is defining oneself as different, seeing one’s taste as ‘normal’ and other people’s as ‘not right’.

The artistic inspiration for The Vanity of Small Differences came from several sources. The overall concept came from someone I regard as the lodestone of British art – William Hogarth. In his most famous work, A Rakes Progress (1733), he tells, in a series of eight paintings, the story of Tom Rakewell, a young man who inherits a fortune from his miserly father, spends it all on fashionable pursuits and gambling, marries for money, gambles away a second fortune, goes to debtor’s prison and dies in a madhouse. Hogarth has long been an influence on my work. I identify with his Englishness, his robust humour and his depiction of, in his own words, ‘modern moral subjects’.

In the second painting of A Rake’s Progress, called The Levee, Hogarth satirises the taste of the newly wealthy Tom. He has already attracted hangers-on, who illustrate some of the excesses of the nouveau riche in Georgian London. Among those in attendance are dancing and fencing masters in the French style, a fashion much derided by Hogarth. In the background hang some of Tom’s recent acquisitions: three old master paintings that Hogarth would have disapproved of, calling them ‘dark pictures’ and preferring modern paintings by English artists.

Hogarth might not approve, but each of my tapestries also makes reference to various famous old master paintings. Making knowing reference to older artworks is in itself a very middle-class thing to do, as it flatters the education and cultural capital of the audience. The paintings I borrow from are mainly early Renaissance religious works, as encapsulated by the collection shown in the Sainsbury Wing of the National Gallery, London. This is my favourite era of art and, as this series is very much a public work, I wanted to use the audience’s familiarity with the Christian narratives depicted to lend weight to my own modern moral subject.
In my series of six works we follow the life of Tim Rakewell, from humble birth to famous death. The main thread of this journey is his progress through the social strata of modern British society. Nearly all of the places, people and objects that feature in the work were inspired by my televised taste safari. We chose the three locations for our TV series – Sunderland, Tunbridge Wells and the Cotswolds – because they are each already strongly identified with the social classes. Sunderland has a proud working-class heritage from its heyday as a mining and shipbuilding town. The phrase ‘Disgusted of Tunbridge Wells’ – referring to a fictional writer of letters of complaint, invented by staff at the Tunbridge Wells Advertiser in the 1950s – makes this town almost synonymous with conservative middle-class values. The Cotswolds have also become associated with a deeply-rooted, landed upper class, due to the prevalence of mellow, limestone stately homes amongst the rolling hills of this scenic area.

Within each social group, taste seems to play a slightly different role. When I asked club singer Sean Foster-Conley what I should feature in my tapestries to show working-class taste, he said ‘the mines and shipyards’. ‘But they no longer exist,’ I replied. In a very important way, however, he was right. The heavy industries that shaped the north of England also shaped the emotional lives of the generations of people who lived there. Winding towers and cranes can be torn down in a day, but the bonds, formed through shared hardship working under them, live on. The embodied tradition of feeling, the emotional structure of a place, takes a lot longer to decay. Taste is an emotional business; working-class people often talk of a strong sense of community, and taste decisions are often made to demonstrate loyalty to the clan. Now that those communities are no longer held together by working in the same mine, mill or shipyard, call-centre workers or spray-tanners pledge allegiance to a locale, to their friends and family, through football, soap operas, body-building, tattoos, hot cars, elaborate hairstyles and the ritual of dressing up for a Friday night on the town. Energy is concentrated on the body, clothes, hair or cars – things to display in the social realm rather than the private home.

Taste seems a less tortured business for the working class than amongst the middle-classes, as the pressure to be different from your neighbours is not as strong. This also seemed to me to be true of the upper class. Amongst the gentry, taste also binds the tribe, but not much personal expression seems to be involved. The word that kept cropping up with the people I met was ‘appropriate’. The owners of grand country houses were custodians of a scene that they were unwilling to let change. They felt deeply obliged to maintain these landmarks and the roles that come with them. Curiously, having to preserve these beautiful and costly piles has helped form the overriding aesthetic of the upper class – one of refined entropy. The houses are lovingly patched, a man wears his grandfather’s coat, the sofa collapses, and the creation of a museum of clutter is blithely encouraged.

Talking to Rollo and Janie Clifford, who own four Grade I listed properties in Gloucestershire, I thought they took pleasure from a crumbling stone staircase or her fifty-year-old car, covered in stickers. When quizzed, they denied an attachment to hard won decay and pleaded poverty. When I pointed out that Rollo carried around his papers held together by a metal clip attached to a stump of dog-chewed cardboard when he could probably afford a new clipboard, he very grudgingly admitted to an appreciation of patina. How much of this is due to lack of funds and how much to inbred taste I do not know, but, as an Englishman, even a jumped-up prole like me feels genetically drawn to a crumbling, faded glory.
This elegantly arrested decomposition gives off useful signals: it says ‘we are not in a hurry to change and upset anyone, we have owned this for ages and therefore are not billionaire incomers, who would install a swimming pool and electric gates’.

The drama of taste really gets going when people betray their aspiration to a higher social status through their purchases. The broad swathe of the British who describe themselves as the middle class are the ones most aware of, and also the most anxious about, taste.

At Kings Hill in Kent I encountered a set of unwritten rules. ‘Discreet branding’ was a phrase that cropped up – Prada loafers with a little badge, a Paul Smith shirt with tell-tale eccentric buttons, a ‘low key’ Rolex. Residents of these PVC, clapboard houses sensed they had moved away from a tribe where crude bling gained respect, but they still needed the reassurance of an easily read code. Ostentation was still a difficult drug to resist– Range Rover Sports were everywhere and one resident poetically summed up the combination of pretention and banality when she described the estate as ‘the only place you would see a Bentley parked on a roundabout’.

The ambience of the estate was maintained by a mixture of contractual obligation (‘no caravans’) and communal taboos (‘no net curtains’). Talking to the residents, I found a genuine community spirit, but I sensed that for all of the convenience, security and luxury of their lifestyle, true middle class status, if they actually wanted it, was beyond an intangible exclusion barrier. What that divide is made of, I think, is largely culture and education. The people basking on the sunlit uplands of the chattering classes have either passed through this miasmic barrier at university, or were born beyond it, where people just seem to know how to be fully middle class. Crucially, they understand that all the rules about taste that they have picked up by osmosis – when to wear shorts, what to name one’s child, what to serve at a kitchen supper – none of them matter; one can flout them all as long as, and this is paramount, everyone knows you are doing it on purpose. So I can buy a Porsche and have it gold-plated, but it has to be full of rubbish and dog hair, and I must NEVER, EVER wash it.

Another driver of taste that I noticed amongst the upper middle class was the desire to show the world that one was an upright moral citizen. In the past, a good burgher might have regularly attended church or done voluntary work; today they buy organic, recycle, drive an electric car or deny their child television. This need to pay inconvenient penance to society seems to come partly from guilt. The liberal, educated middle class have done well, but they must pay with hard labour on their allotment, or by cycling to work.

Professional aesthetes in deconstructed suits and statement spectacles would love it if there were strict overarching rulesof good taste like ‘the golden section’, ‘less is more’ or ‘truth to materials’. I fear they search in vain. I started my research with a full set of prejudices about the ‘inferior’ taste of the working class I had left behind. I have come to realise that things are not that simple. I now find myself agreeing with cultural critic Stephen Bailey, that good taste is that which does not alienate your peers. Shared taste helps bind the tribe. It signals to fellow adherents of a particular subculture that you understand the rules. Within the group of, say, modified hatchback drivers, there is good and bad taste in loud cars in much the same way as there is good and bad taste in installations within the art world. Outsiders may find it baffling or irritating, but that is of less importance to insiders than impressing one’s peers.
No Better Than They Ought To Be

Suzanne Moore

Nothing made me think more about taste than going through the possessions of a dead person that I had loved. To sort through the clothes and shoes and ornaments of my mother, who died way too young, sounds sad. It is the bit, after all, that most people dread, post-funeral: sifting through the possessions of a loved one. It is an autopsy of attachment – attachment to objects. What will be found in the silent sorting of a life’s accoutrements? What will these things say of the life that has gone? What memories are there in a dress, or some special, unused cutlery, or someone’s Sunday best? A friend, whose father was a collector of some repute, was surprised to discover, inside a box in which she hoped to find a valuable sculpture, a mildewed dildo. You never can tell.

For me, though, going through my mother’s stuff was not a trial, but strangely wonderful. This was a veritable treasure trove of clothes and shoes, in which I saw the formation of her taste and therefore, inevitably, my own. I took what I wanted (our feet were the same size); I bagged up what I didn’t. I wondered whether nature or nurture were responsible for the parallels in our taste.

What I found was the fantasy of the life she would have lead, had she been able, compared to the mundane one she ended up with. She was a good-looking woman, who had married an American and lived in the US. So, although solidly working class, she had glimpsed another life and tried to grasp hold of it. She was glamorous to me. I found shoes – deconstructed wedges that make Vivienne Westwood’s look tame; zebra-skin handbags; amber cigarette holders for those sophisticated menthols. Oh yes, and a load of absolute tat. For, towards the end of her life, when she ran out of money and the men who would provide it, she became a hunter-gatherer at car boot sales, where the line between treasure and trash is fine indeed.

While her clothes were good (great, actually) her sense of interior decoration was firmly working-class and of its time. By this I mean cluttered and excessively decorative. Whichever house we lived in – and we moved constantly, up and down the same road sometimes, according to which husband/boyfriend she had – we always had to have a three-piece suite and dining table and chairs, however small the room. You could barely move. I couldn’t breathe. Home was claustrophobic, not just emotionally but materially. So, as I grew up, I understood the idea of space. Indeed the fantasy of space. Decluttering must be a pastime in its own right now for the hoarders of the lower orders. But, for other classes, the snobbery of emptiness or minimalism remains. Imagine no possessions… It’s easy if you can afford anything you desire.

All of these mixed emotions surface when I see Perry’s work. I loved my Mum, I hated our house; I couldn’t wait for a room of my own, yet now I see how, though I escaped, so much of her remains with me. I see her social position against mine. I hate the word ‘journey’; rather, these tapestries are a bracing walk through that taboo subject: class.

Foucault argued of sexuality that, while saying we are repressed, we talk of sex all the time. Similarly, we refuse a verbal discourse on class, except in our Marxist enclaves, but instead
visually signal class difference, indeed class gradations, to each other all the time. Perry's TV series with Seneca Productions, *All in the Best Possible Taste with Grayson Perry* (2012), was a blast of class consciousness, just when we are in deep denial about this reality. Of all the things I expected to come out of this series, the last would have been tapestries. Somehow this is perfect, though. Something old, something new; digitally produced by looms, *The Vanity of Small Differences* is arty and crafty. The tapestries use humour to depict loss and joy and a pervading sense of anxiety.

Above all, I see Perry as a profoundly moral artist, which may sound a slightly strange designation for a figure known chiefly by the headline-grabbing label, ‘transvestite potter’. But these are deeply moral, indeed earnest, works – a mode which is, in itself, unfashionable. Irony, after all, is the default mode of so much contemporary culture. The opposite approach, I feel, is more productive. Aesthetics and ethics are related in complex ways, which make art less comforting than the art market as such would have us think.

By straightforwardly asking all kinds of people what they like and why, Perry used television to navigate a way through the class anxieties that plague us all. What if I don’t fit in? What if I don’t stand out enough? Perry teased out from his interviewees, completely without judgement, how we use taste as a way to signal the tribe we aspire to. What if objects really mean something, and that meaning is about more than materiality?

You can imply a fake past – the distressed leathers sofas of the gastropub imply something heirloom-y. But what if something is so bad that it is not good but simply bad, and you have made a tasteless joke?

If identity is staked out through what we eat, how we dress, how we decorate our houses, we are all rather overwhelmed by choice. Choice has now become oppressive. Rich people have interior designers make choices for them. A woman featured in the second episode of Perry’s programme brought a show flat, already decorated, to avoid the dilemma. I have some sympathy. The exercising of ‘individuality’ is arduous. The tyranny of choice is too much. Who is not afraid of getting it wrong?

It wasn’t always like this. It was easier to be different. Not every subculture was snapped up by *Vice* magazine while it was still foetal. Just the wearing of black – now my preferred, and unthinking, uniform – signified subversion. When I had my first child, a friend knitted a black baby jumper and booties. My mother wept for the old pink and blue – I am surprised social services were not alerted. But then my mother never could cope with my ‘taste’. When was I ever going to make something of myself, she asked, when I told her I had a column in *The Guardian*, a newspaper she had never heard of. It had been bad enough when I went out in a tutu and leather jacket and she uttered the immortal words, ‘Ipswich is not ready for footless tights’. For it was so easy then to outrage – to wear a bin-liner, tooth brushes in our hair, kettles for handbags – and to play with the notion of what clothes were.

And how we played. This all came flooding back to me when I found myself at a party several years ago, actually discussing kitchen tiles. If this was not a mid-life crisis I don’t know what is. Since when did I care about kitchen tiles? Or even kitchens? When did my house become me? My very soul? I am not what I eat, nor what I wallpaper. Microwave or Aga stove – who cares? The over-designing of everyday life had begun to feel as claustrophobic as my mother’s living room.
Crucially, I remember how this all started to accelerate in the 1980s, when life in the Western world turned into ‘lifestyle’.

We could blame it on Thatcherism, as we can most things; the massive political and cultural shift towards appealing to an aspirational working class; the realisation that this could be achieved through selling off council houses; the idea that greed would trickle down; that consumerism was the chief means of expression; that shopping was not a means to an end but an end in itself – all of this became real in that period.

The little people who had to buy their own furniture were suddenly confronted with rarefied concepts in design; I interviewed a booming Terence Conran at the time. People had been abroad and had seen how it could be. They would no longer bring back a flamenco doll from Majorca, as my mother had; they would be sold an imitation Mediterranean look, sans soleil. Mum came to visit me in my council flat in Kings Cross, London. ‘Well, it might be all right when it’s furnished,’ she concluded. It was furnished. I just didn’t have all the little ornaments that she considered necessary. Now I do, but they are ‘ethnic’ to indicate that I have travelled – that my mobility is not just social but global.

Class was becoming more than a theory to me, even though as a mature student I had studied Marxism. I started doing a PhD and always felt like I needed a bath before I met my supervisor. I felt this way when I went to work in newspapers – I was not of them, I knew not their secret codes. It was intimidating, until I realised that I had confused cleanliness with middle-classness, confidence with cleverness. I envied these people’s certainty, but I despised what I perceived as their lack of joy and instinct.

Perry has instinct. He understands that working-class taste is about display and comfort and bling and play. Of course it is ridiculous, some of it. It is nasty and ostentatious at its worst, and as sentimental as we see in his depiction of it (The Agony in the Car Park, 2012). But there is a generosity there – an ability to live in the moment. Getting ready to go out is as much fun as going out; in Sunderland, Perry played with the current aesthetic of the hyper-feminine (The Adoration of the Cage Fighters, 2012, p. 66).

So, too, his humanity stretches to the inherited sadness of the upper classes, who cannot live in the moment ever, only in the past, as they keep their crumbling gaffes alive in cold deprivation. The distressed look sought out by the upwardly mobile is actually distressing for this group. I was once helicoptered into a stately home (don’t ask) and shown around. We were given the finest wines known to humanity, yet I was shivering with my coat on. No one remarked on my discomfort. I suppose it revealed my working-class weakness.

Discomfort, though, is exactly what Perry pinpoints most acutely in his depiction of the middle classes. This is, of course, where more and more of us claim to belong, but we are bewildered by the exact worth of our own cultural capital. French philosopher Pierre Bourdieu, from whose theory this notion comes, talks of disembodied cultural capital – things, books, art – and embodied capital – I am thinking here of fake tans and tattoos. He wrote too of how cultural capital is transmitted domestically and through inheritance, but primarily through education. Post–Bourdieu, we read Susan Sontag’s definition of camp – ‘love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration… esoteric – something of a private code, a badge of identity even, among small urban cliques’ – and began to see postmodernism as camp for straight, middle-class people. Kitsch is fun but employed with a sneer. Any artist must ask, surely, ‘What is beauty?’ and I can’t help asking, ‘What are the politics of this
visual style? Style as a knowing wink that only a chosen few can understand has become popularised. Its edginess has become marketable; this is no longer about playing with identity, but simply displaying one’s expanded visual vocabulary. Camp, which is meant to be a way to survive, is commodified, becomes just another signifier of knowingness, no longer a radical aesthetic at all. The same thing happens to minimalism. ‘You want to sell your house, love? Paint it white. Strip the floorboards,’ says the estate agent. Make every bedroom look like a boutique hotel.

The reason this becomes problematic for the middle classes is because, as Perry points out, they are acutely self-conscious. ‘No better than they ought to be,’ as we used to say, though they do try. For class is embedded in culture and culture is ever-evolving – it contains what Raymond Williams identified as dominant (existing), residual and emergent elements. All of these are woven into Perry’s tapestries: what was there; what should be there; what will be there. The cultural struggle is always over meaning. The middle class remains both unknown to itself and fearful that what is valuable may disappear. This sense of loss is mysterious but hangs over Perry’s work.

For me, to read writers or to see artists who understand that working-class culture can be as profound and as complex as high culture remains exciting. Yet this is not to romanticise it; there was much I was glad to run away from. And where was I to run to? Is there a place where taste is democratic rather than just demographic? Is there a place where taste is about hope and morality and life itself; somehow not just a mirroring of market values?

I was very struck by Perry’s reference to his key influence – Hogarth – who told us that his work was about ‘the modern moral subject’. For this work is also about moral issues: the battles, both individual and collective, around consumerism – lived out as we reconfigure our own relationship to how we live and what we buy; the sadomasochist instinct that ‘good taste’ is perhaps just something I haven’t bought conceptually or actually just don’t understand. The knowledge economy is not a neutrally aesthetic environment – far from it. This is why education matters and why politics, a word Perry doesn’t use but which is the subtext to this work, matters. A democracy of taste remains a thought experiment. For, while everyone has taste, some, we are taught, have more than others. Just as Hogarth dealt with lived experience and disappointment, Perry looks at the ethics beneath aesthetic choices.

At a time when social mobility has ground to a halt – when inequality booms and cannot be bust – Perry reminds us of how we tell each other who we are and who we belong to. In these conservative times, this is a radical thing to be doing. That is why this work is important. Sometimes things not only look good; they are good. I am making a moral judgment here, but then I recognise myself – my flaws, my dreams – in these tapestries of joy and despair, of ugliness and beauty.

As Perry has said, ‘Taste is a tender subject. What really fascinates me about the topic of aesthetic taste is that people really care.’ What really fascinates me about these works is precisely that they are really caring – and for those often not cared for. Classlessness is a dream. The very ability to accrue cultural capital, to make tender aesthetic choices, to shift class, as both Grayson and I have managed somehow to do, is being taken away. Taste, like everything else, will be further privatised; we are not all in it together. These tapestries put the debate back in the public realm. Taste belongs to all of us. Make it your own. For this is how we live now.
Digital – from Conception to Finished Tapestry

Adam Lowe

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Joseph-Marie Jacquard, a Republican from Lyon, France, invented a mechanical loom that used punched cards to control the weaving of a design. The ‘programmed’ perforations in these cards controlled the movement of hooks manipulating the warp (lengthwise or longitudinal) threads of the tapestry. These cards formed a chain that was inserted into the loom, allowing some hooks to pass through the punched holes and therefore determining the movement of the warp threads. When one row was finished, the next chain of cards was inserted, and so on until the weaving was complete. It was an extraordinary invention, resulting in an unimaginable level of standardisation and speed. Unfortunately, not everyone approved of this mechanisation of the craft: some local weavers removed their wooden clogs and attacked the machines, thus coining the word ‘saboteur’ (from the French sabot, for clogs). Napoleon approved, however, and decreed the loom public property. Jacquard made the prototype in 1804; by 1812, there were 11,000 looms in operation in France.

Throughout the century, programming and refinements to the system were prolific. By 1886/87 a small prayer-book was being woven in grey and black silks on a Jacquard loom in Lyon. The *Livre de Prières Tissé d’après les enluminures des manuscrits du XIVe au XVIe siècle* (published by A. Roux, designed by R. P. J. Hervier and woven by J. A. Henry) was woven from an estimated 500,000 handmade cards. The resolution is such that every letter appears as if it was typeset, and the images have a tonal range that gives them the appearance of daguerreotype plates.

Perhaps more importantly, the English mathematician Charles Babbage saw one of Jacquard’s looms and realised that it could be used to perform automated mathematical calculations. It was as a direct result of his encounter with the Jacquard loom that he developed his first calculating engine. Babbage’s collaborator was Ada Lovelace (the daughter of Lord Byron). In 1843 she wrote: ‘Thus, not only the mental and the material, but the theoretical and the practical in the mathematical world, are brought into more intimate and effective connection with each other – we may say most aptly, that the Analytical Engine weaves algebraic patterns just as the Jacquard-loom weaves flowers and leaves.’

With the rapid development of computing technology over the past forty years the Jacquard loom has found a new purpose – for the output of images either made or manipulated in a virtual space. Grayson Perry is an artist who has recently taken up the challenge this offers.

Grayson Perry’s first work in this medium, *The Walthamstow Tapestry* (2009, Paragon Press), draws on the medieval morality tradition popularised by early Flemish weaving workshops in centres such as Arras and Tournai. Within the ostensible subject of the seven ages of man, the narrative potential of the Bayeux tapestry and Christian iconography collide with autobiography and confession, in a simultaneous celebration and critique of the modern icons of capitalist consumer society.

The source material for this work was derived from scanned sections of Perry’s line drawings. These had been drawn by hand and then manipulated and digitally-coloured in
Adobe Photoshop. The enclosures in the drawing were ‘flood filled’ with colour. When an enclosure was not fully closed, however, the colours also filled the neighbouring enclosure, producing some unusual visual artefacts that Perry wanted to keep. At ‘digital mediator’ Factum Arte in Madrid, Blanca Nieto corrected distortion in the scan, removed unwanted pixels, worked on the structure of the lettering so that it remained legible after weaving, and started working on the printed colour references for Flanders Tapestries, the weavers, based in Wielsbeke, Belgium.

Initial weaving tests were carried out and a colour palette identified. Yarns are usually bought raw and the colour shades chosen in conjunction with the artist. All the yarns are then dyed to get the highest possible colour fastness value, this will differ depending on the yarn material and colour shade. Colour fastness is a complex issue, and all of the threads used in Grayson Perry’s tapestries are optimised for light resistance (to the detriment of water resistance); this means the tapestries are more resistant to light than water. To produce the colour charts, a selection of 12 dye colours is made (plus four tones for the weft yarns). A grid of weave patterns (all the possible interlacing patterns between the yarns) is then used to produce the colour chart or ‘flag’ of colours available, consisting of several hundred little patches, numbered and lettered according to columns and rows. Once a colour gamut is agreed, it is shown to the artist for approval.

When the image is woven, the result is a ‘mosaic’ of yarns crossing one another, which visually re-composes the original image while transforming it into the language of tapestry. How this mosaic works, both close up and from a distance, is critical. The range of colours both real, flat, and perceived, optical mixes is further enhanced by the use of different weaves and tensions to produce a relief surface. Grayson Perry is involved in all artistic decisions about the look and feel of the tapestry. He is involved in some but not all of the technical research into how this is achieved. At this stage the essential ingredients are trust, experimentation and communication, a dynamic worth noting because of its enduring tradition within the history of weaving, stretching all the way back to medieval times. Perry works in London, I am in Madrid, and we are both English. Blanca Nieto is Spanish. Nieto, Perry and I usually communicate in English. I talk to Roland and Christian Dekeukelaere – skilled Flemish weavers running Flanders Tapestries – and they work with Marcos, who prepares the weaving files and works on the colour combinations, weaving structures, thread type and other details that condition the appearance of the tapestry. Marcos is from Argentina and communicates with myself in English and Blanca in Spanish. The shared language is that of tapestry. The artist Craigie Horsfield, who works closely with Flanders Tapestries, calls this process ‘weaving together diverse social strands of experience’.

From start to finish the process is one of adjustment: to the colour (both flat and optically-mixed colours); the textures; the character of the weaving; the volume or depth that is required; and the sheen or matt-ness of the threads (many different threads are used, including chenille, cotton, mercerised or pearlised cotton, silk, wool and a range of synthetic fibres). All of these decisions condition the final result.

In the case of the Walthamstow Tapestry, the final look – similar to a quilting – was achieved by tightly weaving the black lines and varying the density of the weaving on the coloured areas of the design. In retrospect this was the obvious solution, as it mimicked the process by which the drawing was made. The quilted feeling was produced by ‘using’ the threads that are not visible on the tapestry surface. Due to the character of the colours used, there were seldom more than three or four threads visible on the surface at any time,
the rest of the yarns, however, were still ‘passing through’ underneath the surface. These yarns were made to work even when they not visible, bending the fabric in a concave and convex way. This approach has its limitations, but it gives an extra dimension to the feeling and look of the tapestry.

The loom used at Flanders Tapestries is made by Dornier. The Jacquard mechanism is made by Gosse. When working on a Jacquard loom the ‘loom language’ is, and always has been, digital. The loom only ‘understands’ binary commands, whereby warp threads go up or down before each weft (crossways or latitudinal) thread is interlaced. A combination of standard software, specialised textile software, and Flanders Tapestries experience and willingness to experiment, is used to produce the tapestry. After the programming and proofing work is complete, the task of the loom operator and the loom is to keep everything standardised, repeatable and faultless. The operator needs to remain in constant control of the weaving and avoid the shortcomings and flaws that are inevitable in such a complex interlaced weaving.

A similar procedure was used to produce Grayson Perry’s *The Map of Truths and Beliefs* (2011, Paragon Press), first exhibited as part of *Grayson Perry: The Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman* at the British Museum in 2012. However, by the time work started on the series *The Vanity of Small Differences* (2012), Perry had moved on to producing the entire initial drawing on his Wacom Cintiq interactive pen display. The black outlines have gone; the mastery of drawing directly on the computer screen with a digital pen has created a new graphic language – every mark made in the knowledge that it will be transformed into tapestry. These drawings are to the final Jacquard weaving as Raphael’s cartoons are to the tapestries made in Pieter van Aelst’s workshop in Brussels (or those woven, later, for Charles I in the workshops at Mortlake in the UK).

The narrative works that make up the cycle of six tapestries have a fluency in which Grayson pushes the visual colour mixes to the limit and uses the weave structure to create volume and shadow. The works are digital – from conception to finished tapestry. Jacquard weaving has an elegance that makes the muses happy – it was the inspiration for the computer and is still one of the most beautiful methods of digital output. As we head into the age of 3D printing, a system that can actually weave data is both a role model and an inspiration.

In discussions with Jerry Brotton during the process of curating *Penelope’s Labour: Weaving Words and Images*, Perry declared that tapestry had become his ‘default setting’, his immediate response to any artistic project, because of the way the medium matches his ideas and methods of expression. It is an intensely collaborative project; it is rooted in a powerful craft tradition that stretches all the way back to the Bayeaux Tapestry (although this is technically embroidery), via medieval artisanal culture, and William Morris; it does not recognize the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art forms; and it enables Perry to continue an enduring tradition of telling highly moralised stories of who we are, whether we worship the gods of organised religion or western consumerism.

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Further reading and sources of information

Exhibition catalogue
The Vanity of Small Differences, Grayson Perry, Hayward Publishing 2013

Books
Grayson Perry, Jacky Klein, Thames and Hudson 2009
Grayson Perry – My Life as a Young Girl, Wendy Jones, Vintage 2007
Playing to the Gallery, Grayson Perry, Penguin 2014
The Descent of Man, Grayson Perry, Penguin 2016

Websites
Gigapix images of all six tapestries from the Vanity of Small Differences can be found at https://www.google.com/culturalinstitute/beta/exhibit/QQDKD3VO

The Channel 4 programmes In the Best Possible Taste that document the research, design and making of the tapestries are available at http://www.channel4.com/programmes/in-the-best-possible-taste-grayson-perry

Grayson Perry can be heard on Desert Island Discs (2007) at http://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/features/desert-island-discs/castaway/377f2ab0

Grayson Perry presented the Reith Lectures in 2013. The lectures can be heard at http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00sj965

Further information on Grayson Perry can be found on the Victoria Miro Gallery web-site at http://www.victoria-miro.com/artists/_12/

Information on the Hogarth series that inspired Perry’s tapestries can be found at http://www.soane.org/collections_legacy/the_soane_hogarths/rakes_progress

Grayson Perry discusses taste and the tapestries for the Royal Academy online magazine at http://www.royalacademy.org.uk/ra-magazine/summer-2012/opinion-grayson-perry-on-taste,362,RAMA.html

Follow Grayson Perry on Twitter at https://twitter.com/Alan_Measles