

## arts

# Inside the treasure trove of the man who designed Sgt Pepper

The artist Peter Blake is letting visitors explore his studio. It's a pop-art Aladdin's cave, finds **Rachel Campbell-Johnston**, who gets a sneak peek

From the outside it looks perfectly ordinary. You turn off a broad highway in west London and, leaving the noise of the traffic behind you, stroll down a sedately bourgeois side street.

A ceanothus in full bloom is breaking loose from a garden. Opposite runs a long, neatly painted wall. The door that leads through it is discreet. But step in and you are somewhere truly extraordinary. You are standing amid what looks like a mad car-boot sale.

This is the studio of the British pop art pioneer Sir Peter Blake. Or Sir Peter "Sgt Pepper" Blake as he suggests he should be called because his most famous piece of work — the cover for the Beatles' 1967 album — is what still defines him in the public imagination. "Sadly everything still hinges on that," he tells me. "And it's still a bugbear because I was paid only £200."

Those who know Blake's work could quickly guess who this place belongs to just by looking. To step into the studio — a former builder's yard bought some 25 years ago when his ever-growing collection could no longer be crammed into his overflowing house in nearby Chiswick — feels a bit like stepping inside Blake's brain. Or into a warehouse into which the contents of his head have been tipped.

Where else could I sit down at a small kitchen table and, while sipping a cup of coffee, examine a giant model of a peanut, a rabbit skull, a Mickey Mouse statuette, a plastic gnome, doll's-house food, an assortment of tiny monkeys, sea shells, a Barbie doll, a model galleon and a Richard Smith abstract — all without having so much as to turn my head?

Even the loo is a treasure house, the basin flanked by wooden carvings that range from primitive African fetishes and Christian statues to pieces of decorative Islamic work. The walls are hung with what Blake calls "a joke collection of mirrors". "As if I would want to look at myself nowadays," he says, smiling. A white-bearded reflection smiles back from an elaborately adorned glass. Its owner, who recently turned 85 and now walks with a stick, looks a little like one of the portly gnomes that I have just been examining. He wears a starched white shirt and carefully pressed black suit. A pair of red braces periodically flash.

Next week you will get your own opportunity to see Blake's studio because, although he describes it as "in a way a very secret space", he likes showing people around it. His art gallery, Waddington Custot, which has represented him for 35 years, will be displaying a part of it at the Frieze Masters art fair. This is the fourth time that it has been partially reassembled

for public show. The aim is to highlight the way in which this collection has informed his work.

A fractured structure, created to look as if it has just been torn from the fabric of the building, will frame the desks on which he works. Piles of books, papers, photographs and cut-out figures will cover their surfaces. They will capture a sense of the pillaging imagination of the man who, though most commonly hailed as the godfather of British pop art, finds the roots of his talent in a far older tradition of folk art.

Blake's vast assemblage of objects is not just one collection. "It is a collection of some 30 or 40 different collections," he says. It's built up of discrete assemblages of, for instance, elephant models; toys made of tin; period advertising signs; Punch and Judy puppets; Elvis Presley memorabilia; model boats.

Among the more eye-catching items are tableaux of taxidermy from a 19th-century museum. The house that Jack built in the nursery rhyme has been reconstructed, including the cow with the crumpled horn. The dog that worried the cat and the assortment of other creatures are all stuffed. Damien Hirst, I am told, had hoped to buy the whole thing, but his bid of £1 million arrived too late for the auction in which Blake snapped them up.

**“Sgt Pepper is still a bugbear because I was paid only £200**



Peter Blake in his London studio with part of his vast collection

The instinct to collect is deep-rooted in us and dates, the evolutionary psychologist might suggest, from the days of the hunter-gatherer, when successful accumulation was a matter of survival. Now we amass stuff for rather less practical reasons: intellectual, aesthetic and emotional satisfaction among them.

Little wonder that artists, for whom such considerations are particularly salient, have often been hoarders. Rubens, Rembrandt, Dürer, Duchamp, Picasso and Matisse (whose collection is the focus of a Royal Academy show) had noted assemblages of objects — books, medals, costumes, musical instruments, masks and the artworks of great predecessors and admired peers.

Blake began his collection as a boy. Born in Dartford, Kent, into a working-class family, he was seven when the Second World War started and he was evacuated, first to Essex, to a home where there were no books or toys. It was "a blank time" he says.

Sent next to his grandmother's in Worcestershire, he was suddenly enthralled by the array of cocktail cabinets that crowded her tiny front room, by her assortment of gypsy caravans and her host of aluminium meat mincers. "The roots of my collecting came from her," Blake says.

By the time he returned to Dartford in 1945 he was hooked. The first thing he bought was a painting of the *Queen Mary*, a papier-mâché tray inlaid with

## Insider Travel



Jason Leonard



Allan Lamb

### The World Rugby Sevens in Cape Town with Jason Leonard

Join Jason Leonard, Allan Lamb and other rugby and sporting legends to watch England attempt a repeat of last year's tournament win. It's more than World Rugby Sevens; you'll also have the

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- Return flights including taxes
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- Full day's stadium hospitality in executive suite on both days of the tournament
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A fractured structure, created to look as if it has just been torn from the fabric of the building, will frame a quintessentially eccentric assortment of items. Two large tables will reflect the desks on which he works. Piles of books, papers, photographs and cut-out figures will cover their surfaces. They will capture a sense of the pillaging imagination of the man who, though most commonly hailed as the godfather of British pop art, finds the roots of his talent in a far older tradition of folk art.

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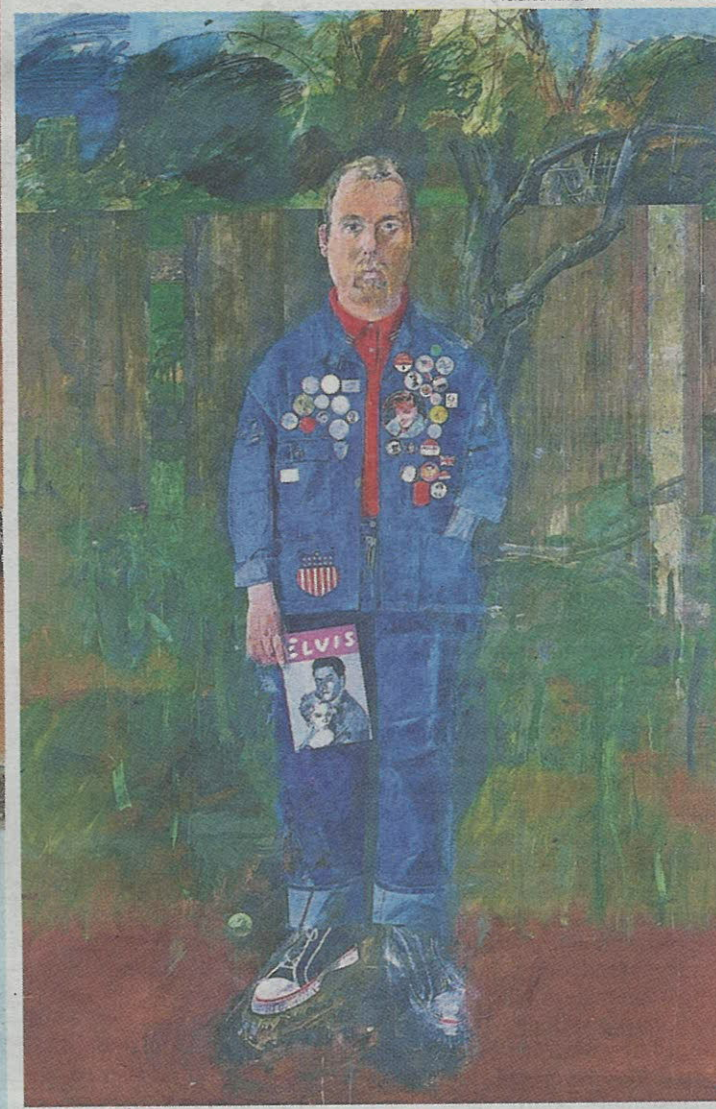
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Blake's cover design for the 1967 Beatles album *Sgt Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*. Top: Self-Portrait with Badges, 1961

mother-of-pearl and a leather-bound set of Shakespeare. During his national service in the RAF and an ensuing period at the Royal College of Art he didn't buy much, but "it perked up", he says, "when I won a Leverhulme scholarship. I travelled round Europe studying popular art, collecting bullfight posters and cigarette packets, wrestling pictures and even the side of a Sicilian decorated cart. From then on in my various lives I've kept collecting. And I get rid of

almost nothing," he says, though he will occasionally make a swap — most recently a Barry Flanagan bronze sculpture for a model of an American female bodybuilder who influenced Robert Mapplethorpe.

Months, if not years, of Blake's life must have been spent rummaging among these objects. He frequently moves things around, creating new juxtapositions and arrangements. Every piece tells a story. As he leads me around, he picks out a few. There are the David Nash sculptures; which he bought at the artist's first show. Nothing had sold, so with what it

would seem is characteristic generosity, he bought a couple.

A line of weaver birds' nests dangle from high on a rafter. An auction house he visited had used them as packing. A gathering of freak animals once belonged, apparently, to a fairground fire-eater called Stromboli. When he lost his sense of equilibrium and could no longer perform, he created these mutants — a horned rabbit, a stoat crossed with a pheasant — to earn money instead. Near by are Tom Thumb's boots — once worn by the Victorian midget who toured with Barnum and Bailey. The cocked hat worn by Douglas Fairbanks in the 1922 film *Robin Hood* is also there.

Such objects are the fodder of Blake's voracious imagination. Sometimes he adapts ideas. Among

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his most distinctive early works, for instance, is a mid-1950s series of imaginary fairground characters.

At other times he uses the stuff straight. An entire set of Larousse French dictionaries, bought at auction in Bath because he could not believe books could be so cheap, turned out to be illustrated with engravings, which he cut out and used in his trademark collages.

The studio of Francis Bacon has been preserved intact and put on display, as a memorial to the artist, in Dublin. Would Blake like his whole collection to be kept in this way? "At the moment, still being alive, it's a delicate problem," he says. There would be financial consequences for his wife and daughter; it costs a lot to keep things looking this disordered. "But I haven't given it a lot of thought."

That's probably because he is too busy making use of it. He shows me a series of works under construction. These draw on his collection of model ships. I peer at toy soldiers crawling, bayonets glinting, across the deck of a galleon. They are about to launch an armed raid on a gang of Disney Princesses on the prow. Meanwhile, on a model tug, a phalanx of Power Rangers, led by a plastic wrestler, are mounting an attack on a handcuffed Houdini.

Only Peter Blake, finding inspiration in his fantastical collection, could have dreamt up something that seems so delightfully bizarre.

**At Work with Peter Blake will be on the Waddington Custod stand at Frieze Masters, Regent's Park, London, tomorrow to Sunday**

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