

An objective experience

As the shortlist for the Object of the Year competition is drawn up, there is a rare chance to feel the strange sensation of being an object oneself



Fig 1: Lifetime cast of Rodin's bronze *Eternal Spring*, with Robert Bowman



Fig 2: Early-17th-century oak tripod credence table, with Lucy Johnson

FOR a couple of hours on April 30, I became an artwork, or at least the equivalent of a few brushstrokes in a painting. I was one of 100 volunteers taking part in the *Slowalk* (in support of Ai Weiwei) directed, or perhaps choreographed, by Hamish Fulton, an artist who finds his subject matter only in what he experiences when walking, or creates walking performances such as this.

We were stationed in a rectangle on the ramp in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall—in sight of Ai Weiwei's seed installation—and had to walk across or longways four times in exactly two hours, without stopping or speaking. Across was 22 of my normal paces, so to cover the distance meant the tiniest of shuffles and a hypnotic rocking motion. Yet, as Hamish told us, going into a trance was not allowed: we had to avoid people coming the other ways, so that we meshed like threads

on a loom. We also had to be aware of the bemused public trying to get through us to the galleries.

It was both exhilarating, because, inevitably, there was an element of meditation, and exhausting, because of the control needed to maintain the pace, particularly on the slope. Obviously, such an ephemeral demonstration will do little to free Ai Weiwei, who was 'disappeared' by the Chinese authorities on April 3, but it will perhaps bring a faint blush to the government's face, especially if the Tate Short film on the web penetrates the Great Firewall.

I mention this not only to publicise the cause, but because when it came to judging the second round of the Object of the Year competition, I found that having recently been looked at as an object made me look at other objects in a slightly more sympathetic way. However, we had to be rigorous in our judgements,

keeping head and heart in even balance. This year's distinguished panel consisted of John Bly, 5th generation dealer and *Antiques Roadshow* face; Lord Chadlington, PR supremo turned chairman of LAPADA; Sir Timothy Clifford, former director-general of the National Galleries of Scotland; Judith Miller, publisher of

the eponymous guides; myself; Jacqueline Pruskin, 20th- and 21st-century specialist; Jeremy Warren of the Wallace Collection, whose particular specialism is sculpture; and Robert Upstone, recently of Tate Britain and now a director of the Fine Art Society.

Our task on this occasion was to whittle down the entries to 14



Fig 3: Karachov Caucasian rug, with Farnham Antique Carpets



Fig 4: Five glass and mirror table centres, with Denton Antiques

to be displayed on the Object of the Year stand at the Olympia Fair (June 9–19). We failed, ending up with rather more—but several are very small.

Three of the entries illustrated and discussed here on May 11 have made it through: the expanding bracelet by Giorgio Fachini (Didier); Winifred (Nicholson) Dacre's abstract painting *Gross Balance 1* (Lucy Johnson); and the rat *netsuke* by the master Masanao (Rutherford & Bandini).

Once again, we have a satisfying variety. There is a lifetime cast (Fig 1) of Rodin's ever-popular bronze *Eternal Spring* (Robert

Bowman), an interesting companion to a Swabian carved lime-wood *Entombment* from an altarpiece, of about 1480 (Joanna Booth). Furniture ranges from an early-17th-century oak tripod credence table (Fig 2) (Lucy Johnson) to the 2009 *Colander Table* in aluminium and plate glass by Daniel Rohr (Peter Petrou) by way of a William-and-Mary walnut and marquetry fall-front *escritoire* (Wakelin & Linfield). There is an intriguing display cabinet (Fig 5) in painted woods with pewter and bronze glazing bars, of 1785 (Summers Davis). This is in course of restoration,



Fig 5: Display cabinet in painted woods, 1785, with Summers Davis

and the maker is unknown, although details might emerge from the archives at Highclere Castle, for which it was made.

The *netsuke* is joined by another Japanese work, a gold lacquer skull being investigated by three *onis* intricately carved in ivory (Kevin Page), and from the Near East is a Karachov Caucasian rug (Fig 3) with really good colours, especially the green ground (Farnham Antique Carpets). A remarkable textile from Witney Antiques is the almost 6ft long Battle of Britain woven lace panel designed by Harry Cross and woven by Dobsons & Browne of Nottingham (1942–46). Thirty-eight were made, but very few will be in private hands.

The smallest and oldest entry is an English late-12th- or early-13th-century shield-shaped silver seal (see box) (McKenna & Co). The arms and inscription identify

the owner as Alice de Merlay (1149–1219). Perhaps because of shape, this sits well with a *Zigurat* 18ct gold and enamel parure of brooch, earrings and ring in a painted wood presentation case, designed by Joe Tilson for Giancarlo Montebello in 1968 (Didier). Even the box hinges are gold.

Equally colourful is a 48-piece silver-gilt and enamel Russian dinner service produced by the Russian 11th Artel workshop between 1908 and 1917 (Mayfair Gallery). Even this is eclipsed for size by the suite of five 14-branch glass and mirror table centres with candelabra and jardinières (Fig 4) used by the 5th Earl Spencer as Viceroy of Ireland in the 1880s (Denton Antiques).

And now we must make our minds up. ➔

Next week The first of the summer fairs

Pick of the week



An innovation is an award for the public's most popular object. It will be fascinating to see whether this coincides with any of the expert panel's three awards. Until June 3, votes can be cast online (www.lapada-object-of-the-year.com), and Facebook users can also champion their favourites. Voters automatically receive a complimentary double e-ticket to the Olympia Fair worth £22, and are entered into a prize draw for

- a year's subscription to COUNTRY LIFE
- a complimentary Champagne lunch for two at Olympia
- LAPADA vouchers worth £200

Winners of the judges' awards will be announced on the Object of the Year stand in the Fair at 12 noon on Wednesday June 15. COUNTRY LIFE's fellow sponsors are Cadogan Tate, the specialist fine art shippers, and Besso Holdings, the insurance brokers.