

Exhibition of unusual cards - from the Suffragettes to Pussy Riot Christmas cards

Martin Shipton, Chief Reporter | Nov 8 2012



Shaun Featherstone visual arts officer shows Glad Tidings of Struggle and Strife: Radical Christmas cards

From the struggle for universal suffrage, to the Stop the War campaign – former Blaenau Gwent MP’s collection of historic Christmas cards depict and publicise some of the most famous political battles in history. Now, this personal assortment of festive greeting cards is to go on display writes Martin Shipton

An exhibition of Christmas cards from the first ever produced to one commemorating the Russian protest group Pussy Riot can currently be seen in Wales.

Based on a collection built up over many years by former Blaenau Gwent Labour MP Llew Smith and his late wife Pam, the exhibition in Newport Art Gallery concentrates on political protest cards.

Glad Tidings of Struggle and Strife includes a total of 575 cards, together with 13 new ones that have been specially commissioned from a variety of artists.

Starting with the first ever Christmas card produced in 1843 – which depicts a number of cheery figures including one resembling Dickens' Mr Pickwick – the exhibition traces the rich history of protest Christmas cards over nearly 170 years. In many ways, in fact, it can be said to tell the story of social, industrial and political struggle in the UK and internationally across the relevant period.

Among the campaigns covered by the cards are the struggle for women's votes, the anti nuclear/peace movement, anti-apartheid, the Spanish civil war, the poll tax, the 1984/85 miners' strike, labour disputes, equality and human rights – right up to the issues of today like anti-globalisation, Stop the War, and Uncut. The cards themselves range from mass produced, party political or trades union messages to small limited print runs by, for example, individual activists, strikers' support groups or single issue/community protesters.

Cards produced during the Blair era go from optimism after the 1997 landslide victory to the disappointment that followed on the left of the Labour movement. One read: "Don;t let traitors hijack the Labour Party. Tony Blair will be a flash in the pan like the Spice Girls."

Mr Smith, who himself stepped down from Westminster disillusioned with Tony Blair in 2005, said: "Many of these cards portray the words and deeds of those who, in the face of injustice, refused to remain silent and accept that nothing could be done.

Former London Mayor Ken Livingstone said: "This is a welcome and often surprising collection that adds to our understanding of how people have talked about their values and hopes for the future at a time of the year that encourages reflection and goodwill."

Shaun Featherstone, the gallery's visual arts officer who jointly curated the exhibition with Mr Smith, said: "Although associated with the Christian festival of Christmas, the idea of peace and goodwill is in fact an incredibly positive secular message which has acted as the spark for a huge amount of creativity.

"Putting together the exhibition has been very rewarding and has also allowed us to display some of the historic objects we own, like a Suffragette banner produced more than 100 years ago by women teachers at Cardiff High School."

Copies of the 13 newly commissioned cards can be bought at the gallery. Among the artists who designed cards is Jamie Reid, best known for the graphic designs he did for the Sex

Pistols in the late 1970s. Jon Langford is a musician from Newport who now lives in Chicago – his bands include the Mekons and The Three Johns. David Mabb works almost exclusively with original William Morris designs, subverting, exploiting and reinvigorating their political potential.

Steve Smith, the brother of Llew, is a graduate of Newport Art School. He has been producing radical Christmas cards for several decades. Robert Rubbish lives in London and creates works which often reflect a social, political dimension; Brian Jones is a contemporary pop artist living in Mid Wales and Jac Saorsa is a drawing specialist and academic from Cardiff.

* The exhibition can be seen in the third floor Newport Art Gallery in the city's John Frost Square until January 12.

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