



**[Rolf Harris: can you tell what it is yet?](#)**

**[Walker Gallery](#) , Liverpool**

**Reviewed by [Jane Turner](#) June 2012**

Many years ago, I took part in a discussion entitled **What is Art?** At the time, I couldn't understand why a bunch of revolutionaries were sitting around intellectualising about whether or not a chair was a work of art or a functional object, whilst half the country was in dispute with the government. I might have been a little economic in my outlook, but I'm still not sure to this day if we came up with a satisfactory answer.

When an Art lover, a canny investor or maybe just someone with more money than sense, can

spend 74 million pounds on **The Scream** by Munch - a painting that makes me feel miserable every time I see it - I still can't figure out the *Art World*.

I quite like paintings though, and consider most of those I have seen to be works of Art, and find myself once again in **The Walker Art Gallery** in Liverpool, standing alongside so many others in front of the amazingly beautiful canvases, watercolours, landscapes, oils and stunning portraits by Rolf Harris, a one-time children's entertainer, who many moons ago waved his didgeridoo, hobbled along on a third leg while singing "Jake The Peg", and managed to transform a large canvas into a decent painting at lightning speed by seeming to throw large pots of paint at it.

I never actually took Rolf seriously as an artist until now – how could you, when he seemed to spend most of his life jokingly scribbling away? Great and proper artists are supposed to be fairly serious chaps aren't they? But this amazing display of a selection of his work has made me conclude that Rolf isn't just a spirited entertainer but a man with a great talent. I'd stand up in any meeting room and declare that this is Art.

**'Rolf Harris: Can You Tell What it is Yet?'** is a temporary exhibition that includes a diverse range of paintings, memorabilia and a lot more that has drawn thousands through the doors of the Walker Art Gallery breaking all attendance records, and putting paid to the idea that Art is just for the rich and an unnecessary frivolity at a time of austerity. The exhibition includes an insight into how Rolf creates one of his paintings from start to finish and a neat little montage of clips that summarises his 60 year career.

The Art is displayed in several rooms, and deal with his TV persona and musical career (hmm, not sure I would stand up and declare him as a musician), his early life and memorabilia, his methods and a thematic rather than chronological approach grouping his art under headings such as urban, suburban, portraiture and Rolf on Art. There are useful and detailed narrative panels to accompany each piece which describe the work and a re-creation of his studio and his methods.



Highlights include a wildlife painting of a magnificent Lion, a Liverpool street scene of Two Girls at the Cavern Club, the famous portrait of “her maj.”, a stunning Australian landscape of the Uluru Sunset (my personal favourite) and a magnificent oil painting of a grand piano, all from private collections so unlikely to be seen again. But most impressive are the sweeping and vibrant landscapes of his beloved native Australia. Harris is 81 years old and has given us just a glimpse of a lifetime of work that reveals real talent, an eye for beauty and colour and an amazing rumbustious life-affirming resilience.

The thing I find striking about the work of Rolf Harris is the range and style of his work; not instantly recognisable like a Monet, Picasso, Renoir or Turner, he has the ability to turn his hand and brush to anything, any style, any form, any medium, any subject and come up with magic, at such speed and with great enthusiasm. A true artist with a love for life I suppose, but then that's just my opinion. The thing about Art as I said earlier is that opinions can and do vary greatly – I wouldn't care much for a Munsch but I might make room for a Harris.

Recalling the “What is Art?” discussion that flummoxed me all those years ago, I remember one strident voice among the group advocating that Art was creative, had intrinsic value, beauty and didn't need a role, a purpose, or to be justified in practical or economic terms. I couldn't agree more and nor does it need to make people feel better, raise self-esteem or re-generate communities – some of the claims made about Art today by those who attempt to justify its existence, cost and purpose in an age of austerity. Should and can Art be measured in economic terms or should it just be left to us, the people, to judge, argue and decide what is good and what is not? Munsch's “The Scream” might make me feel haunted each time I see it and look to me like the frantic crayoning of a disturbed child but somebody else obviously finds it noteworthy.

The Walker Art Gallery is full of Art; of things that provoke curiosity, discussion, admiration, derision, that elicit argument and stir emotions. The Harris exhibition is a temporary display that should stimulate the senses, so go see it while you can and ignore the critics and kill-joys who think Art should have a purpose, be educational and economically justified and would bar us all from any pleasure in the name of austerity.

***Can You Tell What it is Yet?*** may not fire up the purists of the art world, but it's as vibrant and engaging as the artist himself and if this is dumbing down, well then I'm down with the dumb!

**Editor's Note:** [Are the Arts having a renaissance?](#) Well if you want to discuss this particular topic you should come along to the Manchester Salon on Monday 10 September and join in trying to answer the interminable question of **how we contemplate art today**

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