

SAVING A COLLECTION

With a valuable local collection of art at risk, one grassroots group have been working tirelessly to preserve it for future generations of visitors to their seaside town

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Community spirit is alive and well in Folkestone – and this time, Roger De Haan is not at the helm. The former head of holiday company Saga may have been the driving force behind much of the arts-led regeneration of Folkestone in the past decade, but he's not the only one helping the seaside town become a thriving artistic hub.

Grassroots group Friends of the Folkestone Collections (FFC) has been busy, too. The voluntary committee was set up following the closure of the town's well-loved Metropole Gallery in 2008 with the aim of preserving at least some of the institute's heritage. During the 1960s and '70s, the gallery was a beacon of creativity featuring exhibitions by luminaries from Henry Moore to Bridget Riley. It was at this time that the gallery's patrons, John Eveleigh and Kenneth Clark, amassed an impressive public art collection, bringing together print, painting, drawing, sculpture and photography by artists Peter Blake, Victor Pasmore, Julian Trevelyan and Robert Medley, among many others. Following the gallery's closure, and with no official home, the collection was at risk of being sold by Kent County Council.

"Our group was keen to retain the valuable collection in the area," says Pat McMath, the chairman of the FFC. "It's an incredibly interesting one – it's a sort of snapshot of that artistic period. [The mid-20th century is] a period that may have become slightly unfashionable, but in the long term, we feel it will come back into focus. I think as a time capsule of what was



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cutting edge during a particular era, it's an important collection."

The FFC has generously organised several hangings of the works at local hotel The Grand (which is owned by fellow member of the committee, Michael Stainer), and has also taken under its wing a collection of Old Master drawings that was left to the Folkestone public.

Encouraged by the success of their campaign so far, the 14-strong group (with a growing number of volunteers) has also curated a clutch of smaller shows, including a recent show of Chinese posters and work by political cartoonist Dave Brown. Its latest venture is the open South East Summer Exhibition, launching as a counterpoint to 2011's Folkestone Triennial, a modern art festival backed by De Haan's charitable Creative Foundation. "Local people often feel that Folkestone Triennial is something that's been put on them, like a visitation rather than something that grew from the bottom up," explains McMath. "FFC want to showcase local talent and exhibit the work of those who feel there isn't space for them in the Triennial."

The selling exhibition promises to be a quality show, with an impressive judging panel featuring Fred Cuming RA, as well as the respected wildlife photographer Steve Bloom. Painters and printmakers from across the South East area are welcome to submit work by 1 June and some 200 chosen works will be shown at The Grand in July. "We're waiting breathlessly to see what comes in," says McMath. "It's all a bit of a gamble, but one we're sure will result in a huge win for local art."

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