

## 4. Festival Logo

*Associate Director - Curatorial and Public Engagement, Isabel Hughes, explores the amazing stories of two talented contributors to the Festival of Britain. This single object speaks powerfully to the ingenuity of an innovative artist and the skill of an iconic mid-century designer. In revealing its story, Isabel identifies some of the social and cultural complexity of the 1950s and hints at powerful links to today.*

### Michael O'Connell, Festival of Britain logo wall-hanging, circa 1951

*Fifty years on from now, Britain will still be the country of long shadows on county [cricket] grounds, warm beer, invincible green suburbs, dog lovers, and—as George Orwell said—old maids bicycling to Holy Communion through the morning mist*

John Major, Prime Minister, in a speech to the *Conservative Group for Europe*, 22 April 1993

This quotation comes from a speech given back in the 1990s, long before Brexit, in support of Britain maintaining its place in the EU. It has become famous for its cultural references, some first described by George Orwell in his essay, “England Your England”, published in 1941. The Festival of Britain, held 10 years later sought to shine a light on the Britain’s contribution to civilisation past, present and future.

This is a story of two artists whose work was seen at the Festival of Britain in 1951 and is now part of The MERL’s collections. Both men were sons of immigrants who worked on pieces deployed to sum up the glorious past and optimistic future facing Britain after the end of the Second World War.

Abram Games, the son of photographer from Latvia, was born in Whitechapel, London in 1914. His father, Moshe Joseph Gamse allowed the young Abram to practise his drawing skills in his photographic studio and taught him to use draughtsmen’s tools including a ruling pen and airbrush. Although he later briefly attended St Martin’s School of Art, Abram Games was largely self-taught and developed his ideas in part through visits to museums and galleries (he spent time studying and drawing anatomy, for instance, at the Royal College of Surgeons Museum). At some point in the 1930s his father enabled an encouraging meeting with Frank Pick of the London Passenger Transport Board who was responsible for commissioning Edward Johnson’s roundel visual identity for London’s underground and Harry Beck’s iconic underground map, still in use today.

Games enlisted in 1940, early on in the Second World War, and as a private was soon volunteering as art editor for the battalion magazine of the Hertfordshire Regiment, ‘Shun!’ (Short for ‘Attention!’). That year he was also visited Jack Beddington, the publicity director for Shell-Mex and BP who

commissioned the memorable posters promoting leisure travel around the country, Games received a number of commissions through Beddington's contacts but it was his offer to write to the War Office to suggest the need for instructional posters that was to create the bigger opportunity for the young artist. Through a number of twists and turns Games moved from painting regimental badges on the side of lorries, to official appointment as a draughtsman. In 1942 he was made a lieutenant and Official War Poster Artist at the War Office. An example of his many wartime works is now in The MERL collection.



A signed copy of this wartime poster designed by Abram Games is held by the Museum (MERL 2009/9)

This 'Grow Your Own Food' poster, signed by Games, was produced in 1942 when Britain's food supplies were being threatened by the German blockades of shipping crossing the Atlantic. At the same time, a national food strategy required an extra 1.75 million acres of land be turned over to growing more crops and food. This particular poster was aimed at the military and suggests they turn any spare bits of land around their bases and barracks over to growing. It shows clearly Games's drawing facility but also his eye for storytelling through images and symbols. As an instructional poster it conveys its message in under 20 words.

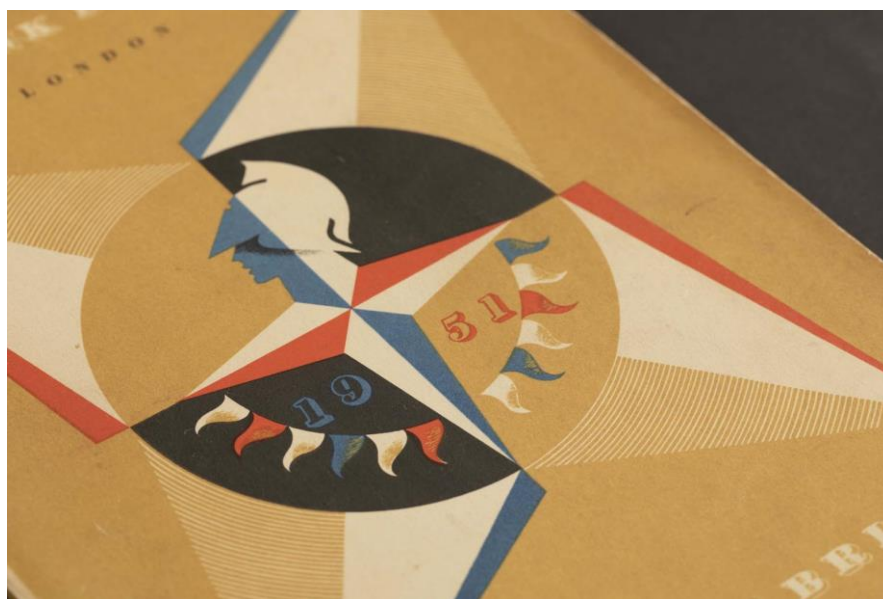
Abram Games produced over 100 such posters during the War but is probably best known for the emblem he created for the Festival of Britain. Having already made his name through his War Office work, Games had been selected to design the stamp for the 1948 London Olympics. In the same year he was invited to participate in a closed competition to design a symbol for the Festival of Britain.

Sir George Aylwen, Lord Mayor of London described the aims of the project:

*“There are two ways of thinking of the Festival. One would be to look upon it merely as a welcome, if temporary, release from the drab days of austerity and restricted life. The better method is to think of 1951 as something more than an end in itself. Besides the festivities, it can be an opportunity to lay the foundations of many good and better things to come.”*

Britain had faced the extreme hardship of six years at war in Europe and the Far East, followed by another six of shortages and austerity. The Festival of Britain, originally conceived as a means of marking the centenary of the 1851 Great Exhibition was taken forward by the Labour Government and deputy Prime Minister, Herbert Morrison, as a vehicle for promoting Britain’s design and manufacturing skills; “a national display illustrating Britain’s contribution to civilisation, past, present and future, in the arts, in science and technology, and in the industrial design.”

There was a strong field of contemporary artists and designers competing against Abram Games to work on the symbol, including Robin Day, Richard Guyatt and FHK Henrion who went on to design the Country Pavilion for the Festival at the Southbank. Games’s outline design went forward to the final stage of the competition along with that of Lynton Lamb, the painter, designer and illustrator who had worked as a camouflage artist during the War.



Festival of Britain logo designed by Abram Games, as used on the cover of *The South Bank Exhibition: A Guide to the Story it Tells* (MERL Library 1770-COX)

Games’s design drew inspiration from the well known image of Britannia which then and up until decimalisation in the early 70s, appeared on the British penny. Traditionally, and on the penny, Britannia wore a centurion’s helmet and was seated on a rock, a spiked shield resting near her right hand and a trident held in her left. Games adapted her image, using only her helmeted head. Whereas Britannia faced right on the penny, on the proposed symbol she looked left. Naomi Games, Abram’s daughter, claims this change was made to reflect Abram’s Socialist commitment and to

indicate that a Labour government was in power. Britannia's head, designed to reflect the spirit of the nation, was almost mounted on the north point of a compass, the four cardinal points of which were said to reflect the four corners of the United Kingdom (but not, it seems the 4 corners of the Empire that Britain was already in the process of letting go). Although there was no use of the Union Jack within the emblem, its colours - red, white and blue, were deployed on the compass points and also for the date "1951" which was added across the East and West points.



Pre-decimalisation penny showing the figure of Britannia wearing a helmet and facing toward the right ([https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British\\_pre-decimal\\_penny\\_1967\\_reverse.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:British_pre-decimal_penny_1967_reverse.png))

Lynton Lamb's shortlisted design contrasted quite significantly with Games's rather militaristic emblem. It deployed a rather playful image of a tent that looks partly the sort you might have found at a Tudor tournament but also, strangely, a bit like a melting cake or ice cream. It had a blue British sky, blue sea and what looks like yellow sand. Importantly, it also had flags flying, the sort that might grace a great British sandcastle.

The reaction to Games's symbol was not initially uniformly positive. Some newspapers claimed it was too warlike, too severe. It was also said that it was too close to the French national image of "Marianne". Others thought Lamb's symbol didn't convey enough the seriousness of the Festival. Ultimately, both artists were asked to modify their submissions. Games was told to make his more festive and his answer was to add red, white and blue bunting (so more flags!). The story goes that Games saw his wife hanging out the washing while he was pondering on the changes he would make to the design and this was the inspiration for that final addition. It was this, now lightened, emblem that was ultimately adopted by the Festival.

Looking at the emblem now it is interesting to note that just a few years later, in 1953, the same compass was used on the new NATO symbol, this time using the four points to represent the breadth of the membership of the treaty rather than the sense of belonging to one United Kingdom. It is also worth thinking about the bunting a little more. These days, it is often deployed more ironically in

student rooms or on the set of “The Great British Bake Off”, arguably the ultimate programme for people who like watching others making cakes rather than bothering themselves.

Apart from conveying the purpose and meaning of the Festival, a key consideration for the winning design was its successful use across a number of promotional materials. The Games design duly appeared on a wide range of advertisements, merchandise and architectural features. It also appears on another artwork in The MERL collection; a textile piece created by Michael O’Connell. The textile may have been specially commissioned as O’Connell worked to commissions for much of his career. It may have just been a test piece, a trial for much larger piece that might have been shown at the Festival of Britain. We don’t really know.



The Kent panel from Michael O’Connell’s ‘Variety of British Farming’ wall-hangings, on display in The MERL’s *Our Country Lives* gallery (MERL 63/18/9)

First-time visitors to The MERL are often astonished to see the massive textile hanging depicting farming and rural life in Kent that sits in its bespoke case at the far end of the Museum’s galleries. It is one of a number of pieces made by Michael O’Connell for the Country Pavilion that arrived at the Museum in June 1952, the Festival itself having ended in late September 1951. They were duly packed away and more or less forgotten about until our late colleague, Jill Betts, rediscovered them in the 1990s.

Michael O’Connell was born in Dalton, Lancashire in August 1898. His parents were Irish immigrants. Like Games, O’Connell was largely self-taught as an artist. Significant amounts of his adult life were spent in Australia and it was there that he met his wife, Ella, with whom he collaborated on many of his artworks. He returned to Britain in 1937. His body of work includes paintings, photography, cement work, and textiles. He is perhaps best known for the last of these because of his commission

to create hangings for the Festival of Britain to reflect “The Variety of British Farming.” To research the content of these hangings O’Connell spent two months travelling around Britain, taking photographs and making drawings. He used the techniques of block printing and paste resist dyeing to make the works, helped by two young women, Betty and Iris Sheridan. When Jill Betts rediscovered the 7 large sections of the textile mural in The MERL store, it was Betty and Iris who provided much of the information about how the works had been made. Michael O’Connell had sadly died in 1976. The hangings were made from mordanted (that is, dyed and fixed) rayon cloth, in most cases acquired from *Heals*, the furniture and home furnishings business with its flagship store on Tottenham Court Road, London. The designs were created by O’Connell and then transferred onto the fabric by Betty and Iris by pinpricking the outline of the design and then filling the holes made with charcoal dust. The shapes were coloured by hand using dyed paste which was painted or piped on. The background colour—in the case of the Games symbol hanging it is blue—involved dyeing activity for which, it is said, Michael took charge. Cloth was dyed in a large bath and then fixed in a mixture of water and sulphuric acid. Iris and Betty confirmed that this was a dangerous business. Any acid that splashed you in the eye or elsewhere was washed away with a little milk. The mixture of water and acid bubbled furiously and the ground shook around it. After that the whole hanging was washed again, areas of dye scrubbed away and the final vivid colours revealed. Finished work was left to dry with larger pieces being laid out on the grass at The Chase, Perry Green, O’Connell’s home and studio in Much Hadham, Hertfordshire.



Michael O’Connell watches as the finishing touches are added to the wall-hangings in the garden at The Chase (Image courtesy of the Central Office of Information)

As Jill Betts continued her research she made contact with Michael O’Connell’s son, Seamus and the piece depicting the Games emblem entered The MERL collection via this connection.

It has been said over the last months that we are facing, with the pandemic, the most significant crisis since the Second World War. People are already drawing parallels between the sacrifices made and deprivation felt during the War and those currently experienced. Likewise, we wonder whether we can make positive changes to the way our society operates once this is all over and we worry about how we can recover economically and as a country. We somehow sense that we have been here before and some look back for inspiration to the period of the Festival of Britain. As a response to the Brexit vote and resulting process for leaving the EU, Prime Minister, Theresa May announced in September 2018, a Festival of Britain and Northern Ireland, to take place in 2022. Satirist, Richard Littler, who presents his work through Scarfolk, an exercise in parody based on public information posters, and its blogspot, created a spoof poster for the project, drawing on Abram Games's symbol. A copy of this poster is set to be added to the Museum's collection. Britannia is shown shooting herself in the head. The bunting is gone and the 1951 date is moved to 2022. The cost is now set at £120m (and sits where the purchase price appeared on the Festival of Britain guidebook). The project currently seeks to distance itself from the 'Festival of Brexit' tag, is now named FestivalUK\*2022 and deploys a logotype or word-based logo to make that clear.



Richard Littler unveiled his 'Festival of Brexit Britain' design on social media. Echoing Abram Games, it is now available in poster form ([https://twitter.com/richard\\_littler/status/1046322039114674176](https://twitter.com/richard_littler/status/1046322039114674176)).

How do you express those rare opportunities for joyfulness and hope? When have there been such collective moments of happiness? The freeing of Nelson Mandela after decades in prison? The release of the Chilean miners who survived against all odds weeks trapped underground? Perhaps the opening ceremony of the 2012 London Olympics which was available once again during this last

Covid19 summer, on BBC iplayer? The truth is that we rarely experience such moments, they are often more about gradual mood changes, neither really exciting nor completely terrifying. Images like the Games emblem attempt to capture both the excitement of a moment in time and the slow burn of British culture with its age-old traditions and history. It is for the viewer to decide whether he succeeded.

## Further Reading:

For more information about Michael O'Connell - <https://michaeloconnell.org.uk/>

For more information about Abram Games - <https://www.abramgames.com/>

For more information about Richard Littler (and Scarfolk) - <https://scarfolk.blogspot.com/>

For more information about The Festival of Brexit Britain poster -

<http://saatchistore.saatchigallery.com/saatchi-gallery-exhibition-posters/3533-festival-of-brexit-britain-by-richard-littler-9786000057886.html>

On the Festival wall-hanging – Collections Database entry for [96/117](#)

## Other Publications (not freely available online):

Tanya Harrod, *The Crafts in Britain in the 20th Century* (Yale University Press, 1999)

Naomi Games, *Abram Games His Wartime Work* (Amberley Publishing, 2019)

Naomi Games, *A Symbol for The Festival* (Capital History Publishing, 2011)

Harriet Edquist, *Michael O'Connell: The Lost Modernist* (Melbourne Books, 2011)

Jill Betts, 'Michael O'Connell and his Festival of Britain Wall Hanging'

*Folk Life*, (1997, 36:1, pp.7-24) <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1179/043087797798238297>