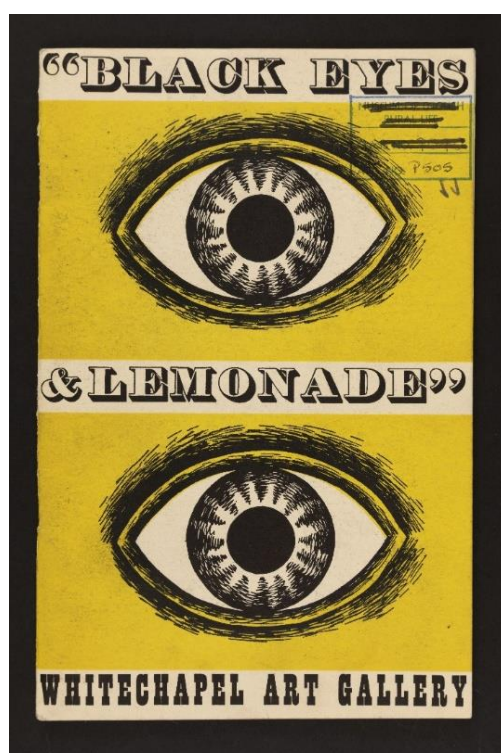


32. *Black Eyes & Lemonade*

*In this response University Museums and Special Collections Librarian, Connie Bettison, explores the 1951 exhibition *Black Eyes & Lemonade*. Here she reveals more about the work of the artist Barbara Jones and the position of popular art within the wider Festival of Britain.*

Barbara Jones, *Black Eyes & Lemonade* (London: Whitechapel Art Gallery, 1951)

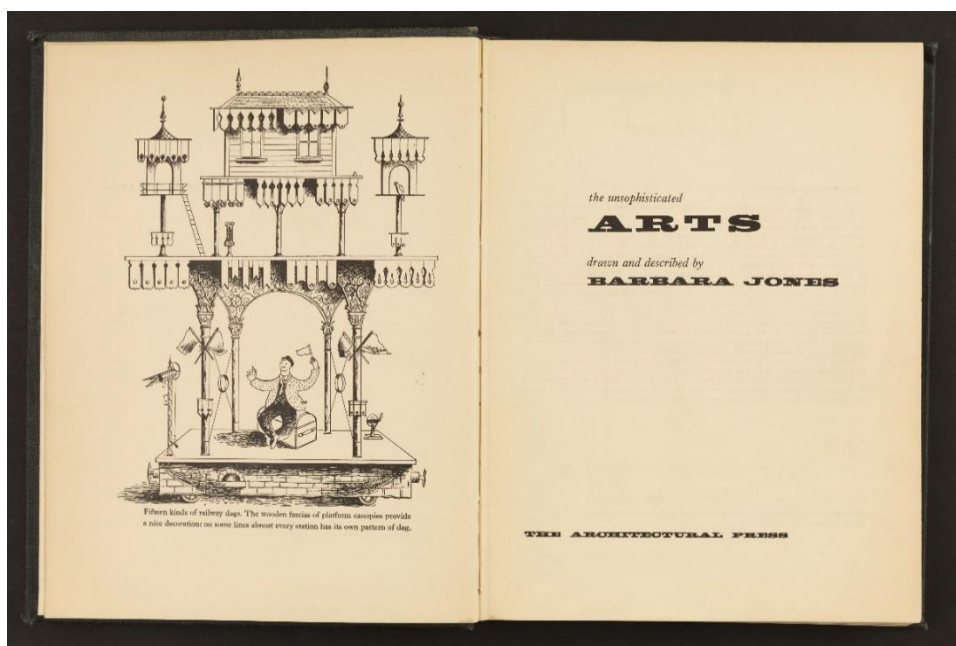


The exhibition catalogue cover, designed by Barbara Jones (University of Reading Special Collections GREAT EXHIBITION--12/06)

"A Persian's Heav'n is eas'ly made, / 'Tis but – black eyes and lemonade"
Thomas More 'Letter VI. From Abdallah in London to Mohassan in Ispahan'
Intercepted Letters &c (1813)

Barbara Jones's exhibition *Black Eyes & Lemonade* opened in August 1951 at Whitechapel Art Gallery as part of the Festival of Britain. The items on show were highly atypical for the time; at first glance more bric-a-brac than beaux arts, but the risk paid off: it was the gallery's most popular exhibition of the decade, with visitor numbers exceeding 30,000. These unusual exhibits included a waxwork rabbi, pub signs, prize rosettes, Staffordshire china and a Punch and Judy fit-up. There was even a pavement artist, a Mr. McErnean, usually stationed outside the British Museum, drawing new pieces daily on the gallery floor.

What united this apparent miscellany of objects was the notion of ‘popular art’, art which, to use Barbara Jones’s own term, was generally considered “unsophisticated”. Her understanding of *popular* or *unsophisticated* art was extremely broad; it not only included traditional craftwork and folk art but also encompassed machine-made products and even objects for sale in the shops. In her own words, it could be anything “that people make for themselves or that are manufactured in their taste”. With *Black Eyes & Lemonade*, Barbara Jones encouraged visitors to look afresh at everyday objects—new or old, handmade or machine-made—and see beyond their utility and into their craftsmanship or artistry.



The Unsophisticated Arts by Barbara Jones (University of Reading Special Collections Printing Collection 745.0942-JON).

The slim exhibition catalogue from the University of Reading Special Collections Great Exhibition Collection re-tells the story of Barbara Jones’s work on *Black Eyes & Lemonade*. It shows us exactly what she included in the exhibition, how the items she selected were arranged, and where or who the exhibits came from. Even before opening the catalogue, the front cover, with its bold fluorescent yellow and black contrast, hints at the unflinching (and unblinking) nature of Barbara Jones’s approach to the world of art.

Barbara Jones

Barbara Jones was born in Croydon on Christmas Day 1912. She studied at the Royal College of Art, graduating in 1937 as a trained mural artist, and soon established herself as a jobbing artist working across a variety of disciplines. She illustrated books, wrote guidebooks, designed dust jackets, contributed essays to the *Architectural Review*, and produced a great number of murals.

By 1951, Barbara was renowned for her work and her success gave her the opportunity to explore her eclectic interests. The support of Nikolaus Pevsner and the *Architectural Review* were integral to her

established position in the art world. She had written regularly for the *Review* since 1944 on many subjects which interested her. Her first article for Pevsner was on rustic porches in the model village of Canford Magna in Dorset and she followed it with pieces on roundabouts, food decoration, automata, funeral customs, and canal boats—all of these appear in some form or other in *Black Eyes & Lemonade*.

In 1951, the Architectural Press published Barbara's book, *The Unsophisticated Arts*. This was a compilation of her pieces for the *Review* and can serve as a useful companion to *Black Eyes & Lemonade*, with many of the subjects she explored in print, including taxidermy, funerals, toys, food, waxworks, and the seaside, resurfacing in the exhibition.

The Exhibition

Although *Black Eyes & Lemonade* was the brainchild of Barbara Jones it was not a lone venture, as the title page of the exhibition catalogue makes clear. Both the Society for Education in Art (SEA) and the Arts Council are named as sponsors, while Barbara's friends and collaborators Tom Ingram and Douglas Newton are credited as co-organiser and cataloguer respectively.



Title page and frontispiece of *Black Eyes & Lemonade* exhibition catalogue (University of Reading Special Collections Great Exh. Coll. 12/06).

Tom Ingram assisted Barbara with the organisation of the exhibition, joining her for a drive across Britain in July 1951 to source further exhibits for display. Both Tom Ingram and Douglas Newton were firm friends of Barbara's; she illustrated books by each of them in later years, *Bells of England* (1954) by Tom Ingram and *Clowns* (1957) by Douglas Newton. Having other artists on her side will have been important, as the institutional sponsors—the SEA and the Arts Council—often needed persuading

that Barbara's ideas were of artistic merit. Barbara and her team pushed back against the institutions' resistance in order to deliver the exhibition she envisaged.

The involvement of the SEA and the Arts Council shows the extent to which popular art was riding a wave of interest in the early 1950s. In fact, the first idea for an exhibition of popular art came from the SEA, and Barbara Jones wasn't their first choice to deliver it. Wendy Koop of the SEA first brought the idea to Hugh Scrutton, Director of the Whitechapel Gallery, and between them they secured a grant from the Arts Council. After that, the SEA offered the exhibition opportunity to Enid Marx, an artist with more traditional ideas about popular art, who turned down the offer having been put off by what she saw as the conflation of Child Art and Folk Art. At this point, the SEA offered the exhibition to Barbara Jones, who accepted, despite her own differing opinions with Wendy Koop and the SEA.

Barbara and Wendy Koop disagreed over the inclusion of mass-produced, machine-made objects in the exhibition. In fact, machine-made or not, Wendy Koop saw most of the 20th-century objects in Barbara's initial selection as "cheap", "tawdry" and "without a single redeeming feature". Eventually, and perhaps surprisingly, Barbara and Wendy agreed that up to half of the exhibition could comprise machine-made goods. On this conflict, Barbara Jones's biographer, Ruth Artmonsky, made the astute observation that "the Victorian and Edwardian objects that they [the SEA] preferred as quaint and antique could well have seemed just as tawdry and cheap at the time of their production". This was Barbara's belief as well, that the everyday objects of today are the museum pieces of the future and can be treated as such.

The question of handmade versus machine-made was raised repeatedly to the point that Barbara defended her decision publicly and staunchly in the introduction to the catalogue, arguing that:

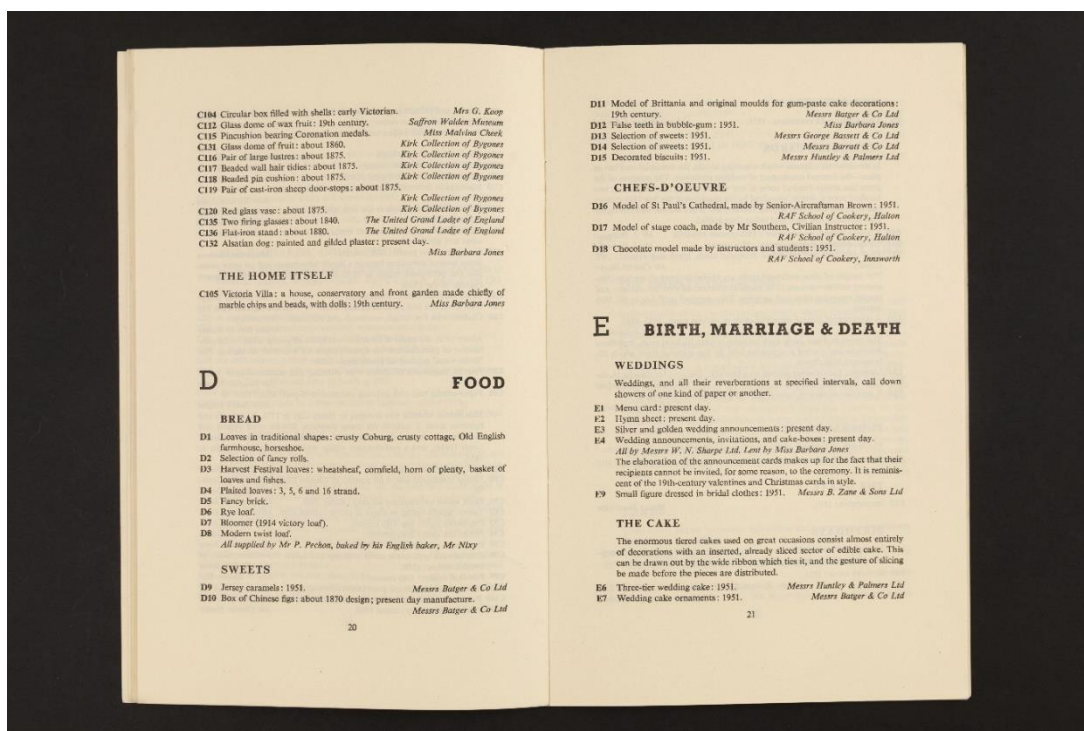
"somewhere there is a dividing line between tool (allowed as hand) and machine, but it is very difficult to say exactly where, and so far a human brain has always dictated just what the machine shall produce."

Here, in the tensions between machine-made and handmade, traditional and mass-produced, new and old were where the controversies of the exhibition lay, but it was also where the seeds for Pop Art were planted. Barbara brought examples of contemporary popular culture into the sanctuary of the gallery in 1951 as Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, and other Pop Artists did later in the decade.

The Catalogue

The exhibition catalogue itself was compiled by Douglas Newton, a poet and friend of Barbara Jones. This was no small task, with each item, or group of items, in the exhibition listed with a description, date, and its donor. Fortunately, Barbara was a notorious list-maker, which would have made Douglas's job of cataloguing the exhibition easier.

Douglas gave very little descriptive interpretation of the objects listed in the catalogue. For example, entry E6 reads ‘Three-tier wedding cake: 1951. Messrs Huntley & Palmers Ltd’. No frills here. Occasionally, a subcategory has a few lines of interpretation, usually alerting the visitor to the visual or material characteristics of the exhibit with suggestions about what to look for, rather than information about the object’s use or history. Of course, many of these objects had little history as they were often brand new. This in turn would be duly noted in the catalogue by Douglas as either ‘1951’ or ‘present day’, reminding the visitor just how up to the minute *Black Eyes & Lemonade* was.



Black Eyes & Lemonade exhibition catalogue (University of Reading Special Collections Great Exh. Coll. 12/06).

Douglas’s sparse descriptions were almost all the visitors to the gallery had by way of textual information, as there were next to no explanatory labels in the exhibition itself. This was a purposeful decision; Barbara Jones aimed to encourage visitors to actively respond to the exhibits, rather than allowing them to mediate their experience of the objects through labels. As she wrote in her introduction to the catalogue: “the museum eye must be abandoned” so that a new, unrestrictive way of seeing could be fostered.

Popular Art

Barbara’s exhibition was very unusual, even compared to the work of others in the popular art scene of the 1950s. However, the wider English Popular Art movement rarely shared her affection for machine-made objects and inclined more towards traditional popular arts, including folk art and traditional handcraft. Barbara was interested in these genres as well but was too attracted to contemporary objects and non-traditional popular arts to exclude them from her work. She believed

in a broad definition of what art is and can be. In an article on ‘Back Street Decorations’ a couple of years after *Black Eyes & Lemonade* closed she wrote:

“We have been frequently told that art is selection. It is time to recognize that subtraction is not always the answer; it can mean addition too.”

The ‘additions’ Barbara had in mind—the contemporary, machine-made, “cheap” objects—were not to the traditionalists’ tastes, and the SEA also needed convincing that they were worthy exhibits. In the 1970s, Barbara reflected on the tension between the traditional popular art scene, and what she was aiming to do with *Black Eyes & Lemonade*:

“I think the society [SEA] originally had in its mind more tradition and smocking and Staffordshire dogs than were in mine. We brought the whole popular art scene right up to date and so far as I know this was the first time it had ever been done: things currently on sale in the shops and posters on the hoardings, plaster and plastic ornaments and a fine 1951 fireplace in the shape of an Airedale dog were all displayed as works of art. People began to realise that indeed they were. Visitors were eased into the idea by a row of ships’ figure heads and cases of other acceptable art-objects and were brought gradually to accept comic postcards and beer labels. All through the exhibition the new and commonplace were seen near the old and safe.”

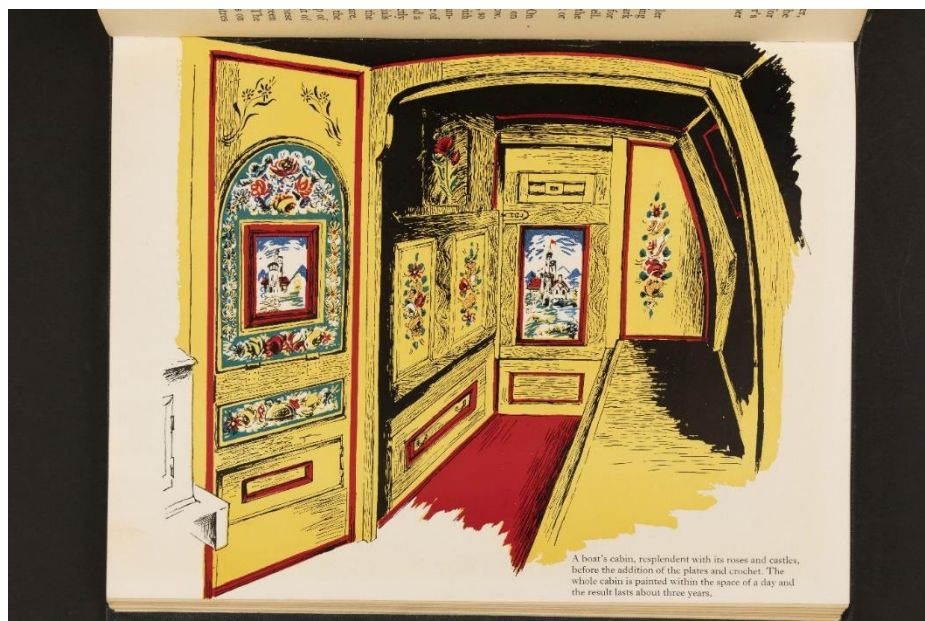
Barbara was interested in many different things and enjoyed listing and categorising them. As such, it doesn’t surprise me that she chose to classify her work as separate to the English Popular Art group. With the title of her book, *The Unsophisticated Arts*, she coined a new phrase, a new category, under which she could include anything she liked. With a term like “unsophisticated” she escaped the limitations of “folk art” or “traditional art” while still including those genres under her umbrella.

This stance contrasts sharply with the work of Enid Marx and Margaret Lambert, who were her exact contemporaries (and as mentioned earlier, Enid Marx was the first choice for the Whitechapel Gallery’s popular art exhibition which turned out to be *Black Eyes & Lemonade*). In 1946, Enid Marx and Margaret Lambert had published a book, *English Popular and Traditional Art*, with many topics overlapping with Barbara’s later book, *The Unsophisticated Arts* such as fairgrounds, ironware, children’s toys and strawcraft. However, Enid and Margaret’s interests had much tighter boundaries than Barbara’s. Enid in particular was loyal to objects which “retained the innocence of folk art” whereas Barbara, as we have seen, could be just as enchanted by even the most ordinary of objects.

Black Eyes & Lemonade and The Museum of English Rural Life

Besides the *Black Eyes & Lemonade* exhibition catalogue forming part of our collections—specifically the Great Exhibition Collection, which includes published material on both the Great Exhibition of 1851 and the Festival of Britain of 1951—Barbara Jones’s work and the exhibition link closely to many of our other collections here at The MERL. Here are some examples.

The first section of *Black Eyes & Lemonade* was 'Transport', subdivided into 'Ships' and 'Canals'. Barbara began the exhibition with this category as she thought it would put the visitor at ease to start with some expected examples of popular art such as ship figureheads and narrow-boat decorations.



Canal boat cabin illustration from the plate facing page 60 in Barbara Jones, *The Unsophisticated Arts* (University of Reading Special Collections Printing Collection 745.0942-JON).

The aesthetic and design of canal boats are as distinctive to us today as they would have been to *Black Eyes & Lemonade* visitors in 1951. The characteristic yellow-and-red designs with floral flourishes are beautiful and display intricate workmanship. However, as Barbara Jones wrote, they are generally viewed as “charming” but little more. Perhaps due to their vernacular associations, they would not be lauded as examples of artwork, at least in the early 1950s. Today at The MERL, canal life is an element of rural life we celebrate and appreciate, including the design and decoration of the narrowboats.

Another section of *Black Eyes & Lemonade* was 'Agriculture'. Here, Barbara included agricultural advertising material (tin-plates, posters, signs, and paintings), rosettes and prizes from agricultural shows, corn dollies, sacks, a wooden mower, butter moulds, and eggcups. Any and all of these kinds of objects can be found in The MERL, but it is particularly interesting to see them gathered in this context, as a celebration of their aesthetics and design, rather than for their history or utility.

The selection of corn dollies included in *Black Eyes & Lemonade* includes some examples of work by the straw craftsman Fred Mizen who made several pieces for the Festival of Britain (including his magnificent, larger than life lion and unicorn set, photographs of which are celebrated elsewhere in *51 Voices*). The Mizen piece in *Black Eyes & Lemonade* was of fireirons. Three other corn dolly pieces from the exhibition came from Barbara's personal collection and were of a corn-stack, a walking stick, and a set representing faith, hope, and charity.

Also included in the 'Agriculture' section of *Black Eyes & Lemonade* were examples of livestock portraiture. These artforms—formal paintings or photographs of cows, sheep, horses, and pigs—are regularly celebrated here at The MERL, particularly on our social media. Barbara included several portraits, with one listed in the catalogue. This was a nineteenth-century lithographical portrait of a Leicester wether taken from a painting by J. Barwick. Pleasingly, and perhaps incongruously, the portrait was donated to the exhibition by Hugh Scrutton, the director of the Whitechapel Gallery.



Here is a similar style of portrait, this time of a Leicester ram, as painted by Richard Whitford in 1859 and drawn from The Royal Smithfield Club Collection held at The MERL (MERL 64/51).

Finally, dotted throughout the exhibition, in categories such as 'Food' and 'Birth, marriage and death' are exhibits produced and donated by Reading's own Huntley & Palmers, the biscuit company. The exhibits they donated to *Black Eyes & Lemonade* included a wedding cake, icing sugar decorations and some decorated biscuits. The concept of putting perishable food in a (three-month!) art exhibition is one of Barbara's more unusual ideas, but what else represents the question of the fleeting aesthetics of shelf appeal so well as a beautiful biscuit?

The Legacy

Barbara Jones's eclectic interests and artistic practices may appear haphazard, but from today's perspective (and with the benefit of hindsight) many of her ideas seem ground-breaking. In particular, her work on lettering, advertisements, and tattooing anticipates the preoccupations of the Pop Art movement and its efforts to collapse categories of 'low' and 'high' art in the late-1950s and early-1960s. But while this lineage seems evident, it is only in the last decade or so that it been

explored thoroughly (see Massey and Seago's 2018 book on Pop Art and Catherine Moriarty's essay on the Whitechapel Gallery's 2016 reshowing of *Black Eyes & Lemonade*).

This recent renaissance of interest in Barbara Jones's work owes a great deal to the Whitechapel Gallery, the Museum of British Folklore and the University of Brighton Design Archives who, in 2013, partially restaged *Black Eyes & Lemonade*. Some original exhibits were tracked down and reshowed, including a fireplace in the shape of an Airedale terrier from 1951. The restaged exhibition also showed items from Barbara's archive including some of her notes, lists, and designs. The 2013 exhibition was received with considerable interest, and it is heartening to see that as a result Barbara's voice and work is being rediscovered as a result.

As evidenced through the wealth of objects in *Black Eyes & Lemonade*, much of Barbara's work and ideas centred around material things, and as you might expect, her personal collection was extensive. She occupied a five-floor house in Hampstead that was chock-full of her accumulated collection. She occasionally wrote about her personal ambitions for turning her collection (or perhaps even her house) into a Museum of Popular Art. However, this was never realised, and her collection was variously lost, sold, or dispersed, although fortunately parts of her archive survive at the University of Brighton Design Archives.

We do know that at some point in the 1950s or 1960s, Barbara was in correspondence with The MERL about the possibility of handing over her collection and that these conversations progressed positively for a while (Artmonsky, page 75). For reasons unknown, negotiation stopped, and we can only imagine what The MERL's holdings might look like had Barbara Jones's collection of curiosities joined the throng.

Further Information:

For information about the exhibition catalogue – [Great Exh. Coll 12/06](#)

For more about the Museum of British Folklore – <https://www.museumofbritishfolklore.com/>

For a 51 Voices entry on Fred Mizen – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/collections/john-tarlton/lion-and-unicorn/>

For a 51 Voices entry on Huntley & Palmers – <https://merl.reading.ac.uk/objects/biscuit-tin/>

Further Sources (online):

On Barbara Jones's art:

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Barnard, Toby. "Delight in the everyday: Barbara Jones, the woman who brought fizz to a flat London." *Times Literary Supplement*, 5759-5760, 16 Aug. 2013, pp.21+. [Gale Academic OneFile](#)

On restaging of *Black Eyes & Lemonade*

Moriarty, Catherine 'Drawing, writing and curating: Barbara Jones and the art of arrangement' *Whitechapel Art Gallery*, 2013. <https://www.whitechapelgallery.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/BlackEyesEssay2.pdf>

Hill, Rosemary 'At The Whitechapel: 'Black Eyes & lemonade'' *London Review of Books* 35:10, 23 May 2013 <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v35/n10/rosemary-hill/at-the-whitechapel>

On contrast with Enid Marx:

House of Illustration 'Popular Art: What Inspires You?' 2018 <https://www.houseofillustration.org.uk/blog/blog/popular-art-what-inspires-you/category/exhibitions>

Further Sources (offline):

On Barbara Jones:

Artmonsky, Ruth. *A Snapper Up of Unconsidered Trifles: A Tribute to Barbara Jones*. Artmonsky Arts, 2008.

The Private Library, Fifth Series, Vol. 2:3, Autumn 1999.

Jones, Barbara 'Popular Arts', in *A Tonic to the Nation: The Festival of Britain, 1951*, eds. Mary Banham and Bevis Hillier (London: Thames and Hudson, 1976), 129–132.

Massey, Anne and Alex Seago (eds.) *Pop Art and Design*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018.

On Popular Art:

Lewery, A. J. *Popular Art: Past & Present*. David & Charles, 1991.