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Paul Nash, *Battle of Britain*, 1941

UP, UP AND AWAY

Celina Fox considers two exhibitions focusing on representations of flight in art and reviews other current art shows

The dream of flight - to soar into space through one's own volition - is a basic human instinct. While it provides a means of escape from the trials of everyday life, there is also something spiritual in the quest to defy gravity and look down serenely on the world from above. Yet the skies have long been seen as divine territory, ruled by the gods, and we attempt to join them at our peril. Perhaps a safer course is to explore the subject through artists' eyes, and this summer, two exhibitions - at Compton Verney and Tatton Park - have risen to the challenge of representing flight.

Salutary depictions of Phaethon and Icarus introduce Compton Verney's show. With all the hubris of young men in fast cars, these Greek

mythological figures steered too recklessly close to the sun, lost control and fell to earth. In Genesis, Jacob was content to dream on stony ground of the angels of God ascending and descending a ladder to heaven. Only the blessed could join them and Christian art is replete with images of glorious lift-offs by Christ, Mary and the saints after death, not to mention - in the case of Francis of Assisi and Joseph of Cupertino, patron saint of aviators - miraculous levitations while still alive.

From the sixteenth century, artists could create illusory bird's-eye views of towns, country estates and battlefields by utilising the mathematical skills involved in surveying maps and drawing perspective. Leonardo da Vinci famously attempted to

replicate the aerodynamics of birds' wings in assorted machines. But with the ascent of the Montgolfier brothers' hot-air balloon in 1783, the actual sensation of flight was experienced for the first time. In September 1785, on a solo trip in Lunardi's balloon from Chester, Thomas Baldwin made drawings that were engraved and published in *Airopaidia* (1786). Tracing his course over the mouth of the Mersey and including the clouds which interrupted his view of the land below, they constitute the first illustrations ever made of the earth from mid-air.

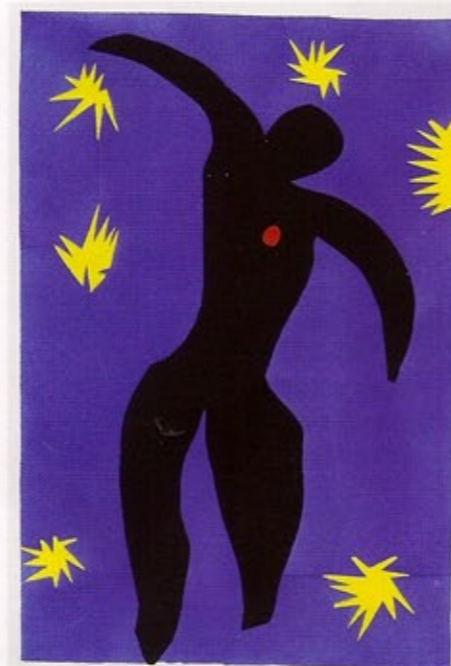
Aerial photography is also covered at Compton Verney, pioneered by Nadar from a tethered balloon on the outskirts of Paris in 1858. Cameras were later attached to unmanned balloons, kites, rockets >

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and even pigeons, but they came into their own with the invention of the aeroplane, especially for military reconnaissance. Following Blériot's cross-Channel flight of 1909, air shows and air races became hugely popular, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors to watch magnificent men and women in their flying machines. Spectacular feats were recorded in newsreels and the exploits of First World War fighter pilots romanticised in feature films - the American magnate and aircraft fanatic Howard Hughes produced *Hell's Angels* (1930), starring Jean Harlow as the love object of two British brothers in the Royal Flying Corps.

Twentieth-century artists - notably the Italian Futurists, who were obsessed with speed - used air travel to enlarge the dimensions of their vision of the world. Aerial views were rendered abstract, the earth's surface detail too distanced for precise meaning. From ground level, planes themselves could become will-o'-the-wisps, though the whole sky acquired a new dynamic through their vapour trails or, on wartime nights, shafts of searchlight and anti-aircraft fire. Among the contemporary works on display, Layla Curtis's video, *Sky Drawings (Night, Day)* records 24 hours of aircraft movements overhead in one flight path, their fugitive traces suggestive of today's global mobility. And while outer space is represented at Compton Verney with photographs from the Hubble telescope, among the site-specific films and installations commissioned for Tatton's Park's third Biennial there is a crash-landed flying saucer by Dinu Li.

'Flight and the Artistic Imagination' is at Compton Verney, Warwickshire, and *'Flights of Fancy'* is at Tatton Park, Cheshire; both until September 30



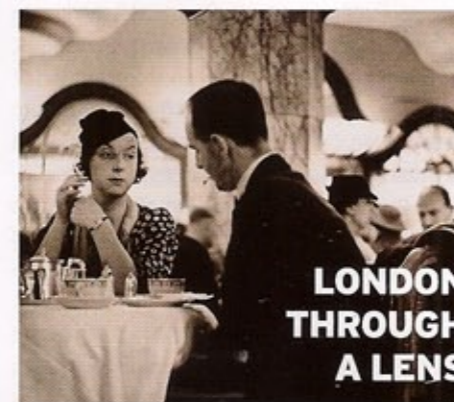
Henri Matisse, *Jazz Suite: Icarus*, c.1947



CLOAK AND DAGGER

If you have been following Neil MacGregor's recent *Shakespeare's Restless World* programmes on BBC Radio 4, then the latest exhibition in the Round Reading Room at the British Museum is the show for you. Presented in collaboration with the Royal Shakespeare Company as part of the World Shakespeare Festival, it explores London through Shakespeare's plays, brought to life in texts, performance and an extraordinary array of objects. Sometimes the smallest have great evocative power, such as the gold coin commemorating the assassination of Julius Caesar, while a dagger retrieved from the Thames confirms that the strong current of violence and plotting in the histories and tragedies also reflected realities closer to home. *'Shakespeare: Staging the World'* is at the British Museum, Great Russell Street, WC1 (020-7323 8181; www.britishmuseum.org) until November 25, sponsored by BP; admission, £14

ABOVE Unknown artist, *Portrait of Richard III with Broken Sword*, c.1523-55



Wolfgang Suschitzky, *Lyons Corner House, Tottenham Court Road, London*, 1934

JEWELS OF THE CROWN

No exhibition could be more fitting than the spectacular array of diamonds on show this summer at Buckingham Palace. The mineral itself has all the qualities - endurance and longevity, purity and value - we associate with the Queen in the year of her Diamond Jubilee. As the only previous British monarch to achieve this feat, Queen Victoria accumulated a magnificent cache during a reign which saw the mines of India and Brazil augmented by the great diamond fields of South Africa. Star pieces range from the necklace and earrings created for her by Garrard in 1858, and worn by all subsequent British queens at their coronations, to the miniature crown she favoured for the last 30 years of her life on account of its lightness, designed to be set over the veil she adopted after the death of Prince Albert. The tiara presented in 1893 as a wedding gift to Princess Victoria Mary of Teck (later Queen Mary) on behalf of the 'Girls of Great Britain and Ireland' is one of the prettiest pieces on display and is still used by the Queen.

'Diamonds: A Jubilee Celebration' is at Buckingham Palace (020-7766 7300; www.royalcollection.org.uk) until October 7; admission, £18



'The Girls of Great Britain' tiara, 1893, R & S Garrard

While the attention of the world is on London and the Olympics, the capital's museums and art galleries offer some escape from the hullabaloo. Tate Britain has devised a calmly contemplative show of photographs of the capital made by foreign photographers, including Henri Cartier-Bresson and Eve Arnold, in the middle decades of the twentieth century. Some came as refugees, others as tourists or photojournalists. The main focus is on people, capturing extremes of wealth and poverty, youth and old age, as well as the city's changing mores and growing cultural diversity. *'Another London'* is at Tate Britain, Millbank, SW1 (020-7887 8888; www.tate.org.uk) until September 16; admission, £10 □