



Literary Subterranea

Pavement Poetry in Notting Hill

Cameron Cartiere

Street art has been enjoying a fair amount of notoriety over the last few years and certainly in my neighbourhood of Notting Hill we have a number of examples from celebrated graffiti artists such as Banksy and Space Invaders. However, one can find another type of street art, a kind that is literally beneath one's feet, in the work of artist Maria Vlotides. The Pavement Poetry project locates seven 'coal hole' covers cast in iron with text from celebrated local writers including P.D. James, Sebastian Faulks, John Heath-Stubbs, Colin Thubron, Hugh Thomas and Margaret Drabble. Literally around the corner from my home is a cover with text by Michael Holroyd. I walk past this spot every day while taking the dog for her morning constitutional and we often pause at the curbside near the piece. Interestingly, I had never noticed it before receiving this writing assignment and I like to think I am a pretty observant person, particularly when it comes to public art.

So how did I miss it, day after day? 'Manhole cover art', is an international phenomena, and I have certainly seen my share of work in New York, Seattle, Vancouver, and across Japan. The manhole cover art of Japan is

particularly striking, ranging from traditional motifs such as cherry blossoms, to Manga characters. The works are often coloured and stand out vividly against the backdrop of the perpetually clean sidewalks of Tokyo and Kyoto. The pavements of Notting Hill are littered with covers from a host of gas, electricity, and water utilities with no discernable pattern or logical method for installation. One thing to note is that manholes are much bigger than coalholes and on the block where the Holroyd cover is situated there are seven hole covers. So it is easy to see how these literary gems can get lost in the visual chaos underfoot.

Some of the earliest contemporary artist-designed manhole covers, or hatchcovers, were commissioned in Seattle in the mid 1970s, a city with a rich tradition of public art. The idea came from Seattle Arts Commissioner Jacquetta Blanchett, who was inspired by seeing covers in Florence, Italy in the late 1950s.¹ The first manhole cover was created by Anne Knight, who designed a relief map of Seattle cast into a 230-pound plate.

MAIN IMAGE: *Michael Holroyd*
Maria Vlotides

1 *Margaret Drabble*
Maria Vlotides

2 *P.D. James*
Maria Vlotides

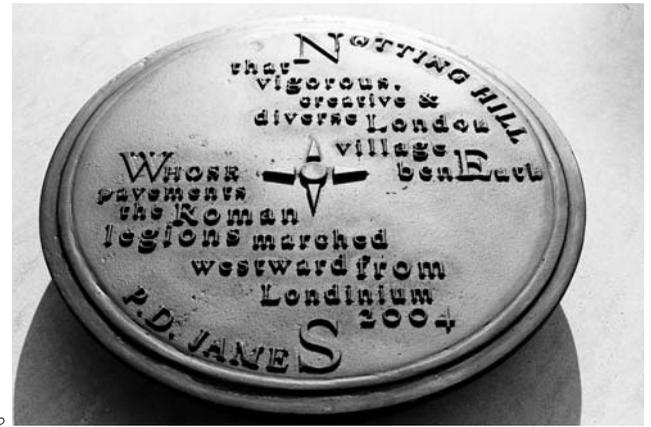
3 *John Heath-Stubbs*
Maria Vlotides

4 *Michael Holroyd*
Maria Vlotides

5 *Hugh Thomas*
Maria Vlotides



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Nineteen of these hatchcovers were installed in the city and when one is standing over an individual cover, the location of that cover is indicated on the map with a steel dot – a precursor to today's sat-nav systems. Further works were commissioned from Nathan Jackson, Garth Edwards and Nancy Blum with each commission created as an edition with numerous covers found across the city. This approach of using multiples not only increases the visibility of the work, but also reinforces its acceptance as a substantial public art commission.

Unfortunately, Vlotides did not have the support of a major art funder – the Arts Council rejected her grant application – so money was raised through private donations and the project is limited in scale. But perhaps this is part of the charm of the work. Each piece is unique and has a sense of place-specificity. Margaret Drabble's poem is a tribute to the Coronet Theatre, and her cover is located in front of the building. And what better place for the cover dedicated to P.D. James than in front of Daunt Books on Holland Park Avenue.

Pavement Poetry is a bit of a "best kept secret" and there are no maps or directions to download from the Internet, but armed with a list of locations from the artist I set out with my dog, Misha, to track down the seven works.² I began with the Michael Holroyd cover situated on the east side of Powis Square.

*This streetwise area
is dedicated to all
Absolute Beginners.
Signed: The Napoleon of Notting Hill.
Michael Holroyd, 2004.*

From there we wandered up Kensington Park Road, just past the Ukrainian Consulate, to find the longer poetic text by John Heath-Stubbs.

*Incline your head, passer-by, and peruse what you see
With some danger from passing perambulators
Not to mention incontinent sparrows and pigeons.
Here is a long, thin thing coiling a round.
It isn't a centipede, but an unrhymed poem –
Free verse at that! What is it there for –
Only to prove what a cultured place
This town of ours is – isn't it?
John Heath-Stubbs, 2004*

From the consulate it is a short walk to Horbury Crescent, where the Sebastian Faulks proverbial cover can be found near the corner of Ladbroke Road.

*A word in your eye
Don't worry or push
A step in the gate
Is worth two in the bush.
Sebastian Faulks, 2004*

The Coronet Cinema is a couple of blocks away on Notting Hill Gate where Drabble's spiral poem is located.

*Behold the glittering coronet of diamonds, tears and dreams.
Margaret Drabble, 2004*

From the theatre, we headed down the hill on Holland Park Avenue to locate P.D. James' outside of Daunt Books.

*Notting Hill, that vigorous, creative & diverse London village beneath
Whose pavements the Roman Legions marched westward from
Londinium.
P.D. James, 2004*





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6 Colin Thubron
Maria Vlotides

7 Sebastian Faulks
Maria Vlotides



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Further down the avenue and around Royal Crescent we made our way to St. Ann's Villas to find the Colin Thubron cover located outside a house with a blue plaque marking the former home of Maurice Chevalier.

The Victorians decried this street. Barbaric, they said, discordant. Look now. The buildings stand the same, Minds and hearts change.
Colin Thubron, 2004

From here we backtracked half a block and turned up Queensdale Road, literally taking a shortcut through the dog-friendly Prince of Wales Pub to Portland Road. Heading north, we located the final cover dedicated to Hugh Thomas outside the Cross Shop at Portland Road and Hippodrome Place.

*This district once boasted
a race-course & it retains
something of the dashing,
classless, devil-may-care, yes,
racy sense of the turf.*
Hugh Thomas, 2004

This walking adventure did what all 'good' street art should do; it allowed the viewer to look at the familiar through a new lens. I walked outside my regular neighbourhood routes and took stock of my surroundings. In the end, I was surprised how many of the covers were in locations I had frequented recently but not observed the texts. The project began in 2003, but many of the covers were not installed till 2008. Perhaps if they were the size of manhole covers I might have recognised them as public art rather than public utilities. But now Pavement Poetry is a part of the visual map of my neighbourhood, making an impression on my personal landscape and each morning as I stroll past Absolute Beginners I can't help but pause and take notice.

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The Pavement Poetry project commissioned original texts from local authors that relates to the area or street in Notting Hill, London W11, which was then transposed as iron coalhole covers. Designed by Maria Vlotides with lettercutter Alan Thewlis, the locations were realised over a five-year period from 2003-2008. The work by Margaret Drabble was unveiled in 2007 and the final six on November 27th 2008. This project was supported by John Scott and the Notting Hill Improvements Group; the Notting Hill Arts Club; Mrs Lou Lockhart-Mummery; Daunt Books; and the Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea. Detailed images of the covers are on the artist's website: www.mariavlotides.com

Notes:

1 www.seattle.gov/light/Neighborhoods/nh4_art.htm

2 Outside the Coronet Cinema on Notting Hill Gate...Near a bus stop on St Ann's Villas (outside a house with a Maurice Chevalier blue plaque)...Outside Daunt Books on Holland Park Avenue...Outside the Cross shop on Portland Road...On Horbury Crescent, near the corner on Ladbroke Road...On the east side of Powis Square...Outside the Ukrainian Consulate on Kensington Park Road, near a pink-stone church called St Peters...