

NONE of the artists was at the opening of this year's Koestler Exhibition of new works – the vast majority are still behind bars.

Set up by author Arthur Koestler, the exhibition showcases art created by inmates of prisons, young offenders' institutions and hospital secure units across the UK.

It's a bewildering jumble of work, including exhibits from Holloway and Pentonville prisons, encompassing sculpture, painting, drawing, tailoring and furniture-making.

Even the least technically assured pieces glow with an impressive enthusiasm, while other works could easily sneak into a Cork Street gallery undetected. One unifying streak is the unfashionable openness of the work. Poet Benjamin Zephaniah, himself a former prisoner, opened the show saying as much: "I don't really get much art these days. I'm always having to ask: 'So what's this one about?' But walking around here, I don't have to ask that. There's an honesty here you don't find much in art these days."

Koestler, the Budapest-born novelist best known for *Darkness at Noon*, knew first hand the power of art in overcoming the dehumanising effects of prison after spending much of his 30s locked up.

While reporting on the Spanish Civil War for the *News Chronicle* in 1936, he was captured by Franco's army and condemned to death, spending three months in prisons on charges of espionage. The British Foreign Office secured a reprieve, and he ended up in Paris, where he edited an anti-Nazi weekly.

As war broke out, he was sent to Le Vernet Detention Camp. With the help of friends he managed to escape to Britain, where he was promptly confined to Pentonville for six weeks for entering the country without a permit.

The Koestler Award Trust grew from the same humanitarian streak that made Koestler a leading figure in the campaign against capital punishment. Lord RA 'Rab' Butler, then Home Secretary, agreed that arts and crafts were an important part of

Treasure in the hearts of those behind bars

Prison is a place for punishment, writes Jonathan Allen, but it has spawned an impressive array of artwork by inmates



From left, poet Benjamin Zephaniah, Wormwood Scrubs governor Luke Serjeant and Sir David Ramsbotham

rehabilitation, and the awards scheme was set up in 1962.

Former Chief Inspector of Prisons Sir David Ramsbotham is now chairman of the trust and spoke at the exhibition.

He said that this year, more than 4,000 entries were received, only a fraction of which can be displayed at St Mary Abbots Hall in Kensington. "Everyone who entered has had an expert giving expert critical comment on their work," he said.

Introducing Mr Zephaniah, he said that prisoners found the poet an inspiration as someone who had put their past behind them.

SMr Zephaniah recalled visiting Brixton Prison for a poetry reading. He said: "One guy

came up to me and said: 'I know you man, you took me on my first burglary.' It was true, I had. He told me he'd been at Wormwood Scrubs, Pentonville and so on.

"I told him that while he'd been touring London prisons, I'd been touring China and Zimbabwe giving poetry readings. He was looking at me and seeing what he could have been, and I was looking at him seeing what I could have been.

"The difference was, somehow I found a way to channel my energy. That's why this is such an important scheme. If I wasn't able to express myself I'd probably be in Brixton too."

Vyivian Shaw, an arts psychotherapist at Pentonville Prison, says that Mr Zephaniah is one of

the few poets prisoners can relate to. She finds that prisoners can overcome all sorts of problems through art, and especially, in her experience, through poetry.

She said: "Art class is one of the few places where they're treated like human beings. What they



Two Fat Ladies painted by an inmate of Highpoint prison

say is valued, not derided."

Holloway Prison also won its share of awards this year. "We always enter an awful lot," admits Hilary Beauchamp, Holloway's arts and crafts coordinator.

"The work is more honest, more direct – none of

the women have got hidden agendas. They're not influenced by trends."

Many of the works are for sale, though 79 have already been snapped up by the Home Office, a figure Sir David says he finds "very reassuring".

He said there was a quote he always kept in

mind, which sounds like Koestler, but is in fact Sir Winston Churchill: "There's a treasure in the heart of every man if only you can find it."

● The exhibition is at St Mary Abbots Hall, Vicarage Gate W8, from 10am-7pm daily until October 7.



London Borough of Camden's Draft Statement of Licensing Policy - Public Consultation

The Licensing Act 2003 makes the Council responsible for liquor, entertainment and late night hot food licences. The Council's draft Statement of Licensing Policy sets out what we will do, and what we expect licensees to do, under the Licensing Act 2003.

To get involved in public consultation on the draft Licensing Policy, join us on:

Tuesday 5th October and Wednesday 27th October 2004 at 6.30pm, Council Chamber, Camden Town Hall, Judd St WC1

To request your copy of the consultation pack:

Email licensingreform@camden.gov.uk;

Read or download it from www.camden.gov.uk/licensing;

Telephone 020 79743534; or

Write to - Licensing Reform Team, 7th Floor, London Borough of Camden, Town Hall Extension, Argyle St, London WC1H 8EQ.



From left, arts psychotherapist Vyivian Shaw, Holloway ceramics teacher John Dawson and arts coordinator Hilary Beauchamp



It's All Out There by an inmate of Moorland Open prison