

The Secret Cultural Diary of David Cameron, aged 43¾

His gift to Obama was 'street art', but what are the Prime Minister's own cultural fetishes? **Rob Hastings** investigates

Judging by the choice of painting David Cameron gone to President Obama during his visit to Washington this week, it is clear that the Prime Minister has a good understanding of one form of art at least: diplomacy.

Ben Flynn's bold *Twenty First Century* City symbolised the fresh, modern and more direct approach that Cameron wants to take in the UK's dealings with the US. But do those 22 brightly coloured letters on their black background tell us anything about Cameron's own taste in the arts?

His passion for indie-rock is common knowledge, thanks to his appearance on *Desert Island Discs*, along with his attendance at the Killers' gig at the Royal Albert Hall last year. He's keen on Radiohead too, even invoking the band's "pay what you want" pricing of their album *In Rainbows* when explaining his reasoning in setting up a Tory supporters' group with a flexible membership fee.

What's less widely known is that he also enjoys reggae, with the 1980s Jamaican singer Eek-A-Mouse featuring prominently on his iPod. And while Speech DeBelle has been held as another victim of the curse of the Mercury Prize after failing to capitalise on her win last year, she can at least count on Cameron as a fan.

"He's properly, properly into his music," confirms a close friend of the Camerons, who vehemently rebuts the

accusation of Blur's Labour-supporting drummer Dave Rowntree that he can't be a real Smiths fan because of the way he dresses. "He loves the Smiths."

As for what floats the Prime Minister's cultural boat beyond pop, apparently the first couple are big fans of DVD boxed sets, particularly *The Wire* and *Shameless*.

Martin Cornish, a friend of Cameron's who is a branch chairman in his Witney constituency's local Conservative party, offers a few more hints. "I think his taste in music is a bit bizarre," Cornish laughs, "but then he is ten years younger than me. I'm a blues man myself."

Cornish reveals that Cameron used to be a jazz drummer as a schoolboy, and that he even invited the Tory leader to play in his group, Vest and Pants: "We thought it would be nice if he played with us. But he said he wasn't very good, and when he heard the standard of our drummer he said: 'Not on your life!'"

He mentioned that the Prime Minister is "quite well versed in opera" and is a patron of the local Bampton Classical Opera. After three years Mr Cameron has yet to attend one of the group's productions, but the group's artistic director is very understanding.

"He's absolutely unflinching in always sending his best wishes, so we feel he is a very supportive patron," Gilly French says. "He said he'd love to come if he can and we'd be delighted to have him. I honestly don't expect him to attend while he's in Downing Street, but maybe afterwards when he's a little bit less busy — he is the Prime Minister after all."

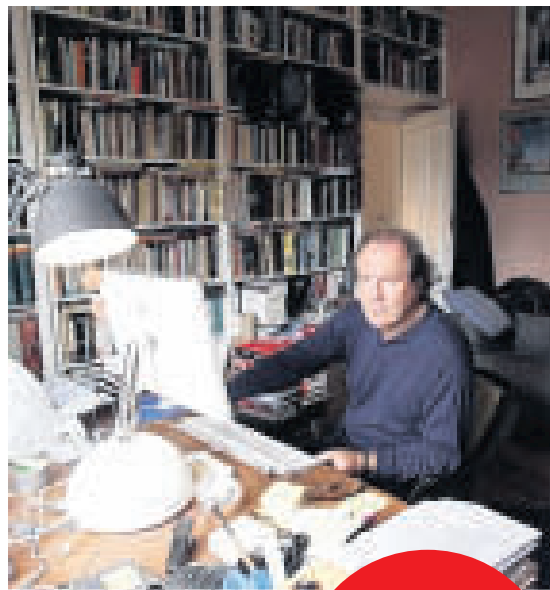
Despite his pressing schedule, Cameron has reportedly found time to attend the ballet once or twice when in London. Admiring the English National Ballet's performance of *Sleeping Beauty* with his family in 2008, Cameron was quoted as saying: "I think it is wonderful. There's nothing better than watching them all thunder across the dancefloor."

Another way Cameron likes to escape from high-level politics is through literary fiction and thrillers. One of his favourite authors is William Boyd, although during the campaign he was pictured reading Patricia Cornwell's *Scarpetta*, which concerns a forensic pathologist looking into the chilling case of "the midget murderer". For his summer break, his personal press secretary Gabby Bertin says his plan is to "kick off with something quite light" before moving on to more serious tomes. "He reads lots of thrillers,"



THE FURNITURE

Doesn't look very comfy does it? Begs for a nice plump cushion. Still, we're told that the Camerons' home aesthetic is 1950s and 1960s furniture "like the Jetsons"



THE BOOK

The PM will begin his summer hols with a spot of William Boyd — who once wrote a novel *The Blue Afternoon*, prescient, prescient — before starting on more serious tomes



THE MUSIC

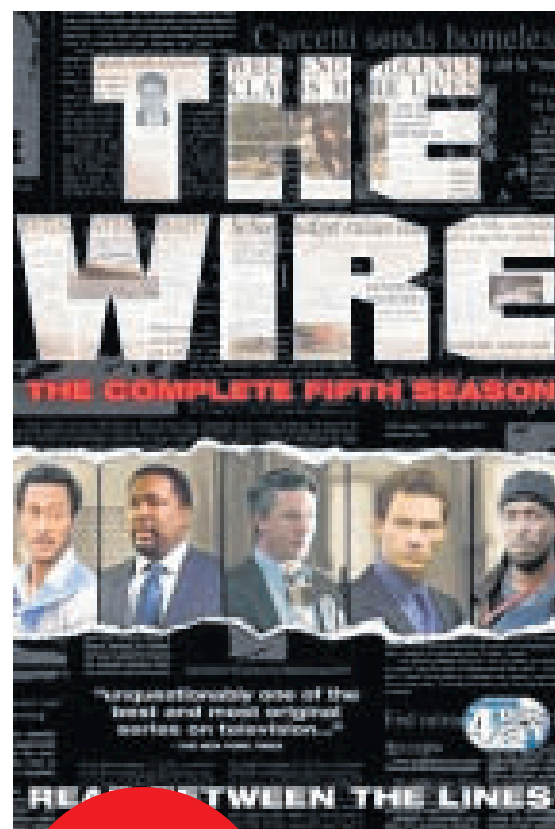
The Jamaican reggae star Eek-A-Mouse, whose back catalogue includes the 1980 album *Bubble Up Yu Hip*, has pride of place on the squeaky-clean, cheese-loving PM's iPod

BIG PICTURES: PATRICK BALDWIN; AP; ANTHONY HALL; LFI; LEON NEAL; ALAMY



THE ARTIST

The Prime Minister loves bankers, sorry, Banksy, the irritatingly anonymous street artist, whose work has become so sought after people are starting to move walls to preserve it



THE BOXED SET

We knew he was devoted to the television adaptation of *Lark Rise to Candleford*, but not, until now, that he spends his time off working through boxed sets of *The Wire* and *Shameless*



THE BALLET

Cameron caught the English National Ballet's *Sleeping Beauty* a couple of years back. Rumours that George Osborne woke him up with a kiss at the end of the show are entirely untrue



THE TECHIE

He's young! He's techno-savvy! His spokesperson is keen that we know he's just bought an iPad! She could not confirm that he subscribes to *The Times* on it. [Weeps]



THE OPERA

The people's PM is a patron of Bampton Classical Opera, never mind that he hasn't visited yet. He's a fan of cuts, so watch out for the *Barber of Seville* next season. Hehe

Cornish says. "He devours them. You need something to take your mind away, you can't be studying all the time."

He enjoys cinema too, and although he has been unable to go in the past few years his recent purchase of an iPad means he is likely to catch up on more movies in future.

As for visual art, the Cameron household is scattered with large acrylic paintings by Samantha — who studied art at Bristol polytechnic, now the University of West England — which lean artfully against the walls rather than hanging from them.

"They have a very modern sensibility in their art and interiors," says a source close to the first couple. "Their house is furnished a bit like the Jetsons. Samantha has a passion for the 1950s and 1960s and she likes bold block colours: a red sofa with a green chair. There is no frou frou, no chandeliers or ornaments."

The kitchen in their North Kensington house is all brushed stainless steel, very industrial, and all their plates are plain white. She is a designer, remember. Two weeks away from their move into the flat above No 11, word is that Samantha is planning to remodel it on more modern, open-plan lines. No wall will be safe.

Meanwhile, clearer indications of the Camerons' aesthetic may come when they and their staff browse the extensive catalogue of the Government Art Collection. While others settle for the poster section of Habitat, the Camerons get to cherry-pick any art they like. This decision typically takes place during the summer recess, and officials from the GAC are awaiting news of any preferences from the Prime Minister's staff. But given the loaded comment from Bertin about the present selection — "It's not all to our taste, shall we say" — it seems that major changes are likely.

Toby Sargent, deputy head of news for the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, who has been involved in many government choices over the years, says most specific choices of artworks do not come from the prime ministers themselves. Yet from the examples of No 10's previous two residents it seems their opinions can offer an insight into the characters. Gordon Brown's preference for Scottish landscapes reflected a sense of loyalty to his childhood roots, while Blair's attitude perhaps also rings true of the general perception of his political self.

"I don't think Tony Blair had any strong opinions, he left it to the staff," Sargent says. "They used the waiting room at the top of the stairs in No 10 as a showcase for the Young British Artists, showing quite edgy stuff — but it would be fanciful to say that it was his idea."

Cameron will have one starting point of course: President Obama's gift to Britain's first couple of a signed lithograph by Ed Ruscha. It sure beats those 25 non-UK-compatible DVDs he gave to Gordon Brown.