**Text by Dr. A. Stafford, Senior Lecturer in French at the University of Leeds commissioned by Martin Hamblen to coincide with his Launch Pad exhibition *Literacy,* 5 - 14 2014**

‘I am the maker (the artisan) of the jig-saw puzzle, cutting out the pieces of wood. You’re the players’. So says the proverb, so could have Martin Hamblen in his exhibition *Literacy*. ‘Performing’ the expression ‘Drawing A Line in the Sand’ as a literal reference to the way that the nations of the Middle East – known for its sand! – have been carved artificially (deliberately?), Martin complements his extraordinary collection of jig-saw maps. Just look at the straight lines, between Iraq and Saudi Arabia, Syria and Lebanon! Great for jig-saw players, but not, alas, for the Middle-East populations, who must, daily, ‘perform the line in the sand’, so that they can get to work, buy bread, visit family. All thanks to Sykes-Picot: why not Picot-Sykes? Was Britain the keener one in this secret Anglo-French carve-up in 1916? The secret treaty meant that, map-wise (jig-saws aiding), the whole of the world’s Muslim population was under imperialist control by 1918. It is an extraordinary fact. The last hundred years since then have seen the inexorable shattering of that jig-saw, an inevitable turning backwards (or upside-down) of the puzzle so that it hangs precariously, literally by a thread, by a line, drawn in the now moving sand. Tea-towels with maps of every continent can be bought on any trip abroad, so can plates proud of French cheese too, but not vacuum-sealed packs of jig-saw pieces – Martin Hamblen has locked the fragments of people’s lives of those populations who have to operate under the Sykes-Picot carve-up, live with the stark but curved edges that interlock the Middle-Eastern states in oppressed disharmony. Suddenly we are not able to be the players any more; the jig-saw is; and we are the wood-cutters.

**© Dr. A. Stafford, 2014**