



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. I have finished the History of Western Art but I had some lectures that I gave many years ago and I thought I could use AI systems to convert them to my new design, improve the text and use a clone of my voice to give them.

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52-08B BRITISH FIGURATIVE ART (PART 2)

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William Orpen
The Mirror
1900
Tate, London

British figurative painting is not a retreat from modernism — it is the central tradition of British art across the twentieth century. This talk traces that tradition through nine artists: Sargent, Sickert, Gwen John, Augustus John, Laura Knight, Orpen, Bomberg, Spencer, and Pasmore. Together they span portraiture, war, social upheaval, and one of the most dramatic individual transformations in British art history — from committed figurative painter to abstract sculptor.

British Figurative Art 1900-1950

Unknown
Untitled



British Figurative Art 1900-1950

This is part 2 of British Figurative Art. It was not a provincial retreat from modernism but the central tradition of British art. Selecting from it means leaving out dozens of equally compelling figures, and for this talk nine artists have been chosen to trace that tradition across roughly a century. Five were covered in Part 1: **John Singer Sargent**, American-born but London-based for most of his working life, became the defining portrait painter of the Edwardian era. **Walter Sickert**, shaped by both Whistler and Degas, became the most influential painter's painter of his generation. **Gwen John** worked in quiet isolation in Paris; her brother **Augustus John** famously conceded she was the greater artist. Augustus himself was the glamorous face of society portraiture in Edwardian Britain and **Laura Knight** matched that popularity with formidable staying power, becoming the first woman elected to the **Royal Academy** since its foundation in 1768.

In Part 2 I cover **William Orpen**, Irish-born and London-trained, was the most prolific official artist on the Western Front. **David Bomberg**, one of the Whitechapel Boys and a Slade-trained radical, fell from favour

and was only seriously reassessed decades after his death. **Stanley Spencer**, discussed four weeks ago, is included here to keep his vision in view and finally, **Victor Pasmore** bridges our story: a committed figurative painter who crossed entirely into abstraction..

Notes

The great tradition of British art is figurative painting and it has therefore been difficult to select a few artists. I have chosen nine artists:

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), an American artist who worked in Britain and became the leading portrait painter of his generation.

Walter Sickert (1860-1942), a painter's painter and one of the most influential British artists of the twentieth century.

Gwen John (1876-1939). Gwen John, was an intense and solitary artist who was described by her brother Augustus John as the better artist.

Augustus John (1878-1961) Augustus John was one of the most popular society portrait artists at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Laura Knight (1877-1970) Knight was a painter in the figurative, realist tradition who was among the most successful and popular painters in Britain. In 1929 she was created a Dame, and in 1936 became the first woman elected to the Royal Academy since its foundation in 1768.

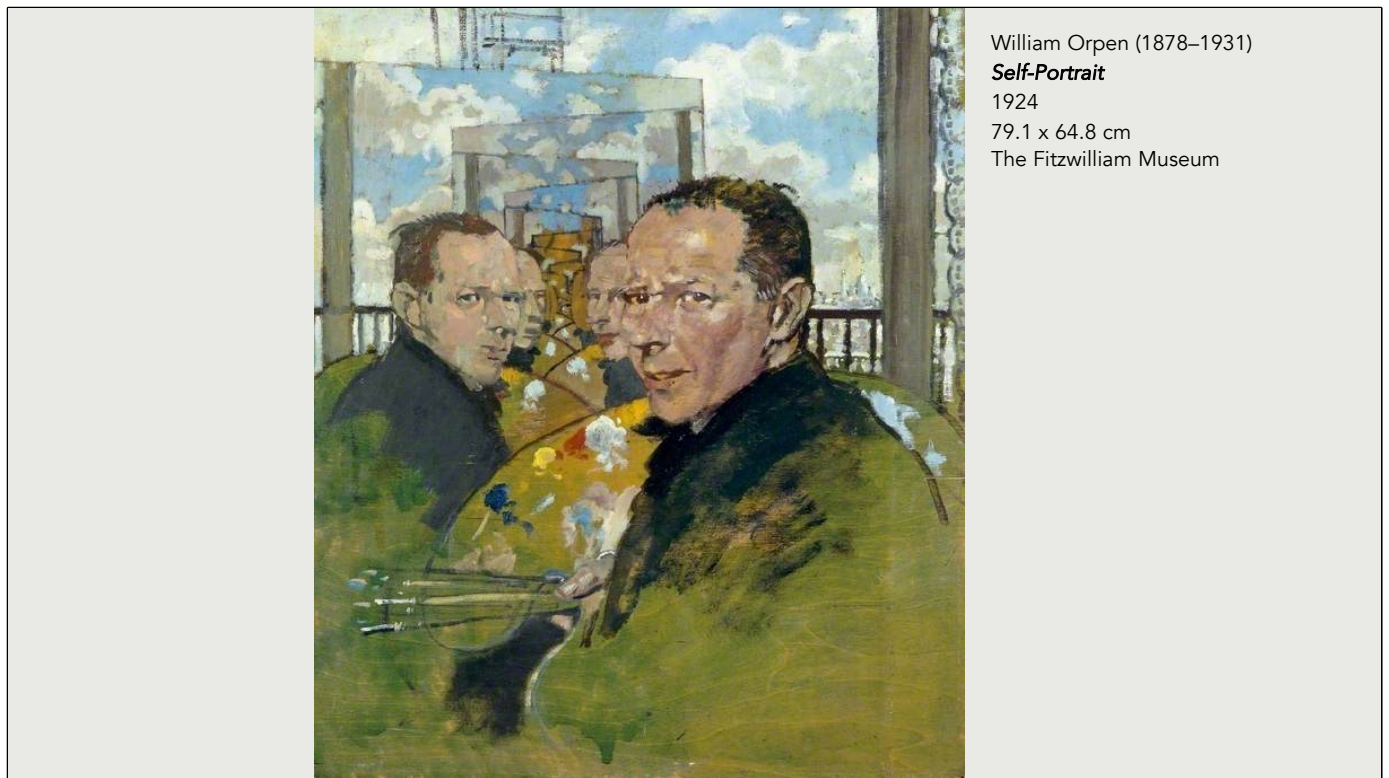
William Orpen (1878-1931) an Irish artist who worked mainly in London.

William Orpen was a fine draughtsman and a popular, commercially successful, painter of portraits for the well-to-do in Edwardian society. During the First World War, he was the most prolific of the official artists sent by Britain to the Western Front and as a Major he was allowed to stay longer. He donated most of this work to the British government.

David Bomberg (1890-1957) was an English painter, and one of the Whitechapel Boys. Bomberg was one of the most audacious of the exceptional generation of artists who studied at the Slade School of Art. He fell out of favour and has only recently been re-evaluated.

Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) is one of the great early figurative artists in Britain and his life was covered four weeks ago. I have included him here to remind you of his work.

Victor Pasmore (1908-1998), who went from figurative to abstract and so creates a link to next term's artists.



William Orpen (1878–1931)
Self-Portrait
1924
79.1 x 64.8 cm
The Fitzwilliam Museum

William Orpen (1878–1931), *Self-Portrait*, 1924, 79.1 x 64.8 cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum

Kenneth Clark's snobbery about training outside London finds a curious echo in the reception of **William Orpen**, though the two men's careers could hardly look more different on the surface. Orpen, born in Ireland in 1878, was a prodigy in every institutional sense. He enrolled at the **Dublin Metropolitan School of Art** at thirteen, winning every major prize including the British Isles gold medal for life drawing, then moved to the **Slade School of Art** between 1897 and 1899, where **Henry Tonks** and **Philip Wilson Steer** shaped his technical rigour and secured him membership of the **New English Art Club**. By the outbreak of the First World War he was the most commercially successful artist working in Britain, celebrated for the swagger portraits Edwardian society demanded and for the more intimate form of the conversation piece. What distinguished Orpen from mere fashionable success was his insistence, as an Irishman exempt from conscription, on enlisting as an official war artist anyway. He became the most prolific artist on the **Western Front**, producing 138 works he subsequently donated to the

British government. That moral seriousness cost him his health. After his death in 1931, critics were loudly dismissive, and his reputation only began recovering in the 1980s.

Notes

Major Sir William Newenham Montague Orpen, KBE, RA, RHA (1878–1931) was an Irish artist who worked mainly in London. William Orpen was a fine draughtsman and a popular, commercially successful, painter of portraits for the well-to-do in Edwardian society, though many of his most striking paintings are self-portraits.

Between 1911 and 1913, John Singer Sargent promoted Orpen's work and he soon built a lucrative reputation, in both London and Dublin, for painting society portraits.

Orpen's ability to produce the swagger portraits that Edwardian high society greatly valued. Group portraits of a type known as conversation pieces were also hugely popular and Orpen painted several. By the start of World War One, Orpen was the most famous and most commercially successful artist working in Britain.

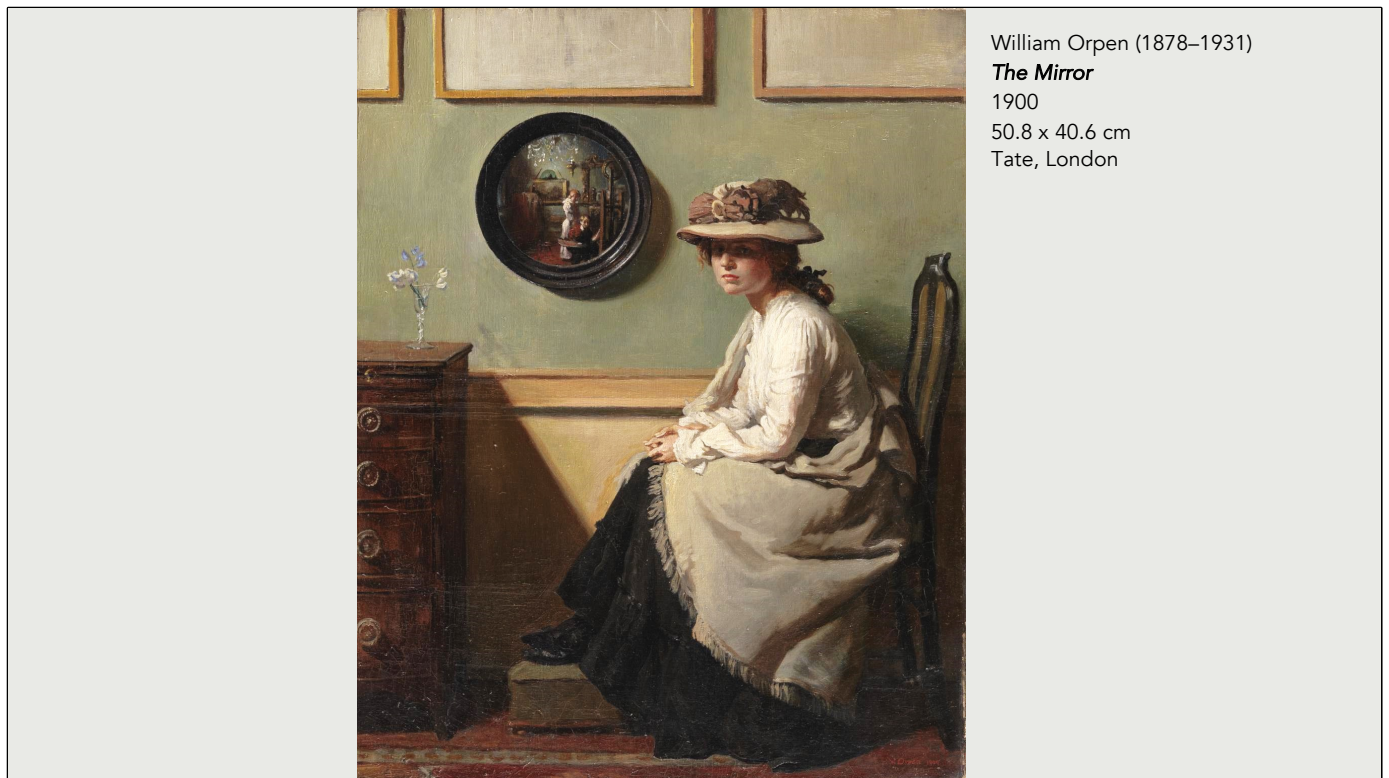
Notes

William Orpen (1878-1931) was born in Ireland, the son of a solicitor. Both his parents were keen amateur artists and his eldest brother became a well-known architect. Orpen had a happy childhood and was a naturally talented painter. At 13 he enrolled at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art and won every major prize including the British Isles gold medal for life drawing. He studied at the Slade School of Art from 1897 to 1899 and experimented with different techniques including incorporating mirrors in his paintings to have images within images. He included false frames and frequently made reference to other artists in his painting. His teachers at the Slade, Henry Tonks and Philip Wilson Steer made sure he became a member of the New English Art Club.

Bio:Orpen

William Orpen (1878-1931) an Irish artist who worked mainly in London. William Orpen was a fine draughtsman and a popular, commercially successful, painter of portraits for the well-to-do in Edwardian society. During

the First World War, he was the most prolific of the official artists sent by Britain to the Western Front and as a Major he was allowed to stay longer. As an Irishman he could have returned to Ireland to avoid conscription as many Irish artists did but he insisted on enrolling. After the war he donated most of his 138 works to the British government. He narrowly avoided a court-martial with the help of Lord Beaverbrook for calling a portrait of a young Red Cross worker, *The Spy*. He had invented a story about a young, female German spy who had revealed herself naked to avoid being shot by a French firing squad. He was made a Knight Commander of the Order of the British Empire in the 1918 King's birthday honours list, and also elected a member of the Royal Academy of Arts, his determination to serve as a war artist cost him both his health and his social standing in Britain. After his early death, a number of critics, including other artists, were loudly dismissive of his work and for many years his paintings were rarely exhibited, a situation that only began to change in the 1980s



William Orpen (1878–1931)
The Mirror
1900
50.8 x 40.6 cm
Tate, London

William Orpen (1878–1931), *The Mirror*, 1900, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, Tate, London

The *Mirror*, which Orpen exhibited at the **New English Art Club** in 1900, is a painting about looking — and about the history of looking. The sitter is **Emily Scobel**, a Slade model to whom Orpen was briefly engaged, and the room is his own lodgings rendered with documentary precision. Yet the arrangement is anything but casual. The shallow pictorial depth and the careful disposition of objects along the picture plane echo **Whistler's** arrangement in his famous portrait of his mother, with its cool aesthetic geometry. At the same time the concave mirror on the wall, reflecting Orpen himself painting at his easel, is a direct borrowing from **Jan van Eyck's Arnolfini Portrait of 1434**, which he knew from the **National Gallery**. That act of self-inscription through a reflective surface — placing the artist inside the scene without placing him in front of the sitter — clearly fascinated Orpen. He returned to it in **A Mere Fracture in 1901**, and references to seventeenth-century Dutch interior painting, the muted tonalities and pooled shadows, run through the same cluster of works. The personal

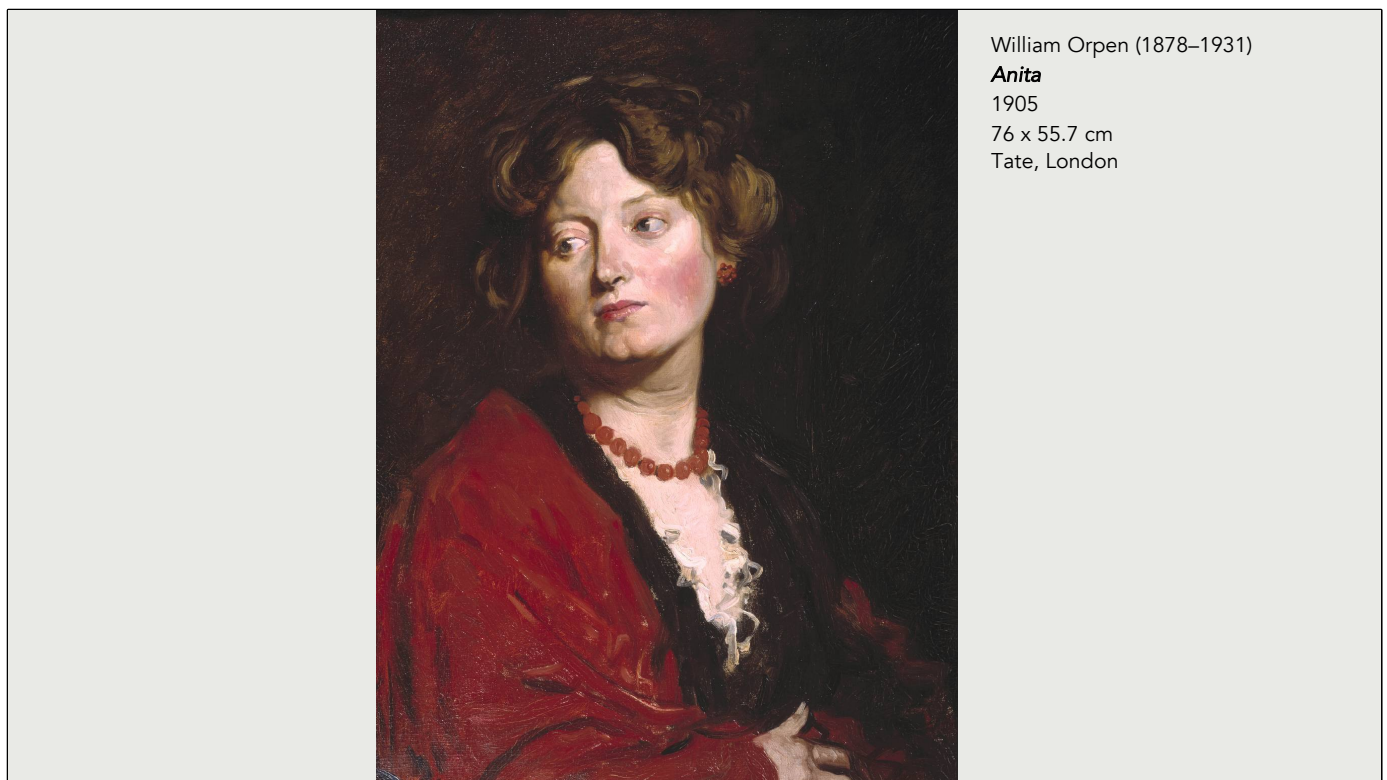
story behind the canvas adds an edge: Emily Scobel ended the engagement in 1901, and Orpen subsequently married **Grace Knewstub**, sister-in-law of **William Rothenstein**, though that union proved deeply unhappy.

Notes

The sitter in this portrait is Emily Scobel, a model from the Slade School of Art. Orpen was briefly engaged to her. The room is apparently an accurate portrayal of Orpen's lodgings, but the shallow pictorial depth and decorative, or 'aesthetic,' arrangement of objects is based on Whistler's famous portrait of his mother in profile. The concave mirror on the wall reflects the artist painting at his easel. This is a device which Orpen borrowed from a 15th-century painting by Jan van Eyck, *The Arnolfini Portrait*, which he would have seen on display at the National Gallery.

Orpen's *The Mirror*, shown at the NEAC in 1900, references both Jan van Eyck's *Arnolfini Portrait* of 1434 and also elements of seventeenth-century Dutch interiors, such as muted tones and deep shadows. Orpen depicted the 'Arnolfini' convex glass in several other paintings, including *A Mere Fracture* in 1901, during this period.

Whilst at the Slade, Orpen became engaged to Emily Scobel, a model and the subject of *The Mirror*. In 1901, she ended their relationship and Orpen married Grace Knewstub, the sister-in-law of Sir William Rothenstein. Orpen and Knewstub had three daughters together but the marriage was not a happy one and, by 1908, Orpen had begun a long running affair with Mrs Evelyn Saint-George, a well-connected American millionairess based in London, and with whom he also had a child.



William Orpen (1878–1931)
Anita
1905
76 x 55.7 cm
Tate, London

William Orpen (1878–1931), *Anita*, 1905, 76 x 55.7 cm, Tate, London

The unhappy marriage notwithstanding, Orpen's private life and his professional ambitions were never entirely separable from his friendships, and the **portrait of Anita Bartle**, painted around the same period, shows exactly that entanglement. Bartle was a Dublin journalist and author, a friend rather than a formal commission, and Orpen used the sitting quite deliberately as a technical experiment. He had just returned from **Madrid**, where he had spent concentrated time before **Rubens's portrait sketches in the Prado**, and what struck him was the directness of Rubens's handling — rapid, confident, structurally economical. His **Slade** training in the 1890s under **Henry Tonks** had been predominantly in drawing, and painting remained territory he was actively conquering rather than commanding. The Bartle portrait is the result: a severely limited palette of red, black, and white, with no attempt to conceal the brushwork. The strokes stay visible, almost declarative, mimicking the energy of a preparatory oil sketch elevated to finished object. The choice to restrict himself to a near-monochrome register connects back to the tonal restraint we saw in

The Mirror — muted, controlled, deliberately refusing chromatic display. Orpen eventually gave the portrait to Bartle as a wedding gift, a gesture that quietly confirms its status as intimate rather than professional work.

Notes

"Anita Bartle, the sitter in this early portrait by Orpen, was a journalist and author in Dublin. At the time he painted it, Orpen had just returned from a visit to the Prado in Madrid, where he had studied portrait sketches by Rubens. His training at the Slade in the 1890s had been in drawing rather than painting. He wanted to try a modern version of Rubens's direct technique, and used this portrait of a friend as an exercise. Orpen uses only red, with black and white, and leaves visible the brushstrokes, in the manner of an oil sketch. He later gave the portrait to the sitter as a wedding present." (Tate)



William Orpen (1878-1931)
Self-Portrait, Sowing New Seed
1913
Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis

William Orpen (1878-1931), *Self-Portrait, Sowing New Seed*, 1913,
Saint Louis Art Museum, Saint Louis

The intimacy of the Bartle portrait makes what follows all the more striking — Orpen stepping from private friendship into the largest public catastrophe of the age. When war broke out in 1914, Orpen's social connections ran deep into the military establishment, and the **Daily Mirror** reported, incorrectly, that **Field Marshal Haig** had personally appointed him official artist to the Army. The story was false, but it was not without consequence. The **Department of Information**, which administered the war artists programme, found itself effectively boxed in by the public announcement, and Orpen was duly commissioned as a **Major**, furnished with a military aide, a car and driver, a batman, and an assistant — a logistical apparatus that reflected both his status and his gift for manoeuvring institutions. He painted prolifically at the front, but submitted nothing to the Department. When a reprimand arrived, Orpen did not contest it through official channels — he went directly to Haig's office and had the reprimanding officer reassigned. It is a revealing episode: the same

social intelligence that secured him portrait commissions among the London and Dublin elite operated just as smoothly in the machinery of wartime bureaucracy. Orpen understood, instinctively, that access to powerful men was itself a medium he had been working in for years.

Notes

When the war started Orpen had many contacts in the army and as a result the Daily Mirror reported that Haig had made him official artist to the Army. Although not true the department in charge of war artists, the Department of Information, had little choice but to appoint him as a Major with a military aide, a car and a driver plus a batman and an assistant. He painted many pictures of the front but did not submit any to the Department. When he was reprimanded for that he arranged for Haig's office to move the officer who had issued the reprimand.



William Orpen (1878–1931)
Winston Churchill
1916
148 x 102.5 cm
National Portrait Gallery, London

William Orpen (1878–1931), *Winston Churchill*, 1916, 148 x 102.5 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London

The same social intelligence Orpen deployed at the front brought him face to face with one of the war's most consequential and embattled figures. This portrait of **Winston Churchill**, painted in **1916**, shows a man of forty-two who looks far older than his years. He appears sunk, despondent, bowed under enormous weight — and the reason is not difficult to locate. As **First Lord of the Admiralty**, Churchill bore the institutional responsibility for the catastrophic **Gallipoli campaign**, in which over **46,000 Allied soldiers** died. Demoted and forced to submit to a commission of enquiry, he had resigned from Cabinet in a state of profound professional disgrace. What Orpen does here is refuse consolation. The pose and the expression offer no heroic retrieval of the man's reputation. And yet — look at the brow, the set of the jaw — there is something that will not quite capitulate. **Paul Moorhouse** of the **National Portrait Gallery** has written that the portrait is "stamped with an unmistakeable and deeply affecting veracity of feeling," and that this veracity, however harrowing, is precisely what distinguishes great

portraiture. The painting does not predict Churchill's later career. It simply tells the truth about a single, crushing moment — which is more than enough.

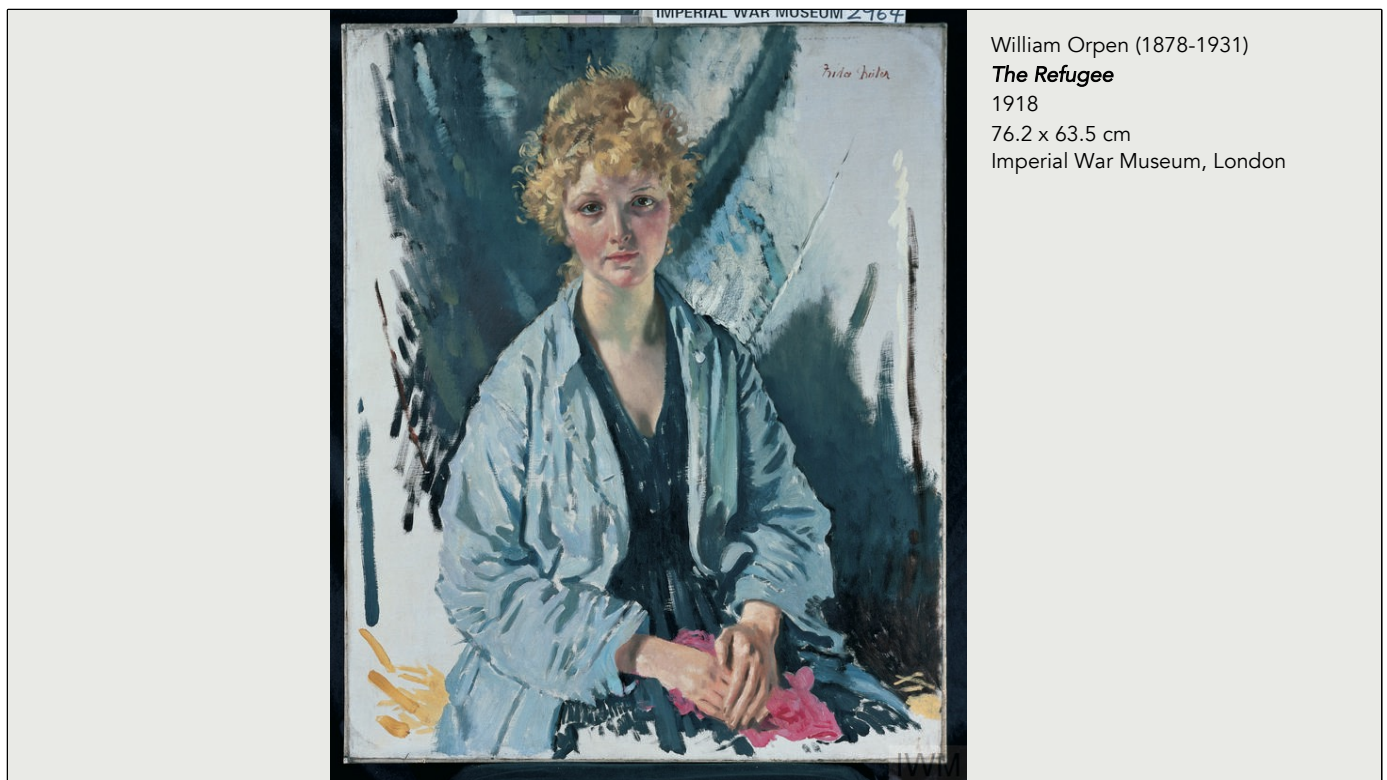
Notes

This is a moving portrait of the young Winston Churchill, painted when he was 42. He appears to be sunk, despondent, depressed and under some great burden. Yet, in the eyebrows and the jawline there is a defiance.

Paul Moorhouse of the National Portrait Gallery wrote, "Churchill was enduring the ignominy of blame for the deaths of 46,000 men. As First Lord of the Admiralty, responsibility for the disastrous Battle of Gallipoli was levelled at him. Demoted, Churchill resigned and submitted to a commission of enquiry. Quite apart from the professional disgrace, the thought of so many lost lives must have been an insufferable mental weight. But mainly it is to do with the capacity of art to intimate truth, however unpalatable. Though harrowing, Orpen's portrait of Churchill is stamped with an unmistakeable and deeply affecting veracity of feeling. And that, for me, is one of the hallmarks of great art. "

References

<http://www.npg.org.uk/blog/what-makes-a-great-portrait.php>



William Orpen (1878-1931)

The Refugee

1918

76.2 x 63.5 cm

Imperial War Museum, London

William Orpen (1878-1931), *The Refugee*, 1918, 76.2 x 63.5 cm, Imperial War Museum, London

That veracity Moorhouse praises came at considerable personal cost — and in at least one case nearly ended Orpen's career entirely. Late in **1917**, Orpen was hospitalised with blood poisoning, and there he met **Yvonne Aubicque**, a young Red Cross volunteer and daughter of the Mayor of **Lille**. The two began a relationship lasting a decade, and Orpen painted her repeatedly — a significant indiscretion, since military artists were strictly prohibited from painting personal subjects while on tour. He submitted two of these portraits to the official censor early in **1918**, titling both **A Spy**. The censor responsible for war artists, **Lieutenant-Colonel A. N. Lee**, was not amused: the title arrived hard on the heels of the executions of both **Edith Cavell** and **Mata Hari**, and Lee made clear that Orpen was either in very bad taste or facing a court-martial. Orpen responded with a wholly invented story about a German spy who had disrobed before a firing squad in a last bid for mercy. Lee saw through it immediately, had Orpen recalled to London, and ordered him to stay there. Orpen ignored the order, returned

illegally to France, and then engineered a phone call — audible to Lee's colleagues in Army Intelligence — from **Haig's** private office, inviting him to dinner. Lee's objections evaporated. The paintings were quietly renamed *The Refugee*.

Notes

This is an interesting image as it is one that Orpen almost got court-martialled for painting.

Late in 1917 Orpen spent two weeks in hospital with blood poisoning. There he met a young volunteer Red Cross worker from Lille named Yvonne Aubicque. The two began a relationship that was to last ten years and Orpen painted several portraits of her. Two of these he submitted to the official censor early in 1918. Orpen named both paintings A Spy and in March 1918 was interviewed by the military censor responsible for the war artists, Lieutenant-Colonel A.N Lee. Lee made it clear that if the title was intended as a joke it was in very bad taste coming so soon after the execution of both Edith Cavell and Mata Hari but if the subject really was a spy then Orpen could be facing a court-martial.

Orpen gave Lee a fantastical story that the women in the picture was a German spy who had been executed by the French but who, in an attempt to save herself, had at the last moment revealed herself naked in front of the firing squad. Lee knew the story was nonsense and had Orpen recalled to London to be reprimanded at the War Office. There, Orpen retracted the firing squad story but was ordered to remain in London. Orpen ignored this and, quite illegally, made his way back to France. There he contrived to receive a phone call from Haig's private office, within earshot of several of Lee's colleagues from Army Intelligence, inviting him to dinner with Haig to discuss what he would like to paint next. Lee dropped his objections to Orpen working in France and Orpen agreed to rename the two pictures The Refugee.

In a further twist, Ms Aubicque became involved with Orpen's chauffeur Grover-Williams after the artist left France - and the pair both spied for Britain during WWII. Grover-Williams was caught and shot and Yvonne returned to Britain, where she became a judge at dog show Crufts

In May 2010, a third version of The Refugee surfaced on the Antiques

Roadshow television programme. The Imperial War Museum had assured its owner that it was a copy by someone other than Orpen but the programme's art expert, Rupert Maas, determined it was painted by Orpen himself as a 'thank-you' present to Lord Beaverbrook for helping him avoid being court-martialled in March 1918. The picture was estimated to be worth £250,000.

An inscription on the picture reads 'copy by person unknown' but Mr Maas suspected the painting was by Orpen after discovering his trademark signature Nepro Mailliw - his name spelled backwards - had been inscribed on the work.

The reason may be that strict rules prevented military artists from painting personal subjects while on tour, but Orpen was so smitten with Yvonne Aubicque, daughter of the Mayor of Lille, that he could not resist.

References

<http://www.sothebys.com/content/sothebys/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2015/iris-h-art-l15134/lot.27.html>



William Orpen (1878–1931)
Le Chef de l'Hotel Chatham, Paris
1921
127 x 102.5 cm
Royal Academy of Arts

William Orpen (1878–1931), *Le Chef de l'Hotel Chatham, Paris*, 1921, 127 x 102.5 cm, Royal Academy of Arts

The audacity Orpen showed in manipulating Lee translated, after the war, into an equally unapologetic confidence in the commercial market. He returned to society portraiture and thrived — earning as much as **£35,000** in a single year through the **1920s** and commanding **2,000 guineas** a canvas. Studios in both **Paris** and **London** kept him at the centre of two metropolitan worlds simultaneously. His **1921** Royal Academy submission was a portrait of the head chef at the **Hôtel Chatham** in Paris. The **Tate Gallery** moved to acquire it through the **Chantrey Bequest**, and Orpen assured them the picture had been painted entirely in Britain — a condition the Bequest required. The announcement was barely made before witnesses came forward insisting they had watched him paint it in Paris. Orpen quietly withdrew, donated a portrait of the Scottish scholar and administrator **Sir William Symington McCormick** instead, and then submitted the chef's portrait to the Academy as his **diploma painting**. That painting is worth examining closely. The Royal Academy describes it as

elevating a working man — **Eugène Grossrieter**, second chef at the Chatham — with the swagger of a Velázquez nobleman. Orpen had always admired Velázquez; here that admiration becomes an argument about whose labour deserves a monumental portrait.

Notes

After the war Orpen returned to painting society portraits and, commercially, enjoyed great success. He was never short of portrait commissions to work on and throughout the 1920s often earned £35,000 per year and could easily charge 2,000 guineas for a picture.

Throughout the 1920s he maintained homes and studios in both Paris and London and exhibited at the Royal Academy each year.

His 1921 RA submission was a portrait of the head chef at the Hotel Chatham in Paris. The Tate Gallery were keen to acquire the painting using funds from the Chantrey Bequest. After Orpen assured the Tate that picture met the conditions required by the Bequest and that he had painted the picture entirely in Britain, the Tate announced the purchase. Several people then came forward to say that they had seen Orpen paint the picture in Paris. Orpen withdrew from the purchase and gave the Tate a portrait of Sir William Symington McCormick instead. Orpen subsequently submitted *Le Chef de l'Hotel Chatham, Paris* to the Royal Academy as his diploma painting.

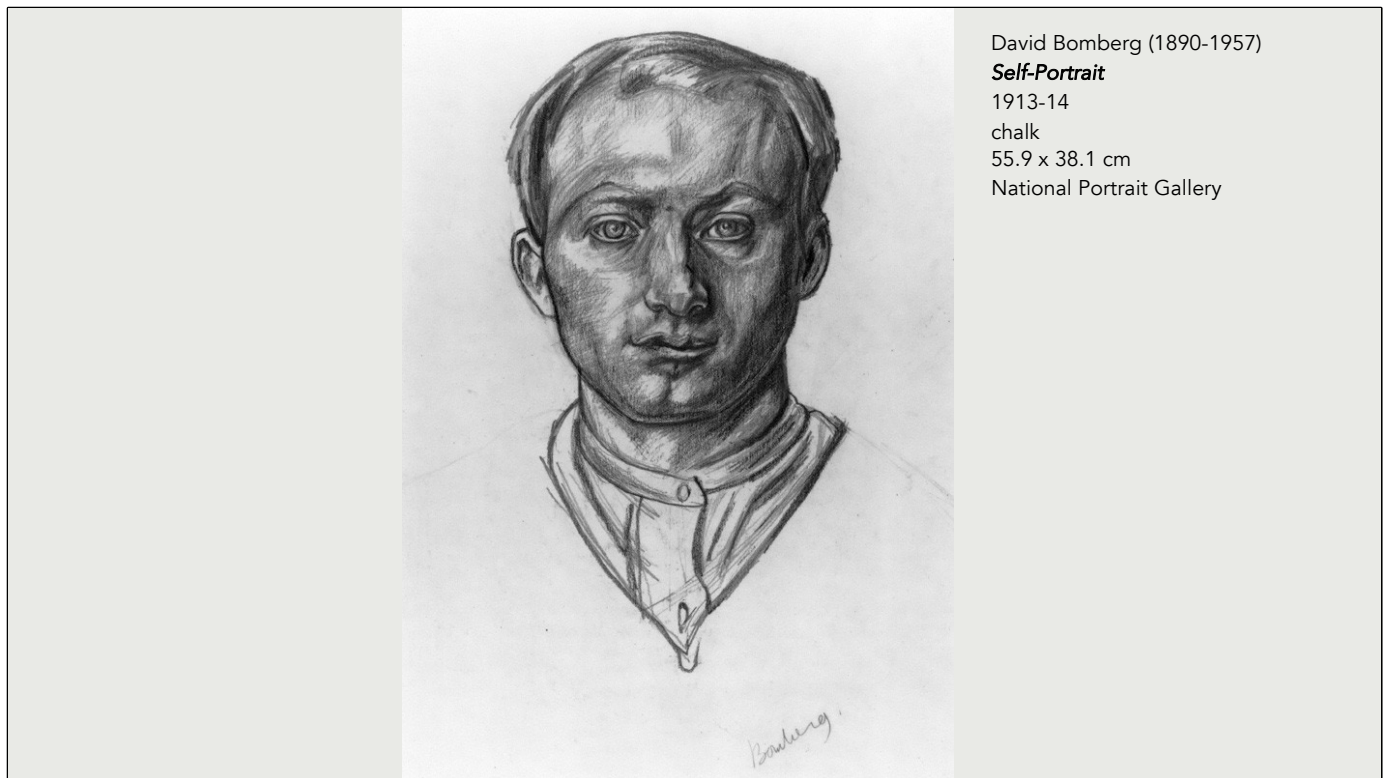
Notes

RA website, "Orpen's painting is a tour de force of monumental portraiture. The crisp white folds of the chef's uniform, the still-life of bottle and wine and the chops are all painted with dazzling technique set against a dark background. Orpen was inspired by artists such as Velázquez and Manet, but in his choice of subject he elevates the working man by portraying him with a swagger and authority equal to any nobleman. The painting depicts Eugene Grossrieter ("Chester"), second chef at the Hotel Chatham, Paris."

Sir William McCormick (1859–1930) was a Scottish literary scholar, particularly of Chaucer, and administrator. He was Chairman of the University Grants Committee, Chairman of the Advisory Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, and Chairman of the British National Opera Company. He came to live in London in 1920, the date of this portrait.

References

<http://www.racollection.org.uk/ixbin/indexplus?record=O1650>



David Bomberg (1890-1957)
Self-Portrait
1913-14
chalk
55.9 x 38.1 cm
National Portrait Gallery

David Bomberg (1890-1957), *Self-Portrait*, 1913-14, 55.9 x 38.1 cm, National Portrait Gallery

From the swagger of Orpen's Velázquez-inflected working man, we turn to another artist whose relationship with tradition was far more combative — **David Bomberg**. Born in Birmingham in **1890**, the seventh of eleven children of a Polish-Jewish leatherworker, Bomberg grew up in **Whitechapel** after his family moved there when he was five. His path to the **Slade School of Art** ran through Walter Sickert's classes at Westminster and a decisive encounter with **Roger Fry's 1910 exhibition**, where Cézanne first registered as a transforming force. John Singer Sargent supported him financially to attend the Slade, where he won the **Tonks Prize** for drawing — then rapidly dismantled everything that prize represented. Fry's **Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition of 1912** accelerated the break, and by **1913** Bomberg was expelled, with Tonks, Frederick Brown, and Philip Wilson Steer all in agreement that his geometric fracturing of the human figure had gone too far. Wyndham Lewis noticed him immediately. Filippo Marinetti did too. Yet Bomberg refused to join the **Vorticists** or contribute to **BLAST** — a

pointed act of independence from an artist who had no shortage of movements eager to claim him. He died in **1957** in near obscurity, recognition arriving only afterwards.

Notes

David Bomberg (1890–1957) was an English painter, and one of the Whitechapel Boys. In the 2011 BBC series, British Masters, Bomberg was singled out as being one of the greatest painters of the 20th Century. He is one of the six artists included in Dulwich Picture Gallery's 2013 summer exhibition, "Nash, Nevinson, Spencer, Gertler, Carrington, Bomberg: A Crisis of Brilliance, 1908-1922"

The self-portrait, was probably made while the artist was still a student at the Slade School.

Bomberg was one of the most audacious of the exceptional generation of artists who studied at the Slade School of Art under Henry Tonks, and which included Mark Gertler, Stanley Spencer, C.R.W. Nevinson and Dora Carrington. Bomberg painted a series of complex geometric compositions combining the influences of cubism and futurism in the years immediately preceding World War I; typically using a limited number of striking colours, turning humans into simple, angular shapes, and sometimes overlaying the whole painting a strong grid-work colouring scheme. He was expelled from the Slade School of Art in 1913, with agreement between the senior teachers Tonks, Frederick Brown and Philip Wilson Steer, because of the audacity of his breach from the conventional approach of that time.

Bomberg is now recognised as one of the most exceptional and original artists of his generation, but he died in 1957 in near obscurity. Son of Jewish immigrants from the East End of London, he was one of the pioneers of early modernism. During the First World War Bomberg fought at the Somme and, having witnessed the atrocities, he spent the rest of his artistic career trying to find or create order, moving frequently, painting and drawing the landscapes of Palestine, Spain, Cyprus, Cornwall and London.

Notes

David Bomberg (1890-1957) was born in Birmingham, the seventh of eleven

children of a Polish-Jewish leatherworker. When he was 5 the family moved to Whitechapel where he spent the rest of his childhood. He studied art at City And Guilds and returned to Birmingham to train as a lithographer but quit to study under Walter Sickert at Westminster School of Art from 1908 to 1910. Sickert was an early influence alongside Roger Fry's 1910 exhibition Manet and the Post-Impressionists, where he first saw the work of Paul Cézanne.

Bomberg had financial difficulties but with the help of John Singer Sargent he was able to attend the Slade School of Art. The emphasis in teaching at the Slade was on technique and draughtsmanship to which Bomberg was well-suited—winning the Tonks Prize for his drawing. He rapidly moved away from traditional techniques under the influence of the Futurists, Francis Picabia and Gino Severini, and Fry's Second Post Impressionist Exhibition in 1912, which displayed the works of Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse and the Fauvists alongside those of Wyndham Lewis, Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell. He was expelled from the Slade because of his radical approach but was noticed by Wyndham Lewis and Filippo Marinetti and he then travelled to France with Jacob Epstein and met Amedeo Modigliani, André Derain and Pablo Picasso. On his return he exhibited at the Camden Town Group (1913) and the London Group (1914). He refused to join the Vorticists or submit an article for their magazine BLAST.



David Bomberg (1890–1957)
Vision of Ezekiel
1912
114.3 x 137.2 cm
Tate, London

David Bomberg (1890–1957), *Vision of Ezekiel*, 1912, 114.3 x 137.2 cm, Tate, London

We said Bomberg refused to join the Vorticists — but the story of why he refused to let Lewis reproduce his drawings is more pointed than mere principle. The painting at the centre of this is ***Vision of Ezekiel***, made in **1912**, when Bomberg was just twenty-two. The subject is drawn from **Ezekiel chapter 37**, the Valley of Dried Bones, where God commands the prophet to speak and the dead reassemble into living form. "There was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together." Bomberg's figures are skeletal yet violently animated, rising from a tilted platform in brilliant, clashing colour. The geometric fracturing makes resurrection look like an explosion of pure form. His mother had died shortly before he made it, and Lilian Bomberg, his widow, always maintained that the choice of this particular text — one of consolation and miraculous return — was deeply personal, rooted in his grief and in a lifelong absorption with **Jewish history and the Old Testament**. When Bomberg showed the work, Wyndham Lewis hung it behind a door where it was barely visible, omitted it from the

catalogue entirely — witnesses attributed this to jealousy. Bomberg's response was to ban Lewis from reproducing any of his drawings in **BLAST**. Not a refusal of principle alone, but a direct and calculated act of retaliation.

Notes

Tate website "Bomberg was closely associated with the Vorticist group in London. His ability to organise forms into powerful compositions is evident in this painting which was carefully prepared in several preliminary drawings. The subject is taken from the Old Testament and illustrates the occasion when God guided the prophet to a valley full of bones and commanded him to speak. 'There was a noise, and behold a shaking, and the bones came together.' Skeletal yet animated the figures appear to emerge from the platform. The brilliant colours emphasise the exultation associated with resurrection. Bomberg may have chosen this text after the sudden death of his mother. The pair had been close and he may have found consolation in this positive theme."

It is unclear to which particular vision of Ezekiel the title refers. Mrs Lilian Bomberg, the artist's widow, has suggested the vision of the Valley of the Dried Bones (Ezekiel, chapter 37), where bones are miraculously revived to life. Bomberg may well have chosen the subject himself, as he was deeply interested in the Old Testament and Jewish history.

Miss Alice Mayes and Peter Richmond both confirmed the story that Wyndham Lewis not only hung the painting behind a door so that it could scarcely be seen, but also did not include it in the catalogue (actions which they attributed to jealousy). Miss Mayes said that in return Bomberg refused to allow Lewis to reproduce any of his drawings in **BLAST**.

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-vision-of-ezekiel-t01197/text-catalogue-entry>



David Bomberg (1890–1957)
The Mud Bath
1914
152.4 x 224.2 cm
Tate, London

David Bomberg (1890–1957), *The Mud Bath*, 1914, 152.4 x 224.2 cm, Tate, London

The act of retaliation against Lewis coincided almost exactly with Bomberg's greatest surge of public recognition. In **1914** he mounted a solo exhibition at the Chenil Gallery in Chelsea, which drew a notably positive review from **Roger Fry** — significant praise, given that Fry had little patience for work he considered merely fashionable. The centrepiece was **The Mud Bath**, a blazing composition in red, white, and blue built from angular, near-abstract figures. The Tate's own account notes that the scene derives from the steam baths near Bomberg's home in the **East End of London**, used by the local Jewish community and carrying associations of ritual as well as physical cleansing. The painting was hung outside the gallery, and the story goes that the horse drawing the **number 29 bus** shied as it came round the corner of the King's Road. That moment of scandalised public attention was short-lived. The war changed everything. The mechanised slaughter of the Western Front — where Bomberg enlisted and where friends and supporters died — destroyed his faith in the

aesthetics of the machine age. The geometric violence of his pre-war work gave way to something more searching: a sustained engagement with landscape, in **Spain, Cyprus, and Cornwall**, that merged geometric structure with the observational tradition of **Turner and Constable**.

Notes

Tate, "The way in which Bomberg reduces the human figure to a series of geometric shapes may reflect his fascination with the machine age, which he shared with the Futurists and Vorticists. This painting could also represent the human form, stripped to its essential core. The scene is based on steam baths near Bomberg's home in east London, which were used by the local Jewish population and which also had religious associations. They were, perhaps, a place for both physical and spiritual cleansing."

In 1914 he had a solo exhibition which attracted a positive review from Roger Fry and international artists. His masterpiece *The Mud Bath* (1914) was hung outside causing 'the horse drawing the 29 bus ... to shy at it as they came round the corner of King's Road.'

He continued to be dogged by financial problems and when the war started he enlisted and was sent to the Western front. The war brought about profound changes in his outlook. The mechanized slaughter of his brother, friends and supporter destroyed his faith in the aesthetics of the machine age. He brought together the geometric energies of his pre-war work as an "English cubist" with the tradition of figurative observation of the English landscape school of Turner, Constable, Girtin and John Sell Cotman. There followed his great period of painting and drawing in landscape, in Spain, Cyprus and Cornwall. A six month stay in the Soviet Union led to his resignation from the Communist Party in London.



David Bomberg (1890–1957)
Jerusalem, Looking to Mount Scopus
1925
56.5 x 75.2 cm
Tate

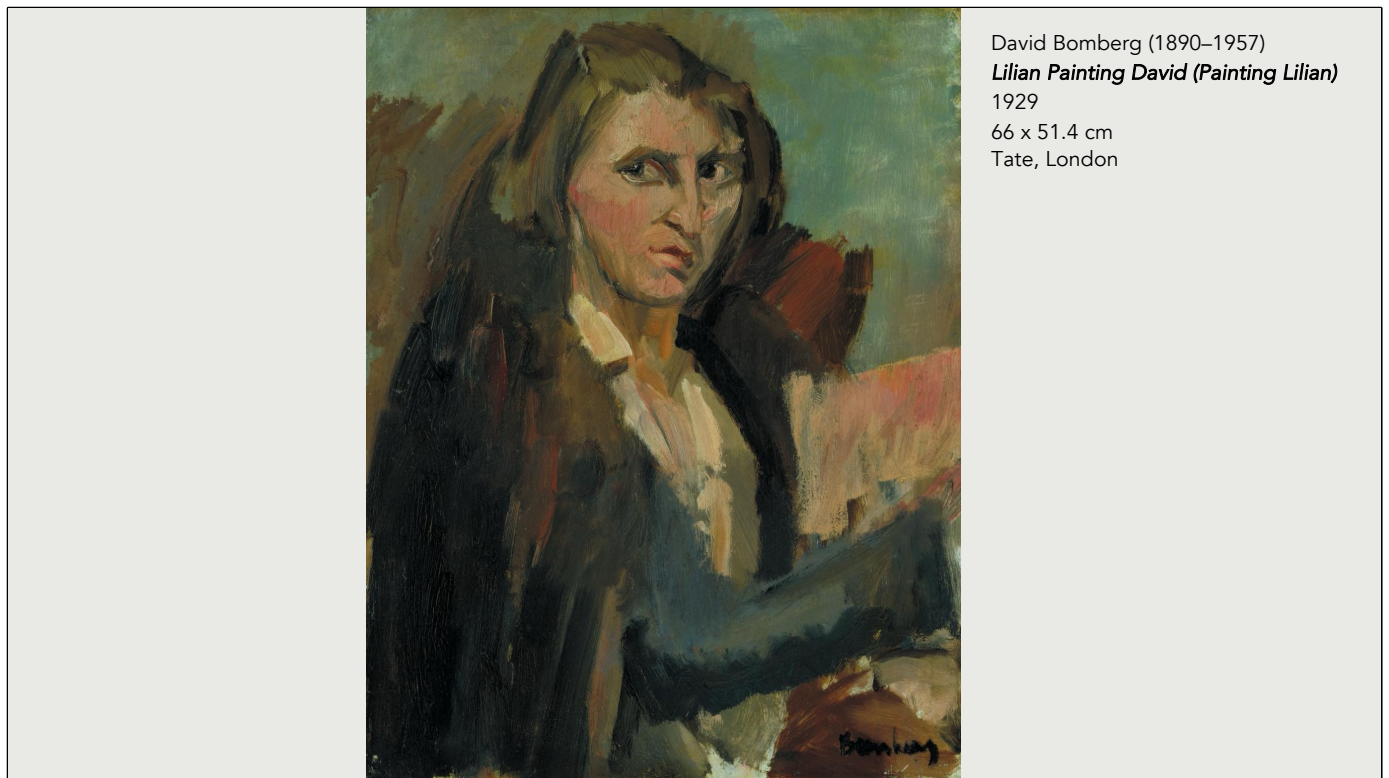
David Bomberg (1890–1957), *Jerusalem, Looking to Mount Scopus*, 1925, 56.5 x 75.2 cm, Tate

That turn away from the machine age, and towards landscape and place, took on a charged political dimension when Bomberg arrived in **Jerusalem** in **1923**. He had been commissioned by a Zionist organisation to document the new Jewish settlements — a logical choice on paper, given his East End Jewish background. But Bomberg was no Zionist, and the commission sat uneasily with him. He found himself drawn instead to the British Government officials administering the **Palestine Mandate**, who proved far more congenial patrons. What those officials wanted was documentation, not interpretation: a faithful visual record of the **ancient city** they were determined to restore and shield from the pressures of modernisation. The result is a striking departure from the expressionist energy of his later landscape work. The painting is painstakingly precise — buildings rendered with an almost archaeological exactitude, the geometry of stone and shadow observed with the same structural intensity he had once applied to the **East End** steam baths of **The Mud Bath**, now turned to the service of

measured description rather than visceral abstraction. It is a moment of productive contradiction in Bomberg's career: a radically independent painter, working for an imperial administration, producing images of a city that three faiths and two competing nationalisms were already fighting to define.

Notes

In 1917 the British Government had declared support for the 'establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish people'. Six years later Bomberg, a Jewish artist from the East End of London, was commissioned by a Zionist organisation to paint images of Jewish settlements in Jerusalem. However, Bomberg was not a supporter of Zionism and found the British Government officials in Jerusalem more congenial patrons. The painstakingly detailed depiction of buildings in this painting probably reflects their desire to see a faithful description of the ancient city which they hoped to restore and protect from modernisation.



David Bomberg (1890–1957), *Lilian Painting David (Painting Lilian)*, 1929, 66 x 51.4 cm, Tate, London

That productive contradiction in Jerusalem marks a turning point — because after Palestine, Bomberg never returned to the angular certainties of his pre-war style. Back in Europe through the late **1920s** and into the **1930s**, he travelled widely — Spain above all. A prolonged stay in **Toledo** proved decisive. Standing before the work of **El Greco**, that sixteenth-century Greek painter who spent his career in Spain, Bomberg found a precedent for the kind of paint handling he had been groping towards: figures and landscapes dissolved into surging, light-saturated brushwork. The influence loosened his technique dramatically, and the resulting style — gestural, urgent, openly emotional — would define the rest of his career. The double portrait of **Lilian Holt**, his second wife, crystallises what that new freedom meant to him personally and professionally. He paints Lilian painting him at the very same moment — two artists in mutual, simultaneous scrutiny. Lilian later wrote, "We recognised the total commitment to art in each other." Crucially, Bomberg refuses the

familiar convention of the artist and his muse. Lilian is not an object of inspiration; she is a practitioner, equally absorbed, equally committed. The painting is a declaration about art as shared vocation rather than one-sided devotion.

Notes

Whether because his faith in the machine age had been shattered by his experiences as a private soldier in the trenches or because of the pervasive retrogressive attitude towards modernism in Britain Bomberg moved to a more figurative style in the 1920s and his work became increasingly dominated by portraits and landscapes drawn from nature. Gradually developing a more expressionist technique he travelled widely through the Middle East and Europe.

Tate, "This portrait shows Bomberg's second wife, Lilian, painting him at the same time as he is painting her. She later wrote, 'We recognized the total commitment to art in each other'. The portrait that Lilian Bomberg was painting at the same time no longer exists. Portraits of artists' lovers abound in art. But here Bomberg chooses to portray his wife as a working artist, rather than as his muse. Bomberg had recently returned from Toledo where, influenced by El Greco, a sixteenth-century Greek artist who worked in Spain, he developed a loose and expressive style which characterised his later work."



David Bomberg (1890-1957)
Kitty, The Artist's Sister
1929
58.5 x 47.6 cm
Towner Gallery, Eastbourne

David Bomberg (1890-1957), *Kitty, The Artist's Sister*, 1929, 58.5 x 47.6 cm, Towner Gallery, Eastbourne

That shared vocation carried a political dimension too. Encouraged by his sister **Kitty** and her husband **James Newmark**, both Bomberg and Lilian joined the **Communist Party** in the early 1930s. It was a commitment that went beyond card-carrying — Bomberg painted banners for demonstrations and attended mass unemployment rallies, bringing the same physical intensity to political action that he brought to his canvases. In **1933** the couple travelled to the Soviet Union, spending five months there with genuine idealism about what revolutionary culture might look like. What they found was the opposite of liberation. **Socialist Realism** had been hardening into state doctrine, and the Soviet authorities were actively suppressing the experimental, expressive painting that Bomberg represented and believed in. The contradiction was impossible to ignore: a political movement that promised collective human dignity was enforcing aesthetic conformity and crushing the individual vision that Bomberg regarded as inseparable from honest art. On returning to London,

both he and Lilian resigned from the party. It was not a retreat from social conscience — Bomberg remained preoccupied with working-class experience and human struggle — but a clear-eyed recognition that institutional politics and genuine artistic freedom could not coexist on those terms.

Notes

Encouraged by his sister Kitty and her husband James Newmark, both Bomberg and Lilian joined the Communist party. Bomberg painted banners for demonstrations and attended mass unemployment rallies. In July they visited Russia for five months and gradually grew disillusioned with the Communist's effect on art. On return to London they resigned from the Communist Party.



David Bomberg (1890–1957)
Self-Portrait
c. 1937
60.6 x 50.8 cm
National Portrait Gallery, London

David Bomberg (1890–1957), *Self-Portrait*, c. 1937, 60.6 x 50.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery, London

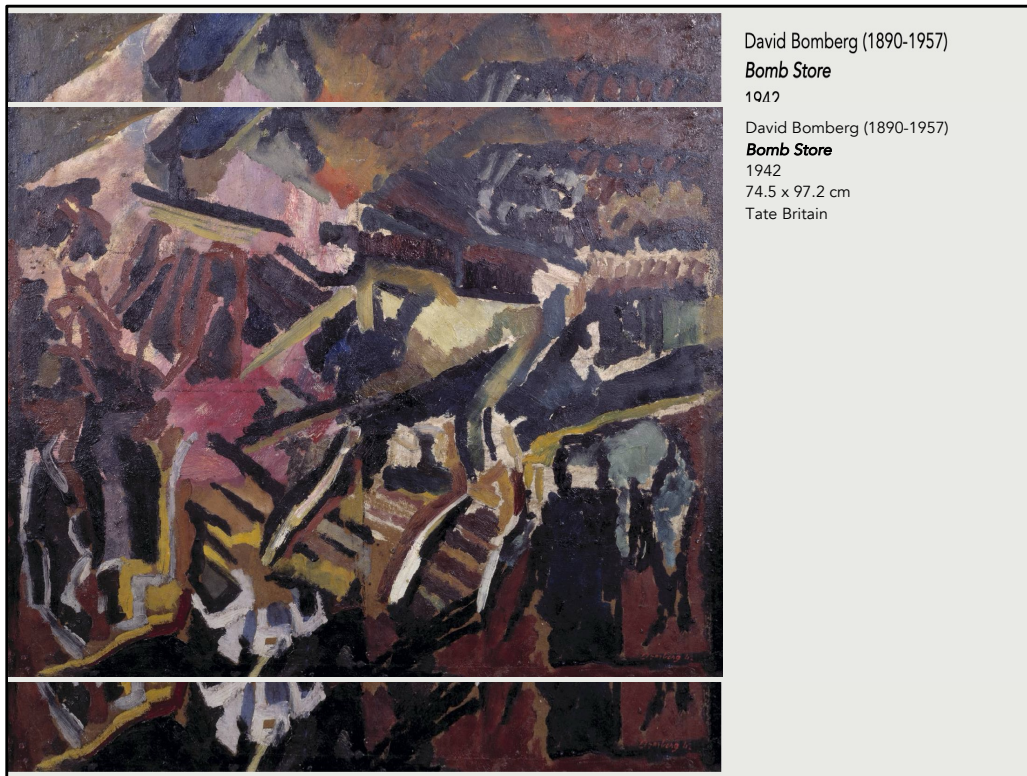
That clear-eyed independence defined the final chapter of his teaching life. From **1945 to 1953**, Bomberg taught at **Borough Polytechnic** in south London, and the influence he exercised there proved to be one of the most consequential acts of transmission in twentieth-century British art. His students included **Frank Auerbach** and **Leon Kossoff**, both of whom absorbed his insistence on what he called the search for the **spirit in the mass** — the idea that paint must register lived, bodily experience rather than merely describe an appearance. Auerbach later spoke of Bomberg as the greatest teacher he had encountered, a man who demanded that students confront reality with total commitment. Bomberg himself received almost no institutional recognition during his lifetime, dying in **1957** in near poverty. The reassessment came later and has been emphatic. The **Dulwich Picture Gallery** placed him at the centre of its landmark 2013 exhibition, grouping him alongside **Nash, Nevinson, Spencer, Gertler, and Carrington** under the title *A Crisis of Brilliance*, which traced the extraordinary generation that

emerged from the **Slade** between 1908 and 1922. What that exhibition confirmed is what Auerbach and Kossoff had always demonstrated in their own work: Bomberg's vision did not end with him.

Notes

From 1945 to 1953, he worked as a teacher at Borough Polytechnic (now London South Bank University) in London, where his pupils included Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff.

In the 2011 BBC series, *British Masters*, Bomberg was singled out as being one of the greatest painters of the 20th Century. He is one of the six artists included in Dulwich Picture Gallery's 2013 summer exhibition, "Nash, Nevinson, Spencer, Gertler, Carrington, Bomberg: A Crisis of Brilliance, 1908-1922"



David Bomberg (1890-1957), *Bomb Store*, 1942, 74.5 x 97.2 cm, Tate Britain

Bomberg's vision did not end with him — but the institution that might have channelled it during the war years shut the door on him twice. When the **War Artists' Advisory Committee** was constituted to document Britain's war effort, Bomberg applied for a commission and was rejected on both occasions. The single work he did produce under official auspices was a series known as the **Bomb Store paintings**, made in **1942**. The subject was an underground munitions depot, and Bomberg brought to it exactly the bodily, visceral attention he demanded of his students at Borough — the weight and mass of stored destruction rendered in dense, pressured paint. What gives these paintings an almost unbearable retrospective charge is what happened two years later: the depot was destroyed in a catastrophic explosion that killed **68 people**. The paintings carry what can only be described as a premonitory gravity, as though Bomberg had sensed, through the very act of looking, the latent violence compressed into those stone chambers. That the Committee had twice refused him a

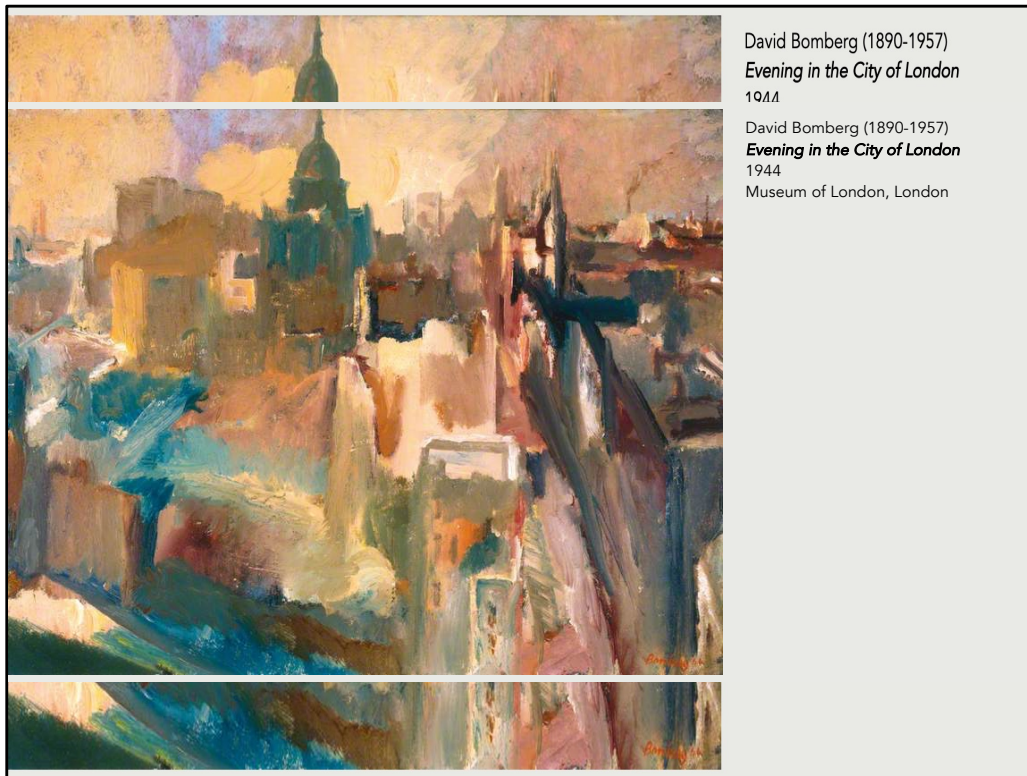
role makes the episode all the more pointed — the artist most attuned to the destructive energies of modern warfare was precisely the one the official machinery declined to employ.

Notes

During the Second World War, he tried to become involved with the War Artists' Advisory Committee, but his application was twice rejected. His single commission as a war artist, a series of Bomb Store paintings (1942) expressing Bomberg's expanded first-hand sense of the destructive powers of modern technology in warfare. These Bomb Store paintings convey a premonitory sense of the massive explosion that destroyed the underground store two years later, killing 68 people.

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-bomb-store-t06998>



David Bomberg (1890-1957), *Evening in the City of London*, 1944, Museum of London, London

The bitter irony of the War Artists' Advisory Committee's rejection sharpens when we look at what Bomberg produced independently in **1944: *Evening in the City of London***, painted from the tower of **St Mary le Bow** in Cheapside. The vantage point is precise — Newgate Street and Cheapside carve a dark diagonal across the right of the canvas, while **St Paul's Cathedral** rises through the atmospheric distance, intact against a sky of dense, warm colour. Martin Harrison called it the most moving of all paintings of wartime Britain, and the claim is hard to dispute. Where official war art tended toward documentation, Bomberg gives you feeling compressed into structure — the blitzed city rendered not as ruin but as endurance. Bomberg himself had stated his ambition plainly: "I want to translate the life of a great city into art that shall not be photographic, but expressive." That programme goes back to his arrival in **London in 1908** from his native Birmingham, when he threw himself into the most advanced currents of European modernism and became associated, however uneasily, with

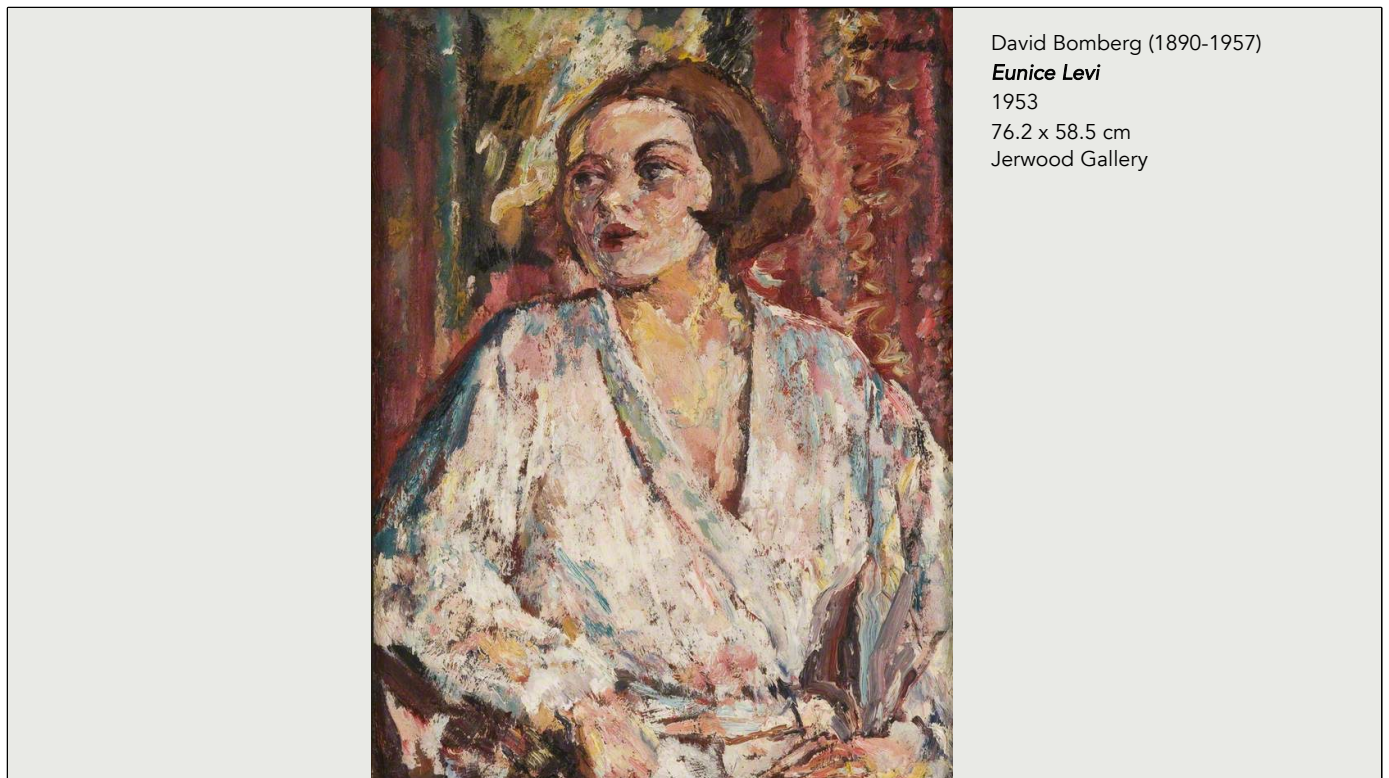
Futurism and its obsession with urban energy. *Evening in the City of London* is the only painting he made of bomb-damaged London, and the warmth of those broad, pressured blocks of colour reads unmistakably as optimism — a city battered but unbroken.

Notes

During World War II, he painted *Evening in the City of London* (1944), showing the blitzed city viewed rising up to a triumphant, surviving St Paul's Cathedral on the horizon, since described as the "most moving of all paintings of wartime Britain" (Martin Harrison).

This view of the bomb-damaged City of London is taken from the tower of St Mary le Bow Church in Cheapside. Newgate Street and Cheapside are represented by the dark diagonal on the right. St Paul's Cathedral dominates the distance.

This is Bomberg's only painting of bomb-damaged London, but his strong blocks of warm colour seem to express optimism. He once said: 'I want to translate the life of a great city ... into art that shall not be photographic, but expressive'. David Bomberg had come to London in 1908 from his native Birmingham. He became associated with the modern styles of art, particularly futurism.



David Bomberg (1890-1957)
Eunice Levi
1953
76.2 x 58.5 cm
Jerwood Gallery

David Bomberg (1890-1957), Eunice Levi, 1953, 76.2 x 58.5 cm,
Jerwood Gallery

From the bombed city to the intimacy of a Hampstead sitting room — the contrast could hardly be greater. By **1948**, Bomberg had moved to **Rosslyn Hill** with his second wife, the painter **Lilian Holt**, and it is here that he produced the **Portrait of Eunice Levi**, his neighbour, shown seated in a white robe before what reads as an abstracted window view. The brushwork is extraordinary — thick, pressured layers of vibrant colour built up with that characteristic insistence on what Bomberg called "the spirit in the mass." The painting arrives after a painful interlude. The **Tate's** refusal to purchase his work in **1937**, compounded by years of failed commission bids, had driven Bomberg into a long depression that stopped him painting altogether. It was Lilian Holt who broke the paralysis, placing a vase of flowers on the living-room table and quietly encouraging him to paint it. His initial reluctance gave way rapidly — he was soon buying fresh flowers every day. The portrait of Eunice Levi belongs to that renewed burst of activity: work made, as it were, with newly opened eyes. The warmth

and freedom visible in its surface are inseparable from that recovery, and from Lilian Holt's role as the steady intelligence behind it.

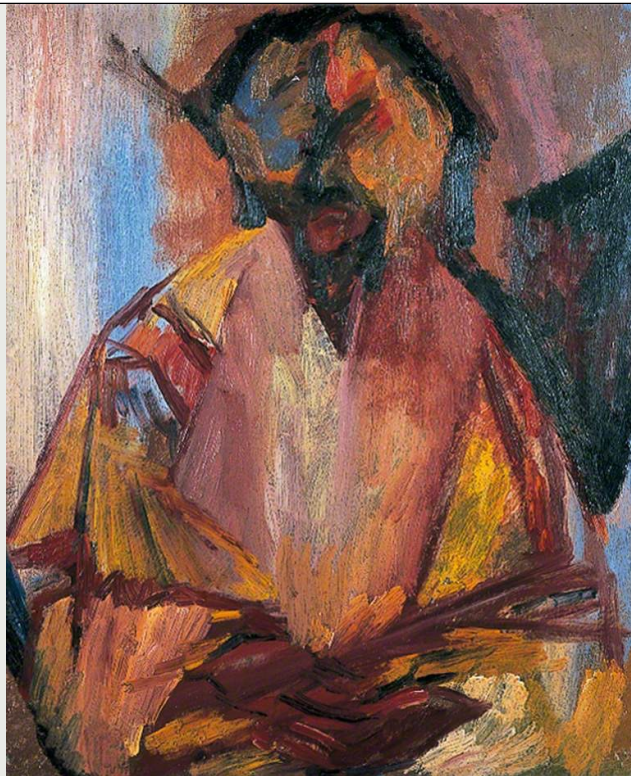
Notes

Jerwood Gallery, "This portrait depicts Bomberg's neighbour, Eunice Levi, and was painted at the artist's home on Rosslyn Hill, Hampstead. Bomberg had moved to this address with his second wife, the artist Lilian Holt, in 1948. In this portrait Eunice Levi sits in a white robe in front of what could be an abstracted view from a window. Bomberg's thick painterly style can be seen vividly within this painting, through the built up layers of wonderfully vibrant and colourful brushstrokes.

The portrait was painted a year after Bomberg's recovery from a long bout of depression, which was brought on by the repeated rejections of his requests for commissions and failure to sell work. He was bitterly disappointed when Tate rejected the purchase of his works in 1937 and these continuing fits of depression prevented Bomberg from painting. In an attempt to inspire her husband to start painting again, Lilian began placing a vase of flowers on a table in their living room and encouraged him to paint them. Initially reluctant, Bomberg soon began buying flowers every day to paint. This portrait can therefore be viewed as one of many paintings accomplished with a fresh eye, by a newly inspired Bomberg."

References

<http://www.jerwoodgallery.org/collection/18/portrait-of-eunice-levy>



David Bomberg (1890-1957)
Last Self Portrait
1956
76 x 63.5 cm
Pallant House, Chichester

David Bomberg (1890-1957), Last Self Portrait, 1956, 76 x 63.5 cm,
Pallant House, Chichester

That renewed burst of energy Lilian Holt made possible did not last indefinitely. By the early **1950s**, Bomberg was gravely ill, and the **Last Self Portrait of 1953** stands as the culmination of his life's work. Lilian Holt described it as a "prophetic picture — he knew that this was the last portrait and that he was going to die." What is striking is that Bomberg painted it without a mirror. There is no attempt at literal likeness; instead the image asserts what he had always believed — the primacy of individual vision over surface appearance. His marginality in British art was never simply a matter of style. Bomberg was a working-class East End Jew, and the hostility his work encountered cannot be cleanly separated from the broader climate of the period. Britain's record of admitting Jewish refugees fleeing Nazi persecution was far more restrictive than the postwar myth acknowledged — recent scholarship estimates that administrative policy excluded roughly ten times as many as it admitted. After the war, **Oswald Mosley's** movement rebranded antisemitism behind the language of "aliens," its

meaning unmistakable to those it targeted. Bomberg died in **1957**, largely unhonoured. The institution that had refused to buy his work in **1937** would eventually recognise what it had overlooked — but too late for him to know it.

Notes

"Like a final testament, Bomberg's intensely moving 'Last Self Portrait' is filled with a tragic awareness of his impending mortality. His wife Lillian described it as a "prophetic picture...he knew that this was the last portrait and that he was going to die." Bomberg didn't use a mirror, for there is no attempt to provide a literal likeness. It reveals instead Bomberg's state of mind, asserting with painful honesty his belief in 'the power of individual vision'." (Art UK)

Tate, "Throughout the 1930s Bomberg's art became broader and more impassioned as he sought to convey the essence of his response to landscapes in Scotland and Spain. This work met with little approval in Britain, and during World War II his outstanding series of Bomb Store paintings did not lead to further commissions from the War Artists Committee, despite his repeated requests. His last years were darkened by the realization that his art remained overlooked and even belittled in Britain. His final landscapes and figure paintings include some of his most powerful works."

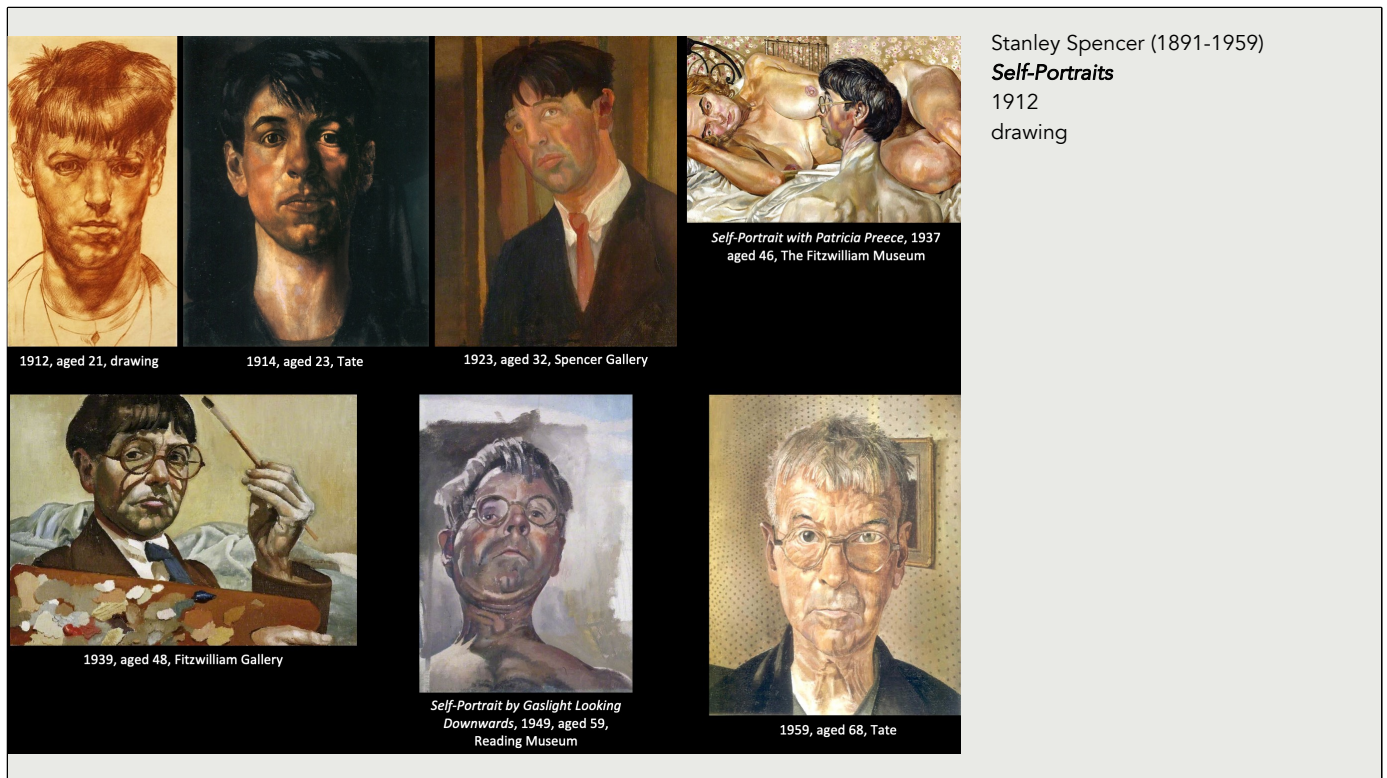
We must ask if his Jewishness was a factor in the belittling of his work. It is instructive to consider the mood of the 1930s when many Jewish refugees fleeing from Nazi Germany sought to enter Britain. Many believe that we welcomed fleeing Jews but "The process...was designed to keep out large numbers of European Jews - perhaps 10 times as many as it let in." Around 70,000 had been admitted by the outbreak of the war, but British Jewish associations had some half a million more case files of those who had not. The unsuccessful public campaign to persuade the government to rescue Jews from mass murder faded quickly from the public consciousness and the myth was born that Britain did all it could for the Jews between 1933 and 1945. After the war Oswald Mosley's fascist supporters returned and instead of blaming the Jews they used the euphemism 'aliens'. However, it was clear to supporters what this meant and Jews were taunted in the streets with 'Not enough Jews were burned in Belsen'.

The Jews that did enter before and after the war brought a new intellectual

culture of artists, musicians, scientist, engineers, philosophers and many other leaders in their field. Although they started with nothing and their numbers were small their impact was substantial and positive although it did challenge the established British culture.

References

<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/jun/08/immigration.immigrationandpublicservices>



Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), Self-Portrait, 1912

Bomberg died unhonoured in 1957; **Stanley Spencer**, born in **1891** in Cookham, Berkshire, died just two years later, knighted and celebrated — yet both men shared a fierce refusal to flatter, and Spencer's long sequence of self-portraits makes that refusal visible across an entire lifetime. This slide presents seven of them, spanning **1912 to 1959**, and what is immediately striking is their unflinching plainness. Spencer never softened his features, never composed himself for posterity. The earliest, a drawing made at the **Slade** around 1912, belongs to the moment when Spencer was studying alongside **Bomberg**, **Christopher Nevinson**, and **Paul Nash**. Henry Tonks ran the Slade with rigorous attention to draughtsmanship, and Spencer absorbed that discipline deeply, even as his imagination pulled him toward **Giotto** and **Mantegna** rather than toward Cézanne or Picasso. When asked what he thought of Picasso, Spencer replied, "I haven't got past Piero della Francesca yet." Paul Nash called him "the last of the Pre-Raphaelites." Spencer loved Cookham so intensely that he would travel home for tea and return the same evening — a habit his contemporaries noticed,

and which gave him the nickname he used himself: simply, "**Cookham.**"

Notes

Stanley Spencer (1891-1959), Self-Portrait, 1912, drawing

Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait, 1914, Tate

Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait, 1923, Spencer Gallery

Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait, 1939, 39.7 x 55.2cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum

Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait by Gaslight Looking Downwards, 1949, 57 x 47cm, Reading Museum and Town Hall

Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait with Patricia Preece, 1937, 61 x 91.2cm, The Fitzwilliam Museum

Stanley Spencer, Self-Portrait, 1959, Tate

Note that this is a selection of the many self-portraits Spencer painted. They are all honest and penetrating; none of them tries to elevate or glamorize the artist.

Spencer's Early Life, 1891 to 1914

1891, A crow fell down the chimney at Fernlea on Cookham High Street, flapped around the room, flew out of the window and Stanley Spencer was born. The date was June 30th 1891 - and the family thought it was a good omen. He was the eighth surviving child of Annie and William Spencer, a piano teacher, and he was joined a year later by his younger brother Gilbert. This is a picture of the house today and this is how the High Street looked in the 1880s. The Kings Arms Hotel is four houses away from Fernlea.

1891-1907, his father did not think the local school was satisfactory and could not afford a private school so Spencer was educated by his sisters Annie and Florence in the shed at the bottom of the garden next door but as Spencer did not like school work so they allowed him to draw instead. Painting was not an important subject for the Spencer family but there were a number of reproductions on the walls and when he was old enough his mother took him to the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy.

1907, Spencer was stimulated by reading from the family bible and enjoyed taking long, solitary walks. He spent time drawing with the wife of a local landowner, Lady Boston who, in 1907, arranged for him to go to Maidenhead

Technical Institute.

1908-12 he studied at the Slade under Henry Tonks. Contemporaries included Christopher Nevinston, David Bomberg, and Paul Nash. 1912 he exhibited John Donne Arriving in Heaven at Roger Fry's Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. He was considered to be influenced by Gauguin. However, he was more influenced by Giotto and Mantegna and when asked what he thought of Picasso he said 'I haven't got past Piero della Francesca yet'. Paul Nash called him 'the last of the Pre-Raphaelites'. He so loved Cookham that he would come home for tea on the train. This was noted and gave rise to the nickname, 'Cookham', which Spencer himself used.

This first self-portrait is a drawing was done while he was at the Slade. It was the year of the second Post-Impressionist Exhibition at the Grafton Galleries.

World War One, 1914 to 1918

1914 he began work on this second self-portrait which was painted in Wisteria Cottage, a decaying Georgian house Spencer rented, from the local coalman in Cookham, for use as a studio. Its dark, rich colours and strongly modelled form was inspired by a reproduction of the head of Christ by the Italian Renaissance artist Luini.

1915-18 he attended the Slade School of Art between 1908 and 1912 and so his career started at the same time as the First World War. During the war his poor physique caused him to apply for ambulance duties. He enlisted in the Royal Army Medical Corp and was sent to Bristol and later Macedonia. He requested a transfer to the infantry in 1917.

1918, he returned to Cookham in December 1918 to hear his brother Sydney had been killed in action three months previously and he lost 'the all pervading joy I felt as a child' and the 'serenity of spirit'. His much loved brother had been killed in the last few weeks of the war and returning to the work after the war he found it difficult to continue, often stating "It is not proper or sensible to expect to paint after such experience." Many artists felt the same and although in Europe some artists reacted against the slaughter by rejecting all social, cultural and artistic standards in Britain and among many artists in Europe there was what has been called a "return to order". The excesses of modernism we rejected and there was a return to more conventional figurative painting. Cubism was partially abandoned even by its creators, Braque and Picasso, and Futurism, which had praised machinery,

violence and war, was rejected by most of its adherents. The return to order was associated with a revival of classicism and realistic painting.

1920 to 1927, The Resurrection, Cookham

1919 lived and worked at Cookham. He became a member New English Art Club until 1927.

1920-21 he lodged with Henry Slessor and his wife at Bourne End near Cookham.

1922 he accompanied the Carline family on a holiday to Yugoslavia, became engaged to Hilda Carline and moved to Hampstead.

1923, aged 32, he painted this third self-portrait.

1925 married Anne Hilda Carline and had two daughters Shirin (1925) and Unity (1930). When he first met Hilda he became a changed man in his own words the old Stanley Spencer 'was now no longer so' and the new 'lust or what you will was sweeping me along'.

1926 completed The Resurrection, one of his 'major, most memorable achievements'. The Times critic would call it 'the most important picture painted by any English artist during the present century ... What makes it so astonishing is the combination in it of careful detail with modern freedom in the treatment of form. It is as if a Pre-Raphaelite had shaken hands with a Cubist.'

The Sandham Memorial Chapel. Burghclere, 1926-32 (National Trust)

1927 Spencer received commissions including the Sandham Memorial Chapel (1927-1932). It was in 1927 that he held his first one-man exhibition at the Goupil Gallery. The centre piece of the exhibition was The Resurrection, Cookham.

Cookham, 1932-1935, The Church House Project

1932 moved to 'Lindworth', a large house in Cookham. Began work on 'Church-House' idea. Elected an Associate of the Royal Academy. Dudley Tooth became his sole agent.

Divorce and Remarriage, 1935-1938

1935 resigned from the Royal Academy after the rejection of *The Dustman* and other works from the Summer Exhibition and the controversy resulted in his popularity declining.

1937 he was divorced by his wife Hilda Carline and immediately married Patricia Preece. His second marriage was a disaster, never consummated and his wife manipulated and exploited him. Spencer tried to win back Hilda but never succeeded. He began work on the *Beatitudes of Love* series.

1937, this fourth self-portrait shows Spencer with Patricia Preece.

1938 in financial difficulties, left Cookham and went to stay with the Rothensteins in London. Dudley Tooth took over managing his business affairs. Began *Christ in the Wilderness* series in bed-sit in Swiss Cottage.

Port Glasgow, World War Two, 1935-1945

1939-41 stayed at the White Hart Inn, Leonard Stanley, Gloucestershire, with George and Daphne Charlton. In March 1940 the War Artists Advisory Committee commissioned Spencer to paint the Port Glasgow shipyards, which occupied him until 1946. Went to live in Epsom with his children and then moved back to Cookham.

1939, this fifth self-portrait shows him with paintbrush and palette.

Resurrection Pictures, 1945-1950

1945 began *The Resurrection, Port Glasgow* series (1945-1950). His reputation improved as a result of his war commissions

1949, this sixth self-portrait shows just before the scandal of the obscenity charge and the death of Hilda.

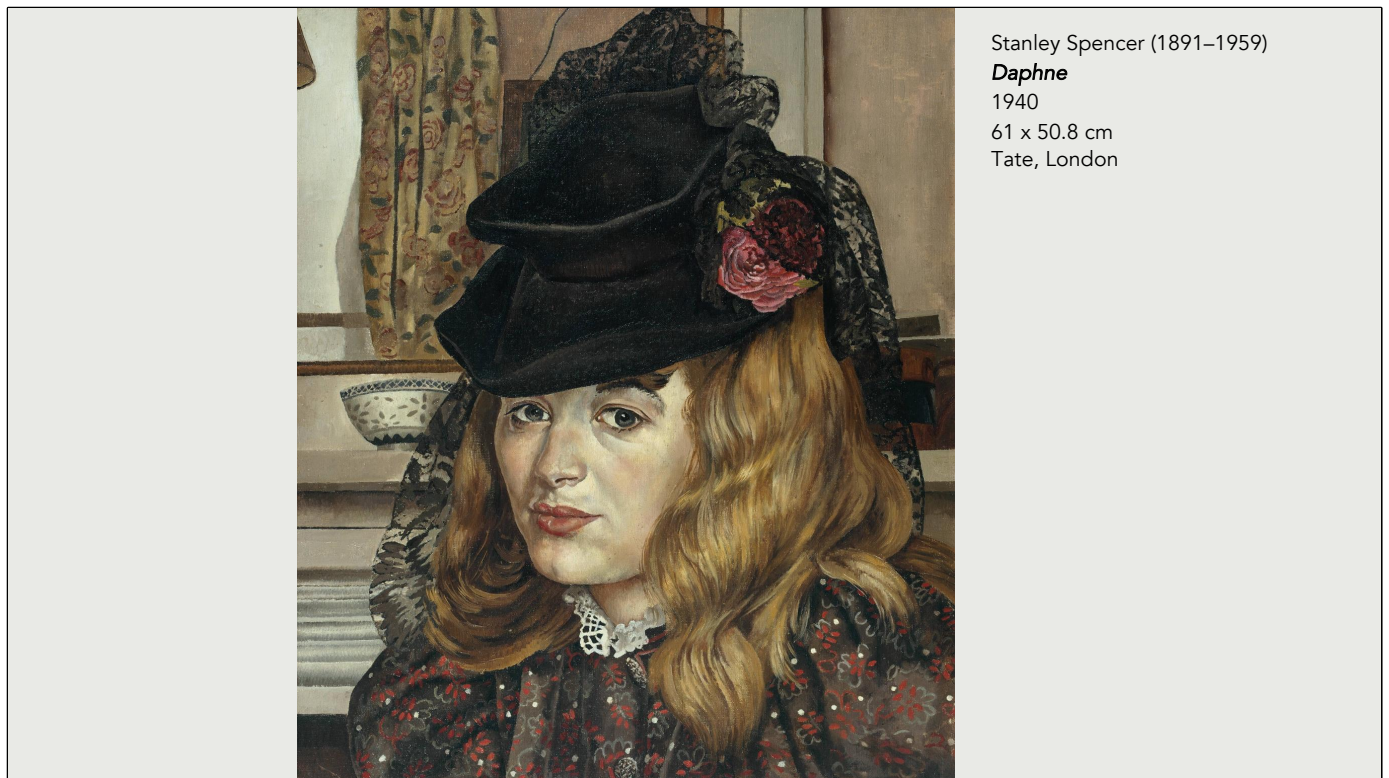
1950 Alfred Munnings, the President of the Royal Academy, initiated a prosecution against Spencer for obscenity but Munnings then resigned and the new President persuaded Spencer to re-join the RA. Hilda died of breast cancer in November. This followed years of mental health problems during which Spencer visited her weekly and sent long letters, some of over one hundred pages. He continued to send letters after her death.

Final Years, 1951 to 1959

1954 he visited China as a guest of the Chinese authorities.

1955 there was a retrospective exhibition at the Tate Gallery.

1959 seventh and his final self-portrait was painted from 12 to 16 July. He was knighted in 1959 and died of bowel cancer on 14 December aged 58 at the Canadian War Memorial Hospital, Cliveden, Berkshire. His last years until his death in 1959 were financially successful although his reputation and his sale prices did not soar until after his death.



Stanley Spencer (1891–1959), *Daphne*, 1940, 61 x 50.8 cm, Tate, London

That same directness Spencer turned on himself he also brought to his portraits of others. **Daphne Charlton**, painted in **1940**, is one of the most concentrated examples. Daphne was a student at the **Slade**, and her husband **George Charlton** taught there — the institution that had shaped Spencer nearly three decades earlier remained a thread running through his social world. The two families were introduced in **1939**, and Spencer became a regular visitor to their Hampstead home. The previous summer all three had gone on a painting holiday together to **Leonard Stanley**, a remote Gloucestershire village — the kind of rural retreat Spencer instinctively sought, though it was Cookham, not the Cotswolds, that truly anchored him. Back in London the following April, Daphne sat for him every day for two to three weeks. The hat she wears — a deliberate, specific object — was bought for **three guineas** from a Bond Street shop in December 1939, chosen expressly for the sittings. Spencer painted a second portrait of her without it. That detail matters. Spencer's portraits are never

generic likenesses; they accumulate the weight of particular things, particular days. The hat is not costume — it is evidence. These are images built from close, repeated looking, entirely consistent with the discipline **Henry Tonks** drilled into Spencer at the Slade.

Notes

Tate site, 'Daphne Charlton was a student at the Slade School of Art in London, as was Stanley Spencer, and her husband George taught there. The Charltons were introduced to Spencer in 1939 and from then on he often visited them at their Hampstead home. All three went on a painting holiday together in the summer of 1939 to Leonard Stanley, a remote village in Gloucestershire. During this stay Daphne Charlton painted Spencer's portrait. In April 1940, back in London, she sat for this portrait every day for about two to three weeks. The hat she wears was bought for three guineas in a shop in Bond Street in December 1939, especially for the sittings. Spencer painted another portrait of her without her hat.'

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/spencer-daphne-n05148>



Victor Pasmore (1908-1998)
Self Portrait with Flowers (detail)
c.1942
51 x 61 cm
Carrick Hill, Australia

Victor Pasmore (1908-1998), *Self Portrait with Flowers (detail)*, c.1942, 51 x 61 cm, Carrick Hill, Australia

From Spencer's intense, object-laden portraits, we turn to a figure whose career traces one of the most dramatic trajectories in British twentieth-century art: **Victor Pasmore**. Born in **1908** in Surrey, Pasmore showed early promise as a landscape painter, but his father's death in **1926** forced him into eleven years as a clerk at **London County Council**, studying evenings at the **Central School of Art**. That institutional detour proved formative: his work from the period is rigorously, almost obstinately, realistic. By the late **1930s** he had helped establish the **Euston Road School**, whose commitment to close, undramatic observation placed it in deliberate opposition to the more theatrical strains of European modernism. Encounters with **Walter Sickert** and **Ben Nicholson** pulled him in competing directions simultaneously. When **Kenneth Clark's** patronage in **1938** finally allowed him to paint full-time, Pasmore threw himself into domestic subjects — intimate Thames-side scenes and candlelit interiors inflected by his deep study of **Vermeer**. The canvas under discussion, likely painted after his move

to **Chiswick** in **1942**, shows that Vermeer-ish gravity: a dark tonality, a rich emerald-green glass jug, flower shapes abstracted until no stems are visible. Sickert's **Camden Town** palette hums quietly beneath the surface.

Notes

Victor Pasmore was born in Surrey and when his father died he was forced to find a job, which was at London County Council. He studied painting part-time and was associated with the Euston Road School between 1937 and 1939. He experimented with abstract art and painted romantic landscapes of the Thames. He was a leading figure painter of the early 20th century. During WWII he was a conscientious objector but was called up. He refused orders, was court-martialled and imprisoned and then exempted from military service. After the war he was commissioned to produce a mural for a bus station in Kingston and he continued to specialise in abstract work.

In 1933-1934, he became a member of the London Artists' Association and the London Group, where he met and was influenced by painters such as Walter Sickert and Ben Nicholson, who were experimenting with modernism. He painted some abstract works but they were never exhibited and he later destroyed them. He felt he had failed to understand abstract principles.

In 1938, due to Kenneth Clarke's patronage he was able to paint full-time and felt himself to be a professional artist.

In 1942, he moved to a new house in Chiswick and this may have been painted in their new house. The tone is dark and he looks out with a stern expression. This is one of a number of domestic scenes inspired by Vermeer. There is a rich touch of emerald green in the transparent glass jug. The flower shapes are abstracted and there are no flower stems in the glass jug. The use of colour seems to have been influenced by Walter Sickert's Camden Town period 1906-18.

Notes

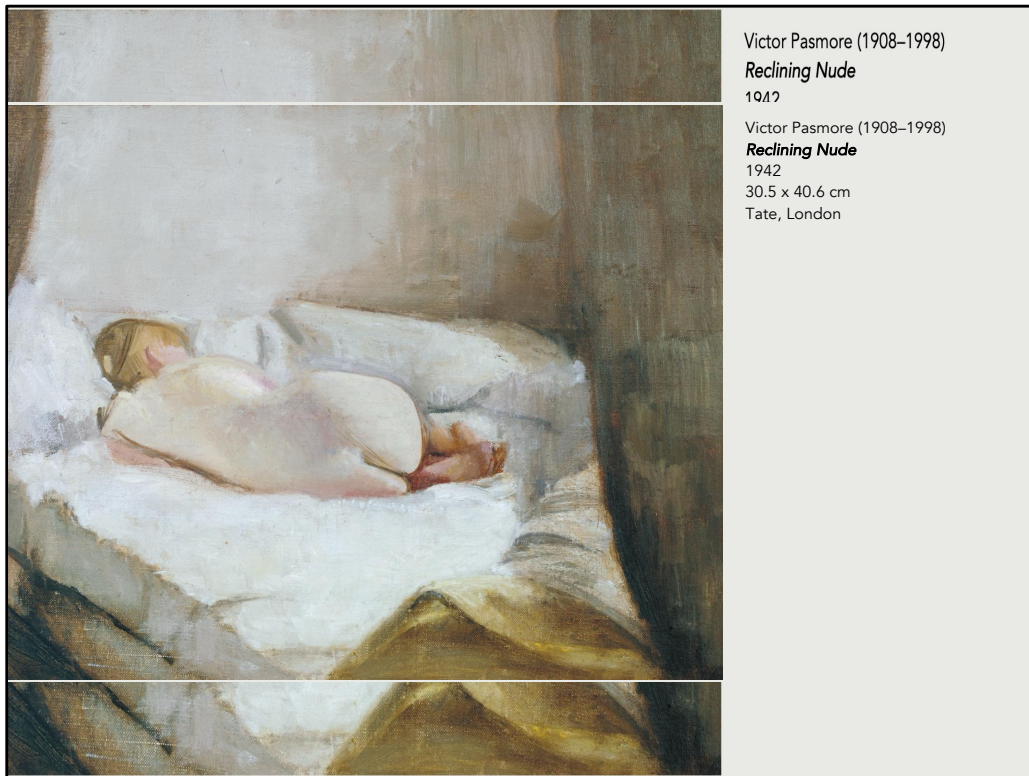
Pasmore was born in 1908 in Surrey and his early interest in painting was encouraged by his family. By 17 he was an enthusiastic amateur landscape painter. His father's death in 1926, when he was 18, prevented him from attending art college and he worked as a clerk at London County Council for

11 years attending evening art classes. His work from this period is intensely realistic.

He studied painting part-time at the Central School of Art and he was associated with the formation of the Euston Road School and the first exhibition of abstract art after the war. After experimenting with abstract art he painted a number of romantic, lyrical pictures of the Thames in the style of Turner and Whistler. He was also one of the leading figure painters of the early twentieth century. He was a conscientious objector during the Second World War but his application was refused and he was called up. He refused orders and was court martialled and sentenced to 123 days imprisonment. This qualified him to go to tribunal and this gave him an unconditional exemption from military service.

References

<http://carrickhill.sa.gov.au/the-story/artworks/british-artists/victor-pasmore-b-1908>



Victor Pasmore (1908–1998), *Reclining Nude*, 1942, 30.5 x 40.6 cm, Tate, London

That founding of the **Euston Road School** in **1937** alongside **Claude Rogers** and **William Coldstream** was, as we've seen, a declaration of intent: rigorous observation over expressive gesture. But the war shattered that collective project almost immediately. When the school closed in **1939**, Pasmore's situation became acutely personal. He registered as a conscientious objector, was forcibly enlisted, imprisoned, and ultimately discharged — a sequence that placed him entirely outside the mainstream of wartime Britain. What followed was a retreat into the domestic. He married fellow artist **Wendy Blood** in **1940**, and the paintings he made of their shared life together are among the most quietly affecting works of his career. Where the Euston Road doctrine had emphasised detachment and objectivity, these small, intimate studies of Wendy are soft and unhurried — the Vermeer-ish gravity we noticed in his still lifes now turned toward a living presence. The contrast with the violence outside is not incidental; it is the point. This portrait of **Wendy Pasmore** embodies

that mood exactly. The parted curtains frame her as something glimpsed rather than displayed — a private moment made visible, not a public statement. The palette stays warm and restrained, the mood resolutely tender.

Notes

In 1937 Pasmore was instrumental in setting up the Euston Road School of Painting, with two other painters, Claude Rogers and William Coldstream. The purpose of the Euston Road School was to teach traditional disciplines and the adoption of an objective approach to the chosen subject.

When war started in 1939 the Euston Road School where he had been teaching closed. He registered as a conscientious objector, but was forcibly enlisted, imprisoned and discharged. He met and married fellow artist Wendy Blood in 1940, and began a series of small intimate studies of her and their life together. These paintings of his domestic life are soft, delicate and calm, in total contrast to the violence of wartime events.

This is one of them and it presents Wendy Pasmore in a quiet and intimate manner, with the parted curtains adding to the private nature of the scene.



Victor Pasmore (1908–1998)
The Quiet River: The Thames at Chiswick
1943–4
76.2 x 101.6 cm
Tate, London

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998), *The Quiet River: The Thames at Chiswick*, 1943–4, 76.2 x 101.6 cm, Tate, London

That tenderness toward Wendy and the domestic interior didn't confine Pasmore for long — by the mid-**1940s** his attention had shifted outdoors, to the Thames at **Chiswick**. The series of river views he made there places him consciously within a long tradition. **Turner** had found the Thames endlessly generative, and **Whistler's** nocturnes had shown how the same river could dissolve into tone and atmosphere rather than topography. Pasmore knew these precedents and worked with them in mind — less as homage than as a living conversation with painters who had taught him to look. What he found at Chiswick was, on the face of it, unpromising. The stretch of riverbank he painted was industrial territory, dominated by a vitamin factory whose smell was, by all accounts, difficult to ignore. Yet the paintings give nothing of that away. A horse and cart drifts through a softly diffused light; the atmosphere is almost rural in its quiet. The dark mass at the right edge of the composition is the factory roof, but Pasmore allows it no industrial menace — it simply anchors the tonal structure. **The Tate**

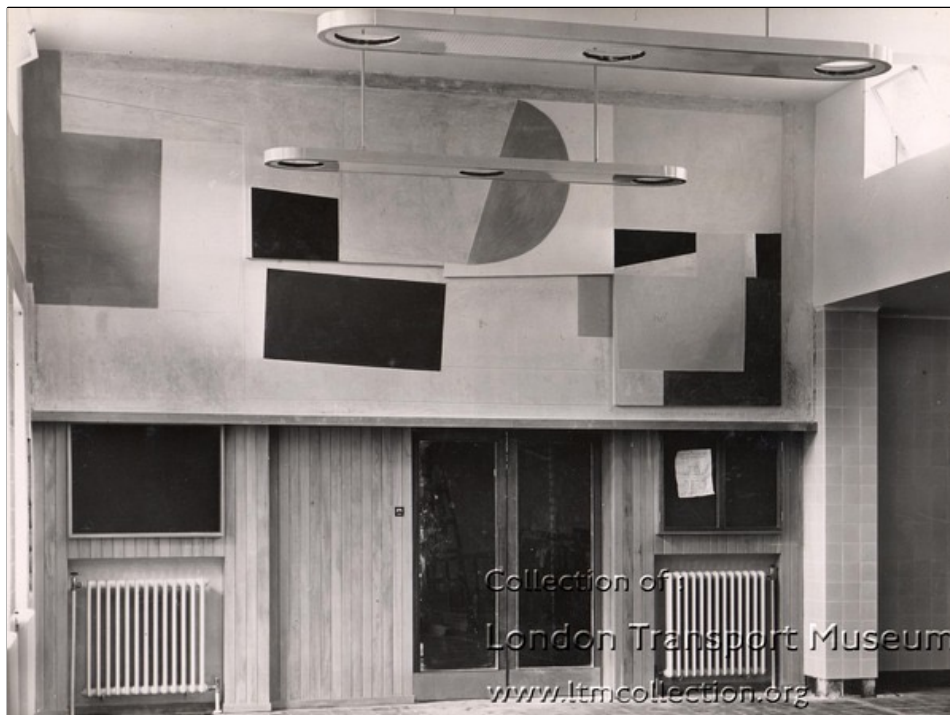
notes the deliberate tension here: the scene's romantic atmosphere actively contradicts the material reality beneath it. That contradiction is precisely what makes the series so interesting.

Notes

"In the mid-1940s Pasmore painted a series of views of the Thames at Chiswick. In doing so he was following a tradition which goes back to nineteenth century painters, including Turner and Whistler. Pasmore was aware of these precedents when he worked on the series and, like those artists, concentrated on the subtle light variations and the atmosphere of the scene. The timeless romanticism of the diffused light and the horse and cart belie the reality of the place, which was then an industrial area: the dark form on the right is the roof of an especially odorous vitamin factory." (Tate)

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/pasmore-abstract-in-white-green-black-blue-red-grey-and-pink-t11978/text-summary>



Victor Pasmore (1908–1998)

Mural, canteen at Kingston bus garage

1950

Mural

Kingston bus garage, Kingston upon Thames

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998), Mural, canteen at Kingston bus garage, 1950, Kingston bus garage, Kingston upon Thames

The romantic atmosphere of those Thames paintings makes what happened next feel almost like a rupture. In **1948**, Pasmore made a total commitment to abstraction — not a gradual drift, but a decisive break that shocked many who had admired his earlier work. The catalyst came largely from **Charles Biederman** and **Ben Nicholson**, whose constructivist thinking redirected Pasmore toward relief collages and eventually three-dimensional structures. The move brought him into alignment with the British Constructivist circle, and his public profile shifted accordingly. In **1950** he designed an abstract mural for a bus depot in **Kingston upon Thames**, and the following year contributed a mural to the **Festival of Britain**, one of the most visible platforms the Constructivists received. His influence on British art education proved equally lasting. From **1954** he led the art course at **King's College, Durham**, developing a foundational curriculum modelled on the **Bauhaus** basic course — a programme that became the template for art and design education across the country. Durham

also gave Pasmore proximity to **Richard Hamilton**, whom he brought in as a teaching colleague in Newcastle. He supported Hamilton's landmark **1956** exhibition **This Is Tomorrow**, contributing a constructivist structure — an early act of institutional backing for an artist who would go on to reshape British culture entirely.

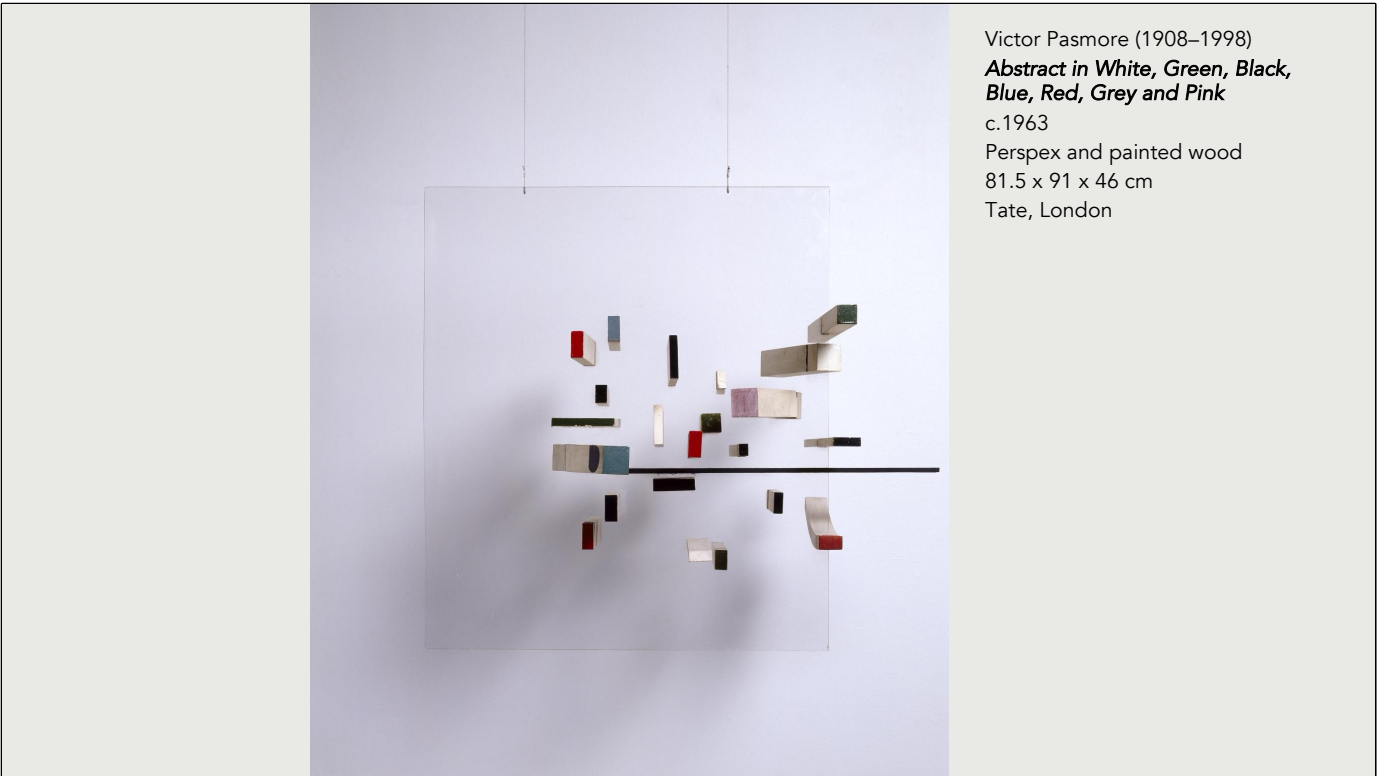
Notes

In 1948 Pasmore reached a watershed. At this time he made a total commitment to abstraction, with constructional collages influenced by Charles Biederman and Ben Nicholson. This developed into an interest in architecture, and he was appointed consultant director of urban design for Peterlee New Town, 1955-1957. Durham University appointed him master of painting in 1955.

In 1950, he was commissioned to design an abstract mural for a bus depot in Kingston upon Thames and the following year Pasmore contributed a mural to the Festival of Britain that promoted a number of the British Constructivists.

From 1954 to 1961 he was leader of the art course of Kings College, Durham where he developed a course inspired by the 'basic course' of the Bauhaus that became the model for higher arts education across the UK. As a result he has had a major influence on art teaching in Britain.

Pasmore was a supporter of fellow artist Richard Hamilton, giving him a teaching job in Newcastle and contributing a constructivist structure to the exhibition This Is Tomorrow.

The image shows a sculpture by Victor Pasmore. It consists of a large, square, transparent Perspex sheet suspended from the ceiling by two thin wires. A horizontal black line is attached to the center of the sheet. Various small, rectangular wooden blocks of different sizes are attached to this line and the sheet itself. The smaller ends of these blocks are painted in various colors: red, green, black, blue, grey, and pink. The sculpture is displayed against a plain, light-colored wall.

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998)
**Abstract in White, Green, Black,
Blue, Red, Grey and Pink**
c.1963
Perspex and painted wood
81.5 x 91 x 46 cm
Tate, London

Victor Pasmore (1908–1998), *Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink*, c.1963, 81.5 x 91 x 46 cm, Tate, London

The work on this slide marks the logical endpoint of the journey the previous slide described. **Abstract in White, Green, Black, Blue, Red, Grey and Pink**, made in **1957**, is a large transparent **Perspex** sheet suspended from the ceiling, pierced by twenty-three wooden blocks whose smaller ends are painted in the colours named in the title. It is simultaneously painting, sculpture, and architecture. Pasmore had worked out the theoretical basis for this in **1954**, arguing that abstract works assert their status as real objects, whereas representational works merely refer to objects outside themselves. Because painting is two-dimensional, it cannot fully make that claim — the abstract work must therefore become sculpture to enter into genuine relationship with real space. The Perspex sheet functions as a kind of framing canvas, but one the viewer can see through, dissolving the boundary between the object and its surroundings. His **1961** article in the **Sunday Times** stated the ambition directly: "Whereas in representational art the spectator is confined to a point which is always

at a distance from the object, in abstract form he must handle, feel, move around and get into the work if he is to fully apprehend the intentions of the artist." **Herbert Read** called this new direction "the most revolutionary event in post-war British art."

Notes

This work is a large, abstract relief sculpture suspended from the ceiling at the Tate. It is a transparent Perspex sheet pierced by 23 long wooden blocks with their smaller ends painted in the colours listed in the title.

In 1954 Pasmore explained that abstract stress their status as real objects whereas representational works refer to objects other than themselves. In addition, as paintings are two-dimensional an abstract painting cannot fully participate in this role of 'abstract work as real object'. So abstract works must become sculptures in order to fully enter into their relationship with real space. This explains the relief work in his paintings and in this work the Perspex sheet acts as a type of canvas to frame the work while allowing it to become fully three-dimensional. Pasmore went on to say,

"Whereas in representational art the spectator is confined to a point which is always at a distance from the object, in abstract form he must handle, feel, move around and get into the work if he is to fully apprehend the intentions of the artist." (Victor Pasmore, 'What is Abstract Art?', Sunday Times, 5 February 1961, p.21.)

In the 1950s and 60s Pasmore and others were involved in 'constructivist' art which did not involve carving or modelling but required the artist to assemble the work as if it were the three-dimensional equivalent of a two-dimensional collage.

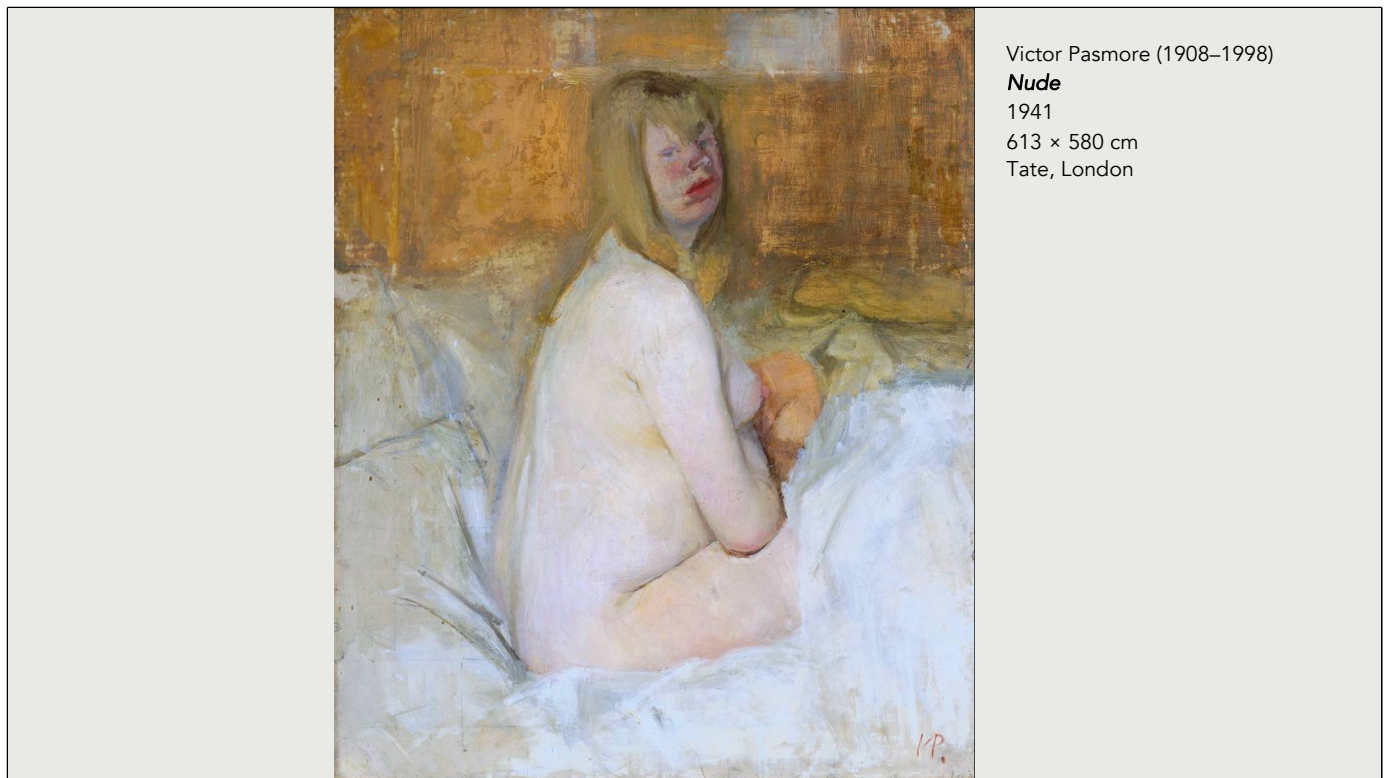
In 1983, he was elected to the Royal Academy.

Pasmore was a leading figure in the promotion of abstract art and reform of the fine art education system. From 1943–1949, he taught at Camberwell School of Art. Beginning in 1947, he developed a purely abstract style under the influence of Ben Nicholson becoming a leading figure of the revival of interest in Constructivism. Herbert Read described Pasmore's new style as "The most revolutionary event in post-war British art".

References

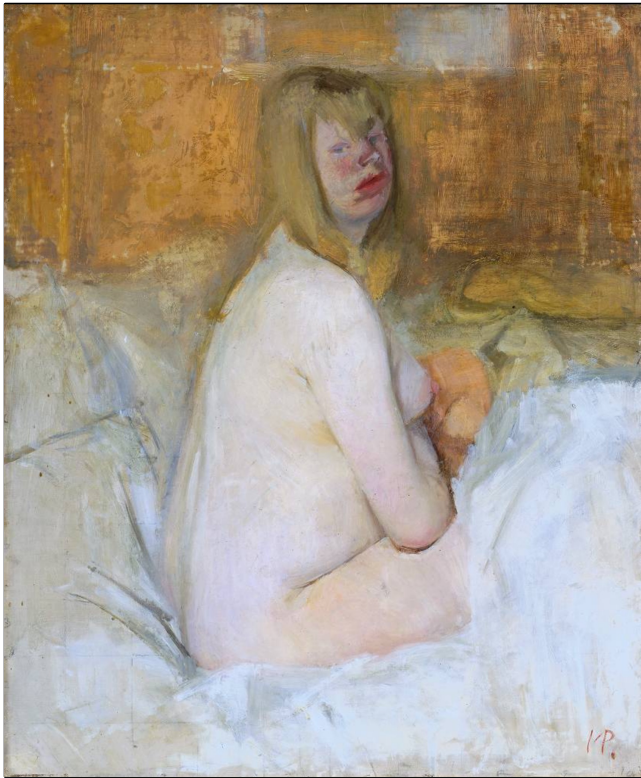
<http://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-liverpool/exhibition/victor-pasmore-changing-process-painting>

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/pasmore-abstract-in-white-green-black-blue-red-grey-and-pink-t11978/text-summary>



Viktor Pasmore (1908–1998), *Nude*, 1941, 613 × 580, Tate, London

I got side-tracked into some non-figurative art as I have not recorded a separate talk on Pasmore and I wanted to show you his range. However, for the final work I return to this figurative work from 1941. It is his pregnant wife Wendy. The just detectable squaring-up marks and the precisely located bodily contours recall the accurate observation of the Euston Road School artists. Although parts are carefully calculated other parts, such as the bedclothes show a freedom of touch. The clarity of the figure recalls the nineteenth-century French painter Ingres, whose image Pasmore included in a later painting of a nude. Here, he was also painting in reaction to a nude by Renoir - 'I thought I'd do the subject, but without the sloppy sentiment. I thought I'd do someone in the family way, just sitting on a bed'.



52-08B BRITISH FIGURATIVE ART (PART 2)

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Victor Pasmore
Nude
1941
Tate, London

Nine artists, one century: from Sargent's Edwardian swagger through Sickert's painterly intelligence, Gwen John's austere inwardness, Augustus John's social magnetism, Laura Knight's hard-won institutional firsts, Orpen's morally serious war record, Bomberg's brilliant, neglected radicalism, and Spencer's unflinching self-scrutiny, to Pasmore's startling conversion to abstraction. British figurative painting emerges not as a retreat from modernism but as its living centre — restless, contested, and consistently concerned with the reality of individual human experience.



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