

COURTAULD INSTITUTE OF ART

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Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes

The paintings of the female nude produced by Walter Sickert (1860-1942) in and around Camden Town between 1905 and 1912 are among the artist's most significant contributions to 20th century British art. *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* will take place at the Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery, Somerset House, London WC2, from **25 October 2007 to 20 January 2008**, and brings together a selection of over twenty-five of his finest canvases and related drawings from public and private collections to provide the first major account of his reinvention of the nude as a subject for modern painting. It is the first of three exhibitions which celebrate the Courtauld Institute of Art's 75th anniversary.

The exhibition will explore the ways in which Sickert developed an uncompromisingly realist approach to the nude in order to address major social and artistic concerns of the early 20th century. His four famously enigmatic Camden Town Murder paintings will be brought together for the first time as the most powerful expression of his fascination with the darker aspects of urban life in Edwardian London.

In his 1910 essay, 'The naked and the nude', Sickert claimed that the subject of the nude had become so idealised in contemporary art as to have lost all basis in reality. He argued that "the modern flood of representations of vacuous images dignified by the name of the Nude, represents an artistic and intellectual bankruptcy". Sickert described the nudes typically shown at the Royal Academy and Paris Salon as "obscene monsters".

The exhibition begins with examples of Sickert's earliest treatments of the nude, such as *The Rose Shoe*, c. 1902-05, probably produced whilst living in Neuville in Normandy, and the remarkable pastel, *Le Lit de Fer* (The Iron Bed), c. 1905, one of the first nudes he exhibited publicly. These works show his early concern for integrating the nude figure within a grittily real interior, sparsely furnished with an iron bedstead. (figs. 1 & 2)

Following his return from France in 1905 to settle in London, Sickert set up various studios in the cheap lodging houses of Camden Town which would form the settings for his most adventurous nudes, such as *La Hollandaise* and *The Iron Bedstead*. The uncompromising poses and the raw quality of Sickert's brushwork imbue these figures with an insistent sense of reality that many critics found disquieting. Rather than the familiar treatment of the unclothed figure as an abstracted ideal of beauty, Sickert's nudes appeared to be naked women in real contemporary settings. (figs. 5 & 4)

These scenes were also charged with uncomfortable social meanings. Sickert's shabby interiors were unmistakable to contemporary viewers as the dark realms of London's poorest working classes. His nudes played unflinchingly to middle class fears of such 'dens of iniquity', known as the notorious haunts of prostitutes, slum landlords and petty criminals. But Sickert also stimulated middle class fascination with such subjects, his 'keyhole' vantage points implicating the viewer as a voyeuristic spectator. Although he staged these scenes in his various studios in the area, the effect of Sickert's treatment of the subject was to blur the boundaries of artifice and reality.

His ambition to create realist nudes achieved profound expression around 1908 with a group of four canvases which are known as the Camden Town Murder paintings; they include *L’Affaire de Camden Town* and *The Camden Town Murder*. In 1907 a young prostitute called Emily Dimmock was found murdered in bed at her lodging house. The image of the Camden bed-sitter as a place of moral corruption and danger was propelled into the popular consciousness. Sickert’s paintings of such interiors took on heightened significance as he – along with the rest of the country – followed the case avidly in the popular press. (figs. 8 & 7)

The Camden Town Murder paintings introduced an unsettling clothed male figure into the composition. The relationship between the figures is ambiguous and Sickert gave them various alternative titles such as *What shall we do for rent?* or *Summer Afternoon*, often changing the names for different exhibitions. (fig. 7) These are not images of the murder in any straightforward sense but are open to numerous different interpretations which toy with the idea of meaning and narrative in art. An area of the exhibition is devoted to a selection of working drawings for these paintings which reveal Sickert’s remarkable practice of exploring different narrative possibilities before arriving at the final image. *Conversation*, 1909, (a close study for the painting *L’Affaire de Camden Town*) shows a clothed female who was transformed into the threatening figure of a man in the final canvas. (figs. 9 & 8)

Sickert’s paintings certainly had the power to shock and confound, so much so that Fred Brown, Professor of Painting at the Slade School of Art, broke off his friendship with the artist because he found his work too sordid. However, Sickert’s virtuoso technique also won him great admiration and it was during this period that he became firmly established as one of the most important modern British painters of his age.

The exhibition concludes with works from around 1912, such as *Jack Ashore*, which effectively mark the culmination of his profound engagement with the nude and its pictorial and narrative possibilities. In just over five years Sickert had produced a body of work which, as the exhibition will demonstrate, revitalised the possibilities of the genre and which can now be seen as a seminal moment in the history of modern British painting. His influence continues to be felt in the work of artists such as Frank Auerbach and Lucien Freud.

The exhibition is conceived in memory of the late Lillian Browse, the author of the first important monographs on Sickert, whose major gift to the Courtauld included several works by the artist such as the important early *Mornington Crescent Nude*, 1905. (fig. 6)

Notes to Editors

Walter Sickert (1860-1942) is considered one of Britain’s greatest modern painters. He established his reputation during the 1880s and 1890s as one of a group of artists who pioneered the Impressionist movement in England. He was an assistant of Whistler’s and later worked in France where he was a friend of Degas, sharing with the latter a realist’s commitment to painting unconventional subjects drawn from modern life. Sickert was encouraged to return to London in 1905 by a younger generation of progressive artists with whom he would later found The Camden Town Group, England’s first 20th century avant-garde. The group’s name reflected Sickert’s fascination with this seedy and sometimes dangerous area of North London where he lived and worked. It was in Camden Town that Sickert believed the artist could experience real life and find authentic modern subjects which engaged the painter’s powers of observation and expression.

FACT SHEET

- Exhibition title:** *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes*
- Dates:** 25 October 2007 to 20 January 2008
- Supported by:** The estate of Lillian Browse
Friends of the Courtauld Institute of Art
Nicholas and Judith Goodison
Offer Waterman & Co
- Location:** Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery
Somerset House, Strand, London WC2R 0RN
Tel. +44 (0)20 7848 2526, fax. +44 (0)20 7848 2589
www.courtauld.ac.uk
- Opening hours:** Daily 10 am to 6 pm, last admission 5.30 pm
- Admission:** Included in admission to permanent collection:
Adult: £5.00, concessions: £4.00; free admission: Mondays 10 am to 2 pm
Free at all times for under 18s, full-time UK students and unwaged
Joint ticket with one other collection at Somerset House: £1.00 discount
Joint ticket with two other collections: £2.00 discount
- Curator:** Dr Barnaby Wright, Courtauld Institute of Art Gallery
- Related Display:** The exhibition will be complemented by a display of drawings and prints of figure subjects by Sickert from the Courtauld Gallery collection. The works span various periods of the artist's long career and demonstrate his remarkable versatility as a draughtsman and his keen eye for capturing the personality and social type of his sitters.
- Catalogue:** A fully illustrated catalogue accompanies the exhibition including essays by the exhibition's curator Dr Barnaby Wright, Dr Wendy Baron, the leading authority on Sickert's work, and Dr Lisa Tickner a specialist on 20th century British art and visiting professor at the Courtauld Institute of Art.
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