

From Holbein to Hockney: A Brief History of British Drawing and Painting



By Robert Priseman

From Holbein to Hockney: A Brief History of British Drawing and Painting

This introduction to the story of British art explores how drawing and painting in the United Kingdom began rooted in Christian subject matter and transformed after the Second World War to embrace an existentialist philosophy.

From Christianity to Existentialism

Painting in Britain can trace its traditions back to the early seventh century and the illumination of religious manuscripts by monks who worked anonymously in monasteries, and also to the medieval decoration of church walls with scenes from the Christian Bible. Then, quite suddenly, in 1526, everything changed when the German artist Hans Holbein the Younger moved to London, bringing with him the lessons of the European Renaissance. During the course of the next 17 years until his death in 1543, Holbein transformed the nature of artistic practice in Britain and set out a template for much of what has followed.

We can begin to understand what follows as two simple narratives. The first is how western art started its journey as a means to illustrate the stories of the New Testament, and then gradually, after Holbein, and most specifically after the First World War, largely abandoned Christianity to embrace the philosophy of existentialism. The second narrative is told in the shift from paint being employed as a material used to describe how people and places look to, instead becoming a substance which helps create metaphors to express how we feel about the world we live in.

In this essay we will follow these two interlinking ideas and begin to see how they are influenced by political events and then eventually combine to become one in the work of British artists in the late 20th century.

From Holbein to van Dyck

Like many of the greatest painters who have a place in the history of British art, Holbein was not born in the country, but came instead from mainland Europe. He first arrived in London in 1526 with a letter of introduction from the scholar Erasmus, and found patronage with the lawyer, statesman and councillor to King Henry VIII, Sir Thomas More. With his support Holbein spent the next two years producing portraits of More's family and circle of friends, as we can see in his sensitive drawing of More (c.1526-7) which was made shortly after his arrival *Fig. 1*. Like many of Holbein's drawings it has been produced in black and coloured chalks with a brown wash. Using a delicacy of line and minimum of information he has achieved a remarkable degree of accuracy in portraying the face of his sitter. This drawing



Fig 1. Sir Thomas More, c 1526-7, Hans Holbein the Younger

and another similar to it acted as the template for a painting. In the painting of More *Fig. 2* we can see Holbein's subject set against a green hanging curtain. He wears a golden chain of state around his neck, a black hat and coat with a fur collar and velvet sleeves. The lighting on More comes from a single source, is direct and helps to define the nature of the different textures and surfaces which Holbein has illustrated so elegantly. Like many artists working in Northern Europe at this time, Holbein had lived close to the centre of the Renaissance which had begun in Northern Italy. The major influence on Holbein was the Flemish Master Jan van Eyck (1390 – 1441) who had perfected a technique for oil painting based on a meticulous representation of the effects of light as it falls over both natural and man-made surfaces. The paint itself is applied in a flat, even manner with the same attention to detail being given to each square cm of the painting. In his painting of More, Holbein offers a representation of a man first and foremost as the office he holds, a man who has subjugated his own pleasures and desires in order to place the needs of those around him before his own. Yet on More's face we detect an expression which is so pensive it almost seems to prefigure his destiny, which was to be executed eight years later of high treason, for refusing on a point of principle to acknowledge King Henry VIII as the Supreme Head of the newly formed Church of England.

In 1528 Holbein moved to Basel, Switzerland, for a four year period of work. He returned to England in 1532, this time gaining the patronage of Anne Boleyn and Thomas Cromwell. 1532 was a turbulent year in British history, being the year Henry VIII sought a divorce from Catherine of Aragon in order to marry Anne Boleyn. In doing so, King Henry defied the Pope, established a new Church of England and declared himself a monarch appointed to reign directly by God. Among those opposed to Henry's actions was Sir Thomas More, who resigned as Lord Chancellor in protest. Holbein however seems to have distanced himself sufficiently from these events as he gained the position of court Painter to Henry VIII in 1535.

Holbein's greatest work, and possibly the greatest painting to have been produced in Britain is *The Ambassadors* (1533) *Fig. 3*. This is a life-sized portrait on a wooden panel of Jean de Dinteville, who was ambassador of Francis I, and Georges de Selve, who was Bishop of Lavaur, and it was painted in the year they visited London. In *The Ambassadors* we see Jean de Dinteville to our left and Georges de Selve to our right. Both men stand in front of a large curtain, their arms resting on a table which in turn has an oriental carpet draped over it. They face us directly, each with a benign expression. Carefully arranged on the table are a number of objects which include terrestrial and celestial globes, a quadrant, a torquetum, a polyhedral sundial and various musical instruments. Just behind the curtain at the top left hand side we see a small crucifix and stretched out in front of the ambassadors a large skull which has been painted in anamorphic perspective. The Ambassadors themselves stand on a cosmatic pavement, which was copied from one commissioned by Henry VIII for the altar at Westminster Abbey. The poses of the Ambassadors present an opening for us as a viewer to



Fig 2. Sir Thomas More, Oil on Oak, 74.2 x 59 cm, 1527, Hans Holbein the Younger



Fig. 3. The Ambassadors, Oil on Oak, 2.07 m x 2.10 m, 1533, Hans Holbein the Younger

take up a third position in the composition. In this way we approach the painting as a silent equal, forming a three without hierarchy.

Artists of the Renaissance, like van Eyck, Raphael and Michelangelo employed geometrical principles to help compose their paintings so that the mathematical order observed in the movement of the stars, which they believed was orchestrated by God, would in turn be reflected upon the earth. In this way, the adoption of the golden section rule, Fibonacci sequence and Euclidian geometry were engaged to mirror the divine order of heaven upon the world, which in turn placed the human actions depicted at the centre of a celestial symmetry. By placing his subjects on a cosmatic pavement, under a crucifix and surrounded by signs and instruments of man's mastery over the world, Holbein carefully places the two men before us as authorities of a physical earth which is in turn governed by the divine kingdom of heaven, and because we share their metaphoric space we know we are governed by these same rules too.

Holbein survived the demise of his first patron, but after Anne Boleyn was executed for adultery in 1536 and then Thomas Cromwell on charges of heresy and treason in 1540, he was left with a void no other patron could fill. Large scale paintings which have complex compositions such as *The Ambassadors* are beyond the capability of most artists to master, they are also time consuming and expensive to produce. Without the financial backing available Holbein turned to private commissions of small scale works which were cheap to produce and quick to complete. During this time he undertook some of his finest portrait miniatures such as those of Henry and Charles Brandon (1541) *Fig. 4 and 5*, who were the sons of the 1st Duke of Suffolk. Holbein died two years later and not much more happened in British art until the arrival of Nicholas Hilliard (1547 – 1619), who specialised in a style of portrait miniature painting very much in line with those Holbein had produced. Hilliard was born in the English town of Exeter, Devon, just 4 years after Holbein's death and 17 years before the birth of William Shakespeare (1564 – 1616). Like most artists of the time he found his patrons in the ranks of the rich and in 1599 secured an annual allowance from Queen Elizabeth I of £40 to work for her, and then in 1617 a monopoly to produce miniatures and engravings of her successor King James I. Until around 1400, the painting of portraits in Europe had been largely confined to icon paintings of Christ and the saints, but with the arrival of the Renaissance other representatives of the Church, including Popes, Bishops and their benefactors also began to have their likenesses represented by artists. Like icon paintings, miniatures are designed to be small enough to hold in the palm of your hand and easy to carry around while travelling.

Hilliard's portraits represent exquisite examples of miniature painting, as we can see in his *Young Man Among Roses* (c. 1585-95) *Fig. 6*. This work, possibly of Robert Deveraux, 2nd Earl of Essex, presents us with a beautiful image of a tall, handsome man, leaning against a tree. Elegantly dressed in the fashions of the time, he stands encircled by a bush of white



Fig. 4. Henry Brandon, Watercolour on vellum, 5.6 cm (Support diameter), c.1541, Hans Holbein the Younger



Fig. 5. Charles Brandon, Watercolour on vellum, 5.6 cm (Support diameter), c.1541, Hans Holbein the Younger



Fig. 6. Young Man Among Roses, possibly Robert Devereux, 2nd Earl of Essex, c.1585-95, Nicholas Hilliard



Fig. 7. Portrait of a Woman, Vellum laid on card, 2.7 cm, c.1590, Nicholas Hilliard

roses, looking wistfully out of the picture at us, his right hand placed over his heart, indicating an attachment to an unseen loved one. It is an image which has come to symbolise a romantic vision of Shakespeare's England.

When painting a portrait Hilliard usually painted the whole face in the presence of his sitter, probably in no more than two sittings. He kept a number of pre-primed flesh-coloured blank surfaces ready prepared in order to save time, worked with a fine pointed squirrel-hair brush and often exploited the tiny shadows cast by thick dots of paint to help give a three-dimensional quality to pearls and lace, as we can see in *Portrait of a Woman* (c.1590) Fig. 7. Yet as good a painter as he was, Hilliard's heights still only represent Holbein's lows. Hilliard died in 1619, three years after the death of Shakespeare and a year before the Flemish artist Anthony van Dyck (1599 – 1641) made his first visit to London to work for King James I. After his visit van Dyck remained in touch with the English court and in 1632 the new King of England, Charles I persuaded him to relocate to London permanently. Once there van Dyck was knighted and offered a pension of £200 a year to work as a painter to the King.

Charles I believed that he had been appointed directly by God to govern, because he believed all the kings of England had a divine right to rule. As a consequence he thought he could reign according to his own conscience. However, many people in England opposed his conviction, especially when it came hand in hand with high taxes to help finance war. In an effort to assert his view of himself as anointed by God, King Charles I employed painting as a means to affirm his elevated view of the monarchy to the population at large, a role which van Dyck became central to. Altogether van Dyck painted around forty portraits of King Charles, many of which were produced in several versions so they could be offered as diplomatic gifts to supporters of the monarchy.

Undertaking these commissions enabled van Dyck to develop a style which combined a sense of direct authority with a laid back sophistication, a mode of portraiture which came to dominate English painting until the end of the 18th century. In van Dyck's picture *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* (c.1637-8) Fig. 8 we see an important example of this new form which shows Charles riding a large horse as if he is leading his knights into battle. Dressed in armour, the king holds the commander's baton in his right hand with the medallion of a Garter Sovereign around his neck. He looks ahead as if completely unaware of our presence, because more important matters occupy his mind. Unlike the portrait of Jean de Dinteville and Georges de Selve in Holbein's *The Ambassadors*, Charles is not painted as one of us, subject as we are to the laws which govern the universe, he is instead offered as a being above us in an intellectual, spiritual and very physical way. Presented as anointed by God, he is displayed as our superior. Yet as a means of propaganda it failed in its aim to assert the absolute authority of the monarchy over his kingdom. Van Dyck died in 1641 and the



Fig. 8. Equestrian Portrait of Charles I, Oil on canvas, 367 x 292.1 cm, c. 1637-8, Anthony van Dyck

following year civil war broke out in England after Parliament refused to accept the absolute authority of Charles I any further.

The Dawn of a New Age for Painting in Britain

Whilst the period immediately following van Dyck's life was remarkable as a period of political turmoil, resulting as it did in Charles I's execution in 1649, it was unremarkable in terms of artistic output. Yet by the time the mid 1700's arrive we begin to witness the dawn of a new age for painting in Britain. At this time we see a flowering of talent with the appearance of artists as diverse as Blake, Fuseli, Gainsborough, Hogarth, Raeburn, Ramsay, Reynolds, Stubbs and Wright and the foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768. It is perhaps not surprising that art in the newly formed United Kingdom of England, Scotland and Wales took off at this point, because art always flourishes under the influence of wealth and during these years we see Britain emerge as a global superpower with the establishment of international trade and a powerful navy to help protect its interests. The first President of the Royal Academy was Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792) who worked primarily as a society portrait painter with many of the people who shaped Britain at this time becoming his sitters.

Just as Holbein set out the artistic template which Hilliard followed, so van Dyck defined the approach to painting taken by Reynolds and many of his contemporaries. The influence van Dyck exerts is easily discernible in the portrait Reynolds painted of *Viscount Keppel* (1779) *Fig. 9* which offers us a typical example. Just as with King Charles I, so Keppel is presented as our superior, a man of authority, an officer who has reached the end of a distinguished career in the Royal Navy. Viscount Keppel had fought both the Seven Years' War and the War of American Independence before becoming First Lord of the Admiralty. He can be seen wearing a powdered wig, holding the hilt of a sword and displaying a stomach which has grown fat from a life of indulgence and privilege. The angle of view we observe displays Keppel in an elevated position, and from this he looks down on us. The background behind him, similar to that in the *Equestrian Portrait of Charles I* is dark and painterly. It represents a vague outdoors scene and is handled with more expressiveness than the figure itself, because while the portraits of van Dyck and Reynolds were always painted directly from life in the studio, their backgrounds were filled in using sketches and the imagination afterwards.

As well as being a painter Reynolds also became an art theorist and between 1769 and 1790 he wrote a series of 'Discourses' which outlined his thinking on the arts and which he delivered in a series of lectures to his students. In his 11th 'Discourse' he wrote "It may be remarked that the impression which is left in our mind, even of things which are familiar to us, is seldom more than their general effect; beyond which we do not look in recognising such objects. To express this in painting, is to express what is congenial and natural to the mind of man, and what gives him by reflection his own mode of conceiving." In other words, painting,



Fig. 9. Viscount Keppel, Oil on canvas, 127 × 101.5 cm, 1779, Sir Joshua Reynolds

for Reynolds, when it operates at its highest level, ignores detail and strives to portray images as we see them in our minds' eye.

A New Sensibility

Towards the end of the eighteenth century new ideas around the sublime experienced as feelings of awe in the sight of nature were beginning to emerge, in part as a reaction to the industrial revolution. These ideas began to be explored in Northern European art by the romantics and in Britain by, amongst others, John Constable (1776 – 1837). Born in East Bergholt, Suffolk, Constable is best known for the paintings he produced of the landscape close to his home which is known as the Dedham Vale.

Little appreciated in the country of his birth, Constable only managed to sell 20 paintings in England during his lifetime, yet this picture isn't a completely bleak one. Whilst on a visit to London in 1821, the French artist Théodore Géricault saw Constable's painting *The Hay Wain* (1821) *Fig. 10* and was so impressed by it that he championed the work in Paris. On hearing about the painting the French dealer John Arrowsmith bought *The Hay Wain*, and three other works by Constable. *The Hay Wain* was subsequently exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1824 where it won a gold medal.

Constable's work had been considered problematic in Britain because it rebelled against the artistic culture of the period which, as outlined in Joshua Reynolds's 11th Discourse, taught artists to use their imagination to compose their pictures rather than study directly from nature itself. Instead, Constable painted many full-scale preliminary sketches directly from the landscape, along with numerous observational studies of clouds such as *Study of Cirrus Clouds* (c. 1822) *Fig. 11*. He did this in order to gain a more accurate approach to his recording of nature and atmospheric conditions, so that his finished paintings might move away from a presentation of how we should view the wealthy and our place in society in relationship to them, and instead to a truthful vision of the world and how we all share in that experience equally. This philosophy and his exposure in Paris inspired a generation of young French painters who included Théodore Rousseau, Jean-François Millet, and Charles-François Daubigny to establish the Barbizon School. The school followed Constable's methodology, abandoned formalism and drew directly from the environment to form the subjects of their paintings, rather than use the landscape as a backdrop to staged events as van Dyck, Reynolds and Gainsborough had done before. Despite this, Constable refused invitations to France where he could further promote his work, saying he would rather remain a poor man in England than a rich one overseas. We can see from this reception that Constable became the first British artist to exert an influence outside of the United Kingdom and he did so by establishing his own philosophical approach to what painting can mean to us.

In 1816, Constable married his childhood sweetheart Maria Elizabeth Bicknell whose



Fig. 10. The Hay Wain, Oil on canvas, 130.2 x 185.4 cm, 1821, John Constable



Fig. 11. Study of Cirrus Clouds, Oil on paper, c.1822, John Constable



Fig. 12. The Cornfield, Oil on canvas, 143 x 122 cm, 1826, John Constable

grandfather was rector of East Bergholt. His love of his native Suffolk and religious background influences are illustrated beautifully by *The Cornfield* (1826) Fig. 12 which is on display at the National Gallery in London. Like many great paintings it can be interpreted in a number of different ways. Constable himself referred to it as *The Drinking Boy* and in the bottom left-hand side of the picture we see a small brook. By the brook a boy lies on his stomach, he is wearing a red waistcoat, blue scarf and white shirt, his face is immersed in the water he drinks. Behind him stand a dog and sheep who are being herded up a lane, ready to pass through a gate to a cornfield which gives the painting its title. Beyond the gate walks a man wearing a black hat, red scarf and white shirt, with two further men working a distant field in the background, on the horizon to the rear of them stands a church. The boy, the gate, the man in the field and the church are drawn along a straight axis which gives us a cause to read this painting as a narrative of life which moves from childhood, to adulthood and then ultimately to death and the final resting place of the graveyard. The sheep remind us of the Christian flock and the brook of the cleansing act of baptism, whilst the gate appears to act as the threshold between the innocence of youth on the one hand and the experience of the adult world on the other, with its axis helping establish a cruciform composition. The gate itself hangs off its hinges, indicating that we lose something as we gain experience. As with all of his mature works, the paint is applied in a heavy gestural manner and the close observations he applied directly from life to the depiction of nature help bind the subject of his composition to a greater degree of visual reality. For Constable, this heightened reality is aligned to a portrayal of a greater 'truth' about our experiences and place in the world.

In his work Constable represents a cross-roads in our story, because on the one hand he demonstrates a Christian underpinning to his painting whilst also offering what appears to be a highly personalised view of the landscape, in which he presents the power of nature as a reflection of the energy and unpredictability of our own emotions.

The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood

In 1848, some eleven years after the death of John Constable, a new group of English painters comprised of William Holman Hunt, John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti also decided to stand against fashions being advanced by the Royal Academy of Arts. What they rejected specifically were the influences of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the promotion of the work of the Italian Renaissance artist Raphael. Later joined in their stance by William Michael Rossetti, James Collinson, Frederic George Stephens and Thomas Woolner they formed the seven-member Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood, whose name refers directly to the groups' rejection of what it considered to be an overly prescriptive approach adopted by the Mannerist artists who emerged shortly after Raphael and the Italian High Renaissance.

The Pre-Raphaelites were further inspired by the theories of the English art critic John Ruskin (1819 – 1900), to “go to nature”, believing that an art founded on serious subjects should be



Fig. 13. Ophelia, Oil on canvas, 76 x 111 cm, 1851-2, Sir John Everett Millais

produced with maximum realism. Initially their themes were religious, but they also explored modern social problems and found inspiration in literature and poetry. Perhaps best known amongst the group is Sir John Everett Millais (1829 – 1896) and his 1851-2 masterpiece *Ophelia*, Fig. 13 typifies the beliefs and approach the group took. Ophelia is the daughter of Polonius in Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* (1603), and the scene Millais depicts is from Act IV, Scene VII, in which Ophelia, driven out of her mind when her father is murdered by her lover Hamlet, goes and drowns herself in a stream. This is not witnessed on stage, but is instead referred to in a conversation between Queen Gertrude and Ophelia's brother Laertes, with Gertrude describing how Ophelia fell into a river while out picking flowers and slowly drowned whilst lost in song.

Millais presents us with this unstaged tragedy, depicting Ophelia half submerged in a dark stream. Her eyes look up towards the heavens, her mouth half open, perhaps still singing. Around her neck a string of blue flowers and in her right hand a small bouquet slips from her grasp. She wears a grey dress which has trapped some air; this allows her to temporarily float before it will pull her down for good. Behind Ophelia lies a fallen willow tree, its leaves brush the surface of the water and in its branches sit a robin, which, like Ophelia, appears to be engrossed in song. Ophelia has become a metaphorical receptacle for Hamlet's distress, a vessel to hold his grief. In to Ophelia the fluid nature of Hamlet's feelings have been poured, and then, like tears, the stream has washed away their sorrow.

True to his ambitions, Millais painted the background to *Ophelia* directly from life, using the Hogsmill River at Ewell in Surrey as the setting for the subject. His model was 19 year old Elizabeth Siddal who he also painted from life, posed fully clothed in a bathtub full of water at his London studio. This dedication to detail is heightened by the use of vivid colours which seeks to amplify the reality of the work to a level which is well beyond the imagination. As with Constable, Millais adherence to accuracy is a striving for a 'universal truth' which is reached through a detached observance of people and places, and the truth Millais painting attempts to show us is not really about the way water flows, branches hang and bodies float, but instead that we have no control over how we feel, only an ability to make decisions on how we behave in the light of our state of mind. These actions in turn have an impact on the lives of others and it is the metaphorical interpretation of what this emotional impact contains which lies at the heart of this masterpiece.

Tragedy inflicted upon the body of the individual who is affected by events outside of their control is a theme which comes to dominate 20th century painting in Britain. Yet where Millais and the Pre-Raphaelites used an intensified colour palette to adhere to reality, the painters of the following generation sought to achieve the same ends by opposite means, abandoning the vivid use of colour and close attention to detail altogether. Their precursor was Walter Sickert (1860 – 1942) who was born in Munich, Germany and moved with his family to London when he was 8 years old. When he was 23 years old Sickert travelled to



Fig. 14. Jack the Ripper's Bedroom, Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 40.7 cm, c.1907, Walter Sickert



Fig. 15. La Hollandaise, Oil on canvas, 51 x 40 cm, c.1906, Walter Richard



Fig. 16. La Coiffure, Pastel on paper, 71 x 55 cm, 1905-6, Walter Richard Sickert

Paris where he met Edgar Degas (1834 – 1917), whose use of photography, close cropped composition and emphasis on drawing exerted a significant influence on him. Following this Sickert chose to paint only in the studio, working from drawings, photographs and memory as an escape from what he described as “the tyranny of nature”. On this foundation he developed a personal version of French Impressionism which for him favoured earthy sombre colours and muted tones. In 1888 Sickert joined the New English Art Club in London, a group which was comprised of French influenced realist artists. It was also the same year that the five victims of the notorious murderer ‘Jack the Ripper’ were discovered in the East End. Sickert took a keen interest in the Ripper murders, believing he had lodged in a room used by the killer. This led him to produce a painting titled *Jack the Ripper’s Bedroom* (c. 1907) *Fig. 14* which depicts what appears to be a shadowy figure standing at the end of a dingy corridor looking through shuttered blinds. This darkest of subject matter was created as part of what has become known as his ‘Camden Town Series’ which were all produced between 1906 - 09. These paintings mostly feature portraits of middle aged women in their bedrooms, who were predominantly ‘fleshy’ and often presented either naked or semi-nude. They are portrayed as the opposite of youthful, glamorous and attractive, being rendered in subdued colours and set in gloomy interiors. This approach aligns a lack of colour with a lack of joy, and a lack of joy with a sense of stark reality. In his depiction of people in paintings such as *La Hollandaise* (c. 1906) *Fig. 15* and pastel drawings such as *La Coiffure* (1905-6) *Fig. 16*, we not only notice an absence of beauty but also see how Sickert has used the mediums of paint and pastel to obliterate his sitter’s faces, as though he wished to metaphorically erase his subjects. By removing himself from any kind of detached observance of detail, Sickert begins to set out a new agenda, which is an adherence to the reality of what he feels instead of what he sees.

Just before outbreak of the First World War, Sickert began to champion the avant-garde artists who were emerging in London at the time, including Lucien Pissarro, Jacob Epstein, Augustus John and Wyndham Lewis who had developed a style of British geometric abstraction which Ezra Pound titled Vorticism. From 1908 – 1912 and again from 1915 – 1918, Sickert taught at Westminster School of Art, where David Bomberg (1890 – 1957) was one of his students.

Post War Existentialism

Bomberg was born in the city of Birmingham, the seventh child of a Polish-Jewish immigrant leatherworker. He enjoyed considerable early success in the United Kingdom as one of the avant-garde painters closely allied to Wyndham Lewis and the British Vorticist movement. In this context, Bomberg produced a series of paintings which reduced the human figure to hard mechanical forms which were designed to express a dynamic vision of modern industrial life. However all this changed for him with the onset of the First World War. In 1915 Bomberg signed up to serve with the Royal Engineers, and his subsequent experiences at the Front brought about a profound shift in how he wished to continue his work as an artist.



Fig. 17. Jerusalem, Looking to Mount Scopus, Oil on canvas, 56 x 75 cm, 1925, David Bomberg



Fig. 18. San Justo, Toledo, Spain, Oil on canvas, 50.8 x 66 cm, 1929, David Bomberg



Fig. 19. Self Portrait, Oil on canvas, 77 x 56 cm, 1937, David Bomberg

After the Armistice of 1918 Bomberg's desire to paint man and machine in correlation as he had done before the war totally evaporated. He now wished to negate the traumas of conflict, and sought to separate man and machine in his work, returning instead to nature and the pursuit of painting directly from life. In this new mission he spent long periods travelling to Palestine and Spain where he undertook a series of highly representational and intricately observed paintings which resulted in works such as *Jerusalem looking to Mount Scopus* (1925) Fig. 17 and *San Justo, Toledo, Spain* (1929) Fig. 18. In *Jerusalem looking to Mount Scopus* we can see how the paint has been applied thickly, with a palette inclined towards bright and optimistic colours. The strong directional sunlight which issues from the top right of the landscape creates a photographic quality, yet this and his other paintings were produced from direct observation, and appear to result from a desire to see a post-war paradise free of suffering, a place of escape from the modernity he had previously embraced. These people-less landscapes were followed by a series of highly personal studies of his own face, again drawn from direct observation, which resulted in paintings such as *Self Portrait* (1937) Fig. 19, in the National Galleries of Scotland. Far less joyful and naturalistic than his landscapes, *Self Portrait* was created the year before Sigmund Freud fled Vienna to move to London and forms one of a series of paintings Bomberg produced of himself whilst living in Hampstead. The dark use of colour, lack of clear detail and thick application of paint in these compositions are reminiscent of Sickerts' 'Camden Town' series and appear to embrace the plasticity of paint as a metaphor for Bomberg's own internal emotions. At this time Bomberg had developed feelings of isolation and depression following the outbreak of civil war in Spain, the rise of anti-Semitism in Nazi Germany and a refusal by the Tate to purchase any of his paintings for their collection. Whilst *Self Portrait* appears to take a polar opposite approach to the working methods of Constable and Millais, he has sought to gaze at the surface of real life in order to reach a heightened perception. Yet in doing so he appears to have stared past the surface and disregarded the close depiction of accurate detail as a way of presenting a 'universal truth', and instead unearthed a 'personal truth', built on a reality of how he feels instead of how he sees. In this way Bomberg paints a sense of his subconscious self rather than the actuality of his outward appearance.

Although most of Bomberg's later paintings failed to sell, his existential almost nihilistic work has exerted a significant influence over many post-war British artists. Most especially his impact can be found in London with a small group of artists who came to know his work through the Borough Polytechnic where he taught. Two of his most important students were Frank Auerbach (b. 1931) and Leon Kossoff (b. 1926) who became key figures in what was to become known as 'The School of London'. This group also included Michael Andrews (1928 – 1995), Lucian Freud (1922 – 2011), R. B. Kitaj (1932 – 2007) and Francis Bacon (1909 – 1992). As a group the 'School of London' painters are mainly expatriate. Whilst Michael Andrews was born in Norfolk in the east of England, Frank Auerbach was born in Berlin, the son of a Jewish patent lawyer; he escaped to Britain from Nazi persecution in 1939 with almost 10,000 mainly Jewish children on the Kindertransport. R. B. Kitaj was

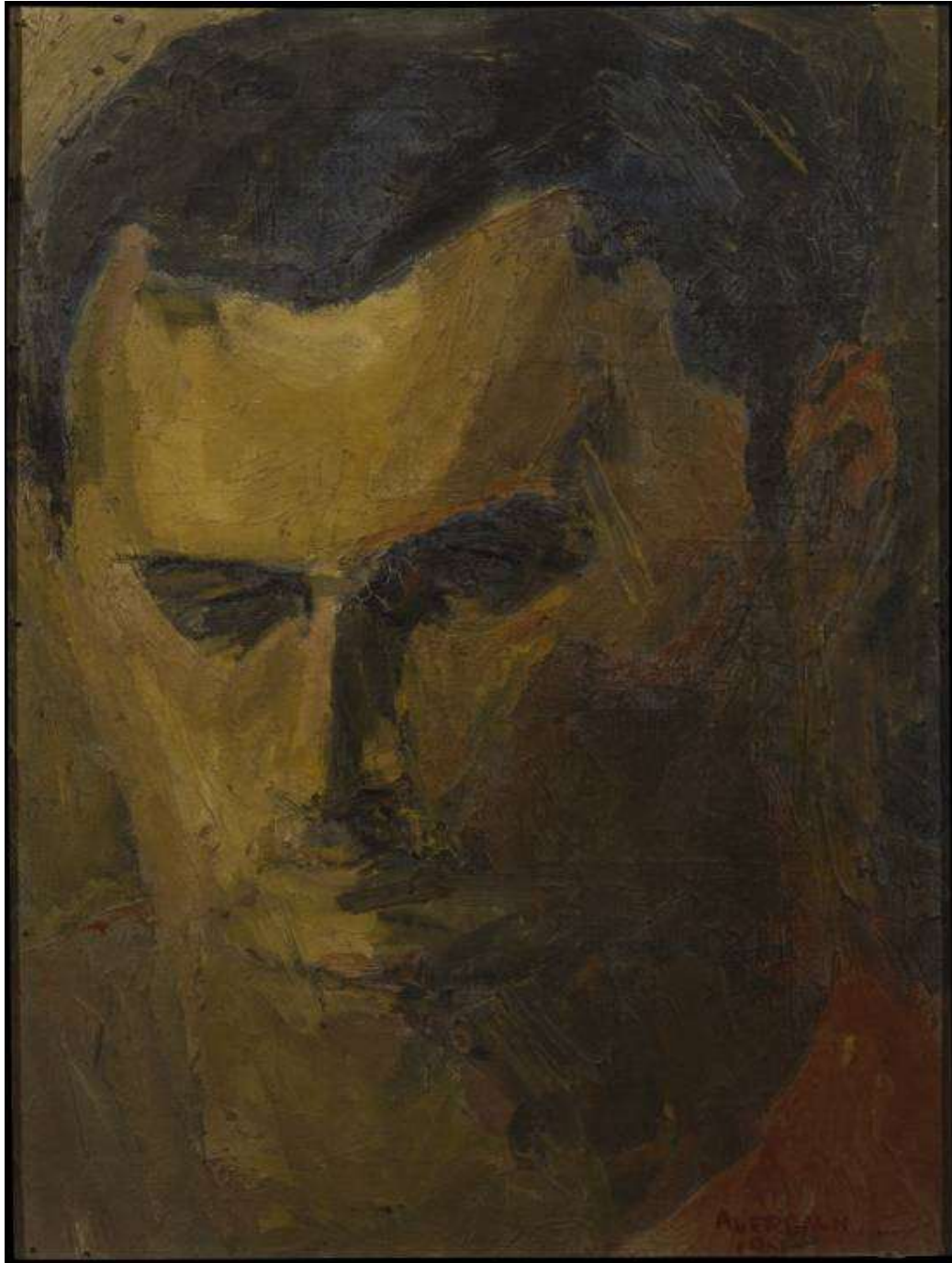


Fig. 20. Portrait of Leon Kossoff, Oil on canvas, 61 x 45 cm, 1951, Frank Auerbach

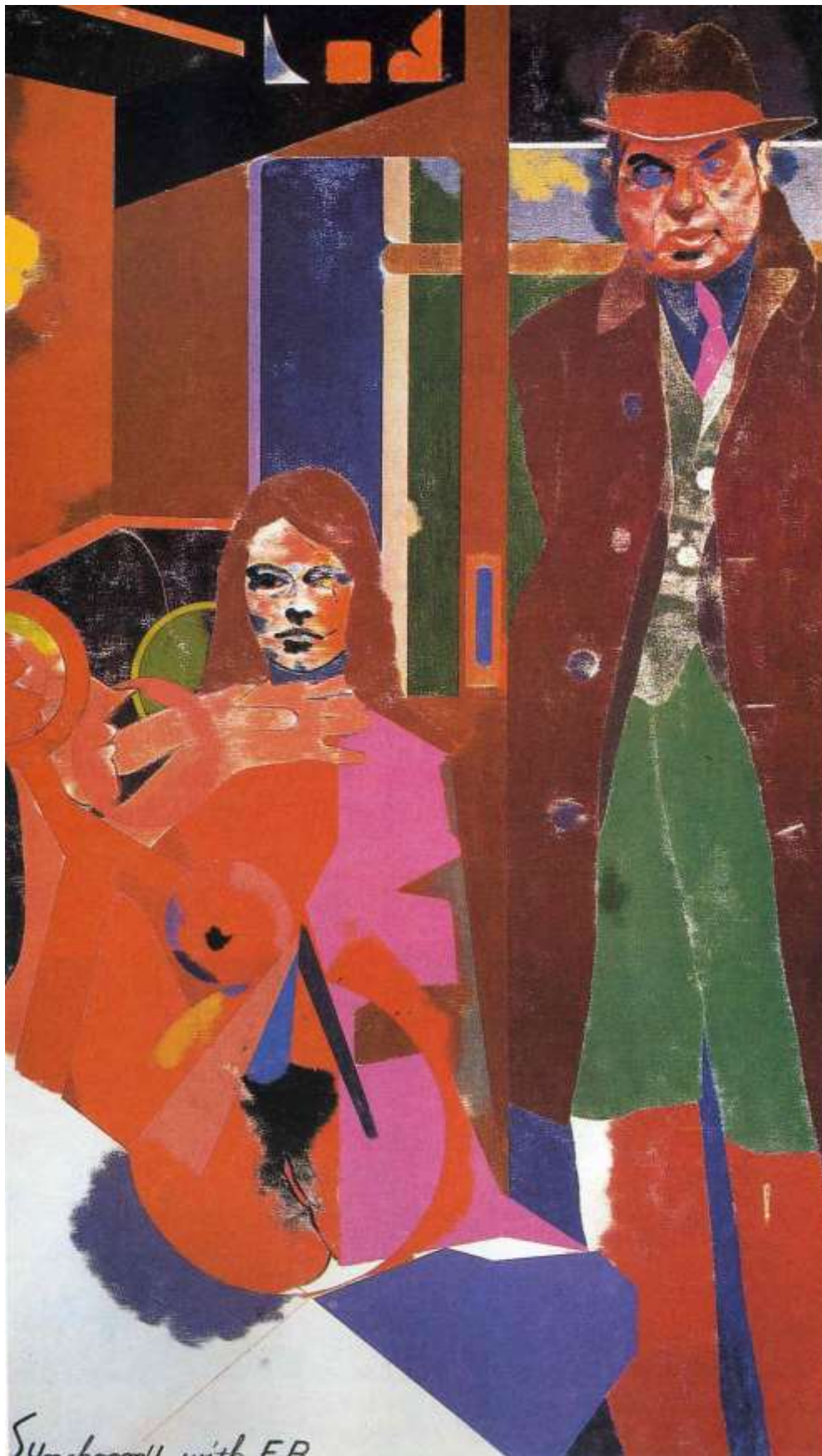


Fig. 21. Synchrocity with F. B., Oil on canvas, 152.5 x 91.5 cm, 1968/69, R B Kitaj



Fig. 22. Portrait of Frank Auerbach, Oil on canvas, 26.5 x 40 cm, 1975, Lucian Freud



Fig. 23. Self-portrait, Oil on board, 42 x 33 cm, 1981, Leon Kossoff



Fig. 24. Self Portrait, Oil on board, 25 x 20.3cm, 1988, Michael Andrews

born to Jewish parents in Ohio, USA and moved to England in 1958 to study art at the Ruskin School, Oxford. Lucian Freud, the grandson of Sigmund Freud, was born in Berlin and also moved to England to escape the Nazis, becoming a British citizen in 1939, whilst Leon Kossoff was born in London, the son of Russian Jewish immigrants.

For this group the role of the state and those who run it, as a subject for their art has been largely set aside, something we witness in their preoccupation with painting the single human figure. Indeed they often produced paintings of each other such as Auerbach's *Portrait of Leon Kossoff* (1953) Fig. 20, Kitaj's *Synchromy with F.B.- General of Hot Desire* (1968-69) Fig. 21, Freud's *Portrait of Frank Auerbach* (1975-6) Fig. 22, Kossoff's self-portrait *Leon Kossoff* (1981) Fig. 23 and Andrews' *Self-portrait* (1988) Fig. 24. As a predominantly Jewish group living in the wake of total war and revelations of the Holocaust, the reductions to figurative painting and individuality seem to be a natural response to mass trauma. Their direction is silent and designed to create a reflection which doesn't ask us to intellectualise our thoughts on war, but instead to deliberate our emotional responses to its aftermath. These post-war London painters appear to be reduced to concerns based specifically on their own experiences regardless of our thoughts.

For Francis Bacon though, the state was not so much set aside as directly confronted, as we observe in his series of 'Screaming Pope' paintings such as *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* (1953) Fig 25. While Bacon used Velasquez's portrait of *Pope Innocent X* (c. 1650) Fig. 26 as his starting point, we can observe many differences from the original portrait which Velázquez undertook. Velázquez's likeness of the Holy Father depicts the head of the Catholic Church clothed in the red robes of office, seated on a red cushioned chair, which is in turn set against red drapes. The Pope's face appears stern; perhaps in consideration of the matters of state, perhaps of the painter before him. Pope Innocent X was born Giovanni Battista Pamphilj, he trained as a lawyer and became head of the Catholic Church in 1644. Yet in Velázquez's portrait there is little hint of the person behind the position. Here Pope Innocent is defined clearly by his religious role; a man bequeathed the power to make decisions which affect the lives of others. It is, like Holbein's portrait of Thomas More a century before, a painting of the man as office.

For Bacon however, despite the subject being the same, everything else has changed. The Pope's red robes have been rendered purple, the draped background transformed into streaked black paint and the Holy Father's silent stare transfigured into a primal scream. Where Velázquez has rendered a man of organisational responsibility defined by his religious duty, Bacon has sought to visually tear away at the edifice of office and reveal instead the vision of a tormented subconscious. This is a painting of man first and office second. *Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X* was painted in the same year as Queen Elizabeth II's



Fig. 25. Study after Velázquez's Portrait of Pope Innocent X, Oil on canvas, 153×118cm, 1953, Francis Bacon



Fig. 26. Portrait of Pope Innocent X, Oil on canvas, 140 x 120 cm, 1650, Diego Velazquez

coronation, yet the customs which help create a sense of institutional solidity for State and Church have ceased to function effectively for Bacon. The visual cues which enabled Velázquez to define the social strength and power of the Church have been subverted here to give a very different message, one which is perhaps more post-Christian than anti-Church. Bacon's picture gives visual expression to a philosophy of existentialism which became prevalent in Europe after the end of the Second World War, that we inhabit a seemingly meaningless universe which is either hostile or indifferent to us; one in which we are effectively alone. It is a vision where the individual has little or no control over external events, events which have the potential to provoke powerful human emotions. For Bacon, the clothes of office create nothing more than a façade of power which are useless against the terrors of life.

Beyond the School of London

Although active in Britain at the same time as Francis Bacon and his circle, the artist David Hockney (b. 1937) occupies a place apart from the 'School of London' painters for a number of key reasons. Where the London painters had spent many decades perfecting individual styles which they then firmly adhered to, Hockney displays a restless energy of constantly changing forms and themes, which far from confronting existentialist truths, seem instead to celebrate life.

Born in Bradford, Hockney attended the Royal College of Art, London in 1959 where he began to experiment by copying fragments of poems on to his canvases which paved the way for a series of paintings on the theme of homosexual love. Openly gay at a time when homosexuality was illegal in the United Kingdom, Hockney decided to reject the austere world of post-war London and in 1963 moved to Los Angeles in favour of the perpetual sunshine and sexual freedom which California seemed to offer. Once there he became fascinated by luxury, especially seen through the abundant use of water in its semi-arid environment. The swimming pools, lawn sprinklers and showers of California was a world away from the drab and impoverished post-war England he had grown up in and it inspired him to experiment with various methods of depicting the drops, sprays, patterns and surfaces of water. He also sought inspiration from the homoerotic magazines he enjoyed reading and he beautifully fused these themes in *Man in Shower in Beverly Hills* (1964) Fig. 27. In this Hockney combines a closed domestic interior with moving water and a naked male figure sourced from a photograph taken by the Athletic Model Guild. Painted in acrylics and employing brilliant colour applied in a flat technique, his portrayal of this young man bathing betrays a sensual love for the subject which presents the polar opposite of Sickert's visual savagery. Hockney's vivid use of acrylic colour and sense that each brush stroke is a caress present us with a celebration of the surface of things and demonstrate an indulgence in physical pleasure.



Fig. 27. Man in Shower in Beverly Hills, Acrylic on canvas, 167 x 167 cm, 1964, David Hockney



Fig. 28. The Chair, Oil on canvas, 121 x 91 cm, 1985, David Hockney

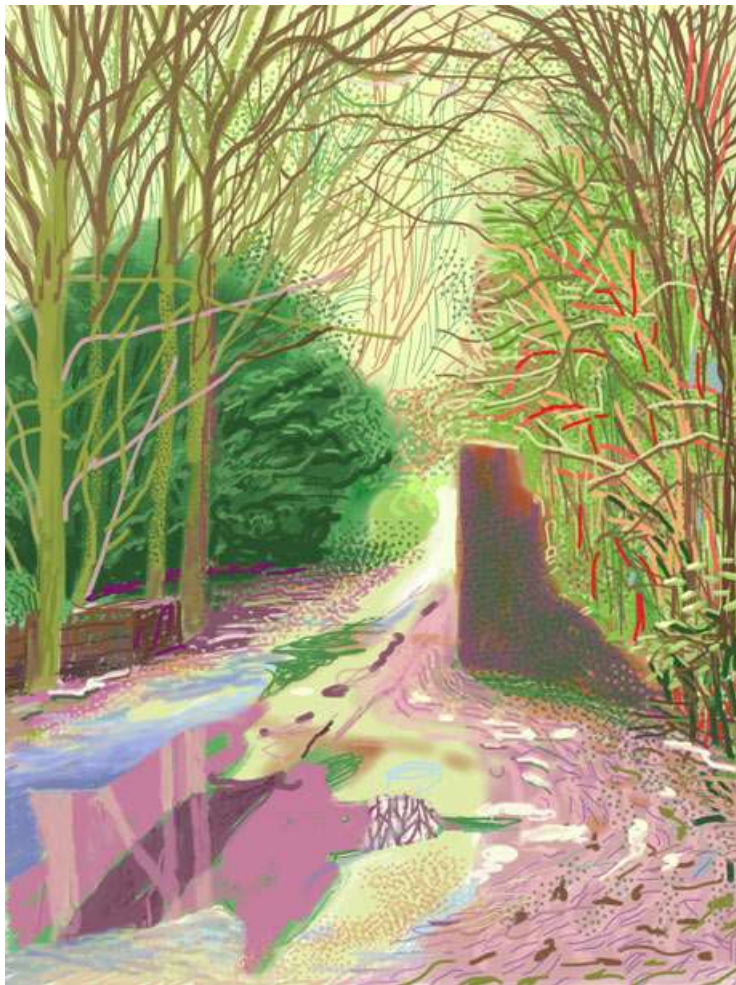


Fig. 29. The Arrival of Spring in Waldgate, iPad Drawing, 2011, David Hockney

Hockney removed his primary focus from painting in the mid-1970s to pursue photography and set design for the ballet, opera and theatre, only to return his interest more fully to painting in the late 1980's. At this time his work began to take on a much more abstracted and vivid style as we can see in *The Chair* (1985) Fig. 28, and it was also during this period that he began experimenting with technology, creating his first homemade prints on a photocopier in 1986. The adoption of technology for making art has been an ongoing fascination for Hockney ever since, and in 2009 he started using the Brushes app on an iPad to create digital drawings such as *The Arrival of Spring in Woldgate* (2011) Fig. 29. Whilst all of these works appear distinctly different in approach, what seems to unite Hockneys' output is a sense of visual enjoyment. His pictures are designed to delight both himself and his audience in a pictorial extravagance which offers us the counter-point to existentialism, the anti-dote to post-war angst.

Yet in this new digital age, after so many centuries of artistic human production, and in a time which, Post-Duchamp, appears to be at its most comfortable viewing readymades, installations, photography and time-based media, what more could be left to say by any artist who wishes to paint? In an interview with the art critic David Sylvester in October 1962, Francis Bacon had said "...what is fascinating now is that it's going to become much more difficult for the artist, because he must really deepen the game to be any good at all." This deepening of the game is a challenge only a handful of figurative painters developed a wish to fully engage with directly after the mid 1980's, painters like Tony Bevan (b. 1951), Christopher Le Brun (b. 1951) and Paula Rego (b.1935). And it is in the pictures of Rego especially that we begin to notice a new kind of direction being adopted by the next generation of painters.

Rego was born in the devoutly catholic country of Portugal and moved to Britain in 1951 for schooling. In her work we notice a desire to move away from the specifically personal which was exhibited by the London painters and instead a wish to connect more broadly with ideas around our social experience. This is demonstrated in her pastel drawing *Triptych* (1998) Fig. 30 which presents us with three stark images of young women undergoing make-shift abortions in back street bedrooms. The figures on the left and right hand panels are dressed in school uniforms which lead us to the conclusion that all three individuals presented before us are under the age of sixteen. The format of three panels is significant, as it recalls the painting of triptychs for church altars. Yet where a traditional church altar painting would present a depiction of Christ on the cross, in Rego's display Jesus is very much absent. Instead, we stand witness to the opposite, three women who in the eyes of the Catholic Church are engaged in an act of mortal sin.

Our reading of them here though is not as sinners, but as young women struggling to find a way through a traumatic situation as best they can. Abandoned by both Church and State they have been forced to seek solutions in illegal clinics which lack any medical support. The



Fig. 30. Triptych, Pastel on paper, mounted on aluminium, each panel 110 x 100 cm, 1998, Paula Rego

figure on our right sits on a bucket, presumably waiting for an unwanted foetus to evacuate her body. She stares directly back at us in a way which seems to ask: “How can you help make this situation better”? Whilst *Triptych* is a work which does not include us in its iconography as Holbein’s *The Ambassadors* does, what we do notice is that we tend to identify personally with the distress of these young women. Their pain metaphorically becomes our pain. This emotional identification with the torment of individuals as the result of hard-line Church and State doctrine is a signifier of liberal thinking. It prompts us to how ask ourselves how we as individuals who collectively help make up a society can do better for those among us who are suffering. By working in this way, Rego fosters a socio-political engagement which directly challenges our pre-conceptions.

Yet as different as *The Ambassadors* and *Triptych* are, they both ultimately pose the same question: Where do we stand in our relationship to others?

Robert Priseman, 2015

