

**THE SPIRIT IN THE MASS:
DAVID BOMBERG, LEON KOSSOFF AND FRANK AUERBACH**

Background Notes

Monica Bohm-Duchen — 26 November 2025



David Bomberg: *Self-Portrait*, 1913-14, National Portrait Gallery

**“WE MUST BUILD OUR NEW ART LIFE OF TODAY UPON THE
RUINS OF THE DEAD ART LIFE OF YESTERDAY”** David Bomberg

The session will begin with a survey of David Bomberg's career from his inauspicious beginnings as the child of poor Yiddish-speaking Jewish immigrants in the East End of London through his brief notoriety as a leading member of London's artistic avant-garde prior to the First World War and his output during that war to his fading thereafter from public view. It will then focus on the increasingly painterly and expressionistic work he started producing from the late 1920s onwards and above all on his profound influence – through his teaching at the Borough Polytechnic from 1946 to 1955 – on a small group of like-minded younger artists, most notably Leon Kossoff (born in 1926 into a similar milieu to Bomberg) and Frank Auerbach, born in Germany in 1931, who came to the UK as a child refugee from Nazism in 1939.

Although Bomberg was to die in 1957 in relative obscurity, his most famous maxim - that an artist should aspire to express "the spirit in the mass" - would remain at the very heart of both Kossoff's and Auerbach's artistic credos. The second part of the session will thus focus on the life stories and careers of these two artists and examine more closely the nature of Bomberg's influence on them.



David Bomberg: *Last Self-Portrait*, 1956,
Pallant House Gallery, Chichester

David Bomberg (1890-1957)

Born in Birmingham to Polish-Jewish immigrant parents, Bomberg was brought up in the Whitechapel area of London. Apprenticed to a lithographer, he went to night classes given by Walter Bayes at the City and Guilds Institute, and broke his indentures in order to attend evening classes at the Westminster School of Art under Sickert and with Lethaby at the Central School of Arts and Crafts. Financial support from the Jewish Educational Aid Society enabled him to go to the Slade in 1911-13, where he won the Tonks Prize for a drawing of fellow student Isaac Rosenberg. He visited Paris with Jacob Epstein in 1913, meeting Picasso, Derain, Modigliani and others and in 1914, with Epstein, organised the 'Jewish Section' of the *Review of Modern Movements* exhibition at Whitechapel Art Gallery.

A founder member of the London Group, his first one-man show took place at the Chenil Gallery in 1914 and attracted a great deal of interest. Although his radically geometricizing approach was very close to that of the Vorticists, with whom he exhibited in 1915, he avoided any formal connection with them. Conscripted into the British Army between 1915-19, he served at the Front in 1916 (the year in which he married) and worked as a semi-official war artist. He also wrote some poetry, affected by the death in action of his brother.

His artistic reputation remained high after the war but he sold little and suffered acute financial hardship. Gradually modifying his hard-edged, geometric approach to form, he worked for the Zionist Organisation in Palestine (1923-7). On his return to England, his meticulously detailed realistic studies and more thickly painted free sketches were received with critical acclaim but barely sold. From 1930, he travelled widely (to the USSR, Morocco and Greece, with an extended stay in Spain 1934-5) with artist Lilian Holt, who was to become his second wife, his handling of paint becoming increasingly tactile and impastoed.



David Bomberg: *Evening in the City of London*, 1944,
Museum of London

During the Second World War Bomberg became an official war artist and began teaching part-time, most notably at the Borough Polytechnic between 1945-53). With his pupils there he formed the Borough Group (1947-9) and the Borough Bottega (1953). In 1954 he moved to Spain, where he remained until he fell ill and was brought back to London, where he died in poverty soon after.

Leon Kossoff (1926-2019)

Born into a Russian-Jewish immigrant family in Islington, London, Kossoff was raised in the East End of London, where his parents ran a bakery. During World War II he was evacuated to Norfolk, where his host family encouraged his love of drawing and he later attended life classes at Toynbee Hall in London's Whitechapel and at St.Martin's School of Art. Following national service with the Royal Fusiliers Jewish Brigade (1945-8), he studied at St.Martin's (1949-53) and the Royal College of Art (1953-6), where he met and befriended Frank Auerbach. Together, they would also attend David Bomberg's evening classes at the Borough Polytechnic (1950-2).

Supported by Helen Lessore's Beaux-Arts Gallery, Kossoff's career took off, albeit slowly, in the late 1950s, and he would go on to have over thirty solo exhibitions, both in the UK and abroad. From the start, Kossoff's primary focus was on the post-war bomb-damaged neighbourhoods or historic landmarks like Christ Church Spitalfields and Arnold Circus, which held a deep connection to his family's history as part of the Jewish diaspora that settled in London during the early 20th century. In the intimacy of his studio, he would create psychologically penetrating, introspective and often melancholy portraits and figure studies, most frequently of family members and friends. Kossoff was also a skilled printmaker.

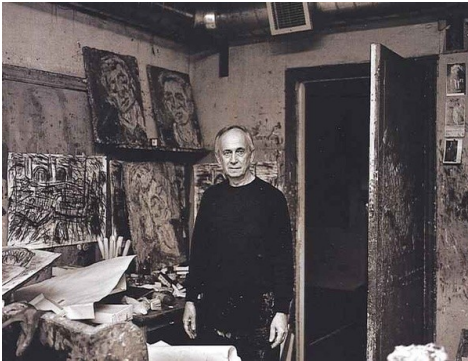


Photo: Leon Kossoff by Toby Glanville, 1998, National Portrait Gallery



Leon Kossoff: *Children's Swimming Pool, Autumn 1972*, Annely Juda Fine Art

Frank Auerbach (1931-2024)



Frank Auerbach: *Self-Portrait*,
1958, Private Collection

Born Frank Helmut Auerbach into a German-Jewish family living in Berlin, Auerbach was sent to the safety of England in 1939; his parents would perish in the Holocaust. He attended Bunce Court in Kent, a progressive school relocated from Germany after 1933 and studied first at St.Martin's School of Art (1948-52) and then at the Royal College of Art (1952-55), simultaneously attending Bomberg's evening classes at the Borough Polytechnic.

In 1956 Auerbach was given his first solo exhibition by dealer Helen Lessore at the Beaux-Arts Gallery, where he exhibited regularly until 1963; he was later represented by the Marlborough Gallery. In 1976 Auerbach – like Kossoff - was one of a loose group of figurative painters selected by R. B. Kitaj for the exhibition 'The Human Clay', giving rise to the sometimes contentious label 'The School of London'. Although their approaches differed, the group remained faithful to figurative painting at a time when conceptualism and minimalism were the dominant forces in the art world.

Auerbach occupied the same studio in Mornington Crescent (formerly occupied by Kossoff) in Camden for almost seventy years and the surrounding area was a frequent subject in his painting, executed in a characteristic vigorous impasto, for which he made often hundreds of preliminary drawings. As with Kossoff, his portraits were almost always of family and friends. There were major retrospectives of Auerbach's work at the Hayward Gallery (1978) and Tate Britain (2015) and an ever-increasing number of solo exhibitions including one at the 1986 Venice Biennale. He died in London on 11 November 2024.



Frank Auerbach: *Mornington Crescent*, 1965,
Tate Britain

Further Reading

Richard Cork: *David Bomberg*, Yale University Press, 1986

Sarah MacDougall & Rachel Dickson: *Bomberg*, Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, 2017

Leon Kossoff & Klaus Kertess: *Leon Kossoff*, Annely Juda Fine Art, 2000

Andrew Demsey et alia: *Leon Kossoff: A London Life*, Piano Nobile, 2019

Robert Hughes: *Frank Auerbach*, Thames & Hudson, 1990

Catherine Lampert: *Frank Auerbach: Speaking and Painting*, Thames & Hudson, 2019

William Feaver: *Frank Auerbach*, Rizzoli, 2022

Online Resources

[David Bomberg - Biography | Ben Uri](#)

[Artist, teacher and provocateur: the legacy of David Bomberg | Art UK](#)

[Leon Kossoff - Biography | Ben Uri](#)

[Leon Kossoff Paintings, Bio, Ideas | TheArtStory](#)

[Leon Kossoff - Overview | Annely Juda Fine Art](#)

[Kossoff, Leon, 1926–2019 | Art UK](#)

[Frank Auerbach - Biography | Ben Uri](#)

[Frank Auerbach Paintings, Bio, Ideas | TheArtStory](#)

[How it's Made: Frank Auerbach | Tate](#)

© Text Monica Bohm-Duchen, 2025

These notes are for study use by WAHG members only and are not to be reproduced.