

# The Slade and the Body

## Background Notes

Dr Jan Cox - 11 October 2017



C. R. W. Nevinson, "La Mitailleuse", 1915

Oil on canvas, 61 x 51cm, Tate



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## THE SLADE AND THE BODY

(Years of attendance in brackets)

In 1868, the lawyer and art collector Felix Slade bequeathed the substantial sum of £45,000 to set up Professorships in Fine Art at Universities in Oxford, Cambridge and London. Additionally, there were six scholarships for students under the age of nineteen. This provided the means and motivation to establish the Slade School of Fine Art. A key appointment was Frederick Brown as Professor in 1892, in that he appointed as his assistant Henry Tonks, a surgeon turned art tutor who placed emphasis on the study of the human form. Upon his death, Tonks was described as “the great leader of that great revival of the art of drawing”. Indeed, Stanley Spencer (1908-12) later claimed that he had to teach himself to paint, such was Tonks’s concentration on drawing. Fred Brown introduced new prizes for his students in 1893/4; in addition to existing ones for life painting and drawing and anatomical drawing, he brought in a figure composition prize and a head (portrait) prize. Soon, the Summer Composition Competition (figure composition) became the most prestigious award.

Soon after the advent of Brown and Tonks, the Slade saw its first ‘golden generation’ of students. Augustus John (1894-8), Gwen John (1895-8), William Orpen (1897-9), Wyndham Lewis (1898-1901) and Albert Rothenstein (1898-1902) were all highly talented draughtsmen and won many of the Slade prizes. Gwen John won the Nettleship Prize for figure composition in 1897, and her brother Augustus won the Summer Composition Competition the following year with *Moses and the Brazen Serpent* (UCL), in which he mischievously included portraits of his fellow students in the biblical scene. In 1899, William Orpen won the prize for head painting with *Portrait of a Girl wearing a Green Dress* (UCL), and in 1901 Albert Rothenstein won the Summer Competition with *The Confessions of Claude* (UCL). Scholarships were additionally awarded to the most promising students. From this period onwards, many of the prize winners were retained for the Slade (now UCL) collection.

A second ‘golden generation’ followed in the period 1907-14, and included Maxwell Gordon Lightfoot (1907-11), Stanley Spencer (1908-12), Richard Nevinson (1908-12), Mark Gertler (1908-12), Edward Wadsworth (1909-12), Dora Carrington (1910-14), Paul Nash (1910-11), Ben Nicholson (1910-11), John Currie (1910), and David Bomberg (1911-13).



John Currie, "Some Later Primitives and Mme. Tisceron", 1912,

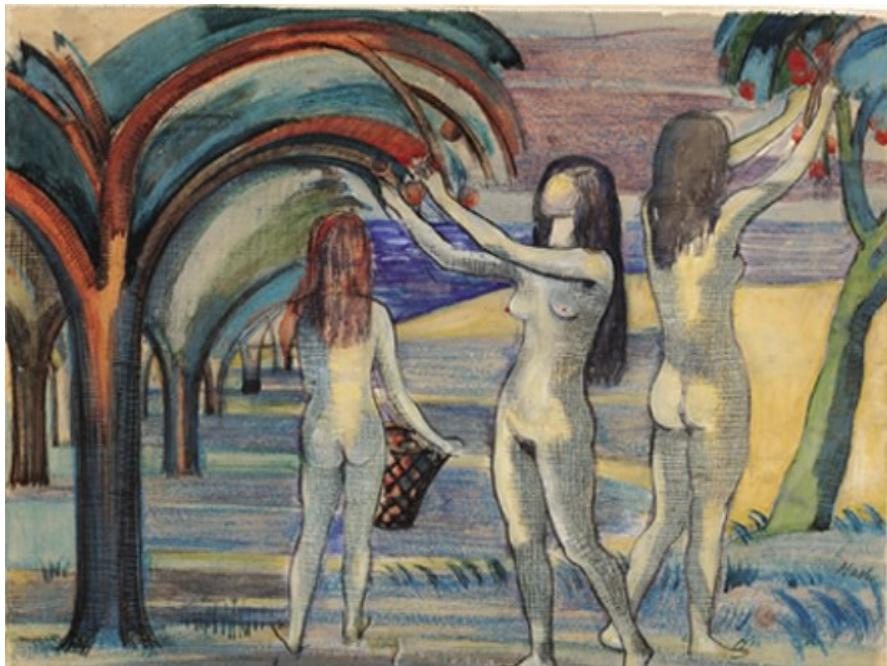
(Currie, Gertler, Nevinson, Wadsworth, Allinson)

46 x 128 cm, Tempera on Canvas, Potteries Museum and Art Gallery

Stanley Spencer was already marked as different from his contemporaries, in that he travelled from Cookham every day to the Slade, and left early in order to catch the 5.08 train home, ready for his favourite family tea of bread and jam. Spencer showed a precocious talent, and won a scholarship in 1910 and the Nettleship Prize in 1911. The following year he not only won the Summer Composition Competition with *The Nativity*, but was the only one of his peers to show at Roger Fry's second Post-Impressionist Exhibition. Spencer created perhaps the greatest achievement in British art when he decorated the Sandham Memorial Chapel at Burghclere (1926-32), then produced some frank and controversial nudes modelled by his second wife Patricia Preece in the 1930s. Throughout his life he made personal and quirky depictions of the human form, adopting the philosophy of Tonks: "Think of the form and the roundness of form...Think of those bones and, those beautiful sweeps and curves they have..." Examples include *Cows at Cookham* (1936; Ashmolean Museum) and *The Woolshop* (1939; Tate).

Edward Wadsworth was born into a wealthy Yorkshire manufacturing family, and studied in Munich before enrolling at the Slade in 1909. He won the first prize for figure painting in 1911 with *Male Figure Standing* (UCL), but soon became involved with Wyndham Lewis and the Vorticists, concentrating

on architecture and later industrial scenes. He is best-known now for his depictions of marine paraphernalia that feature no human beings at all. Following the death of his nine-year-old daughter in 1922, Wadsworth turned his back on Modernism and produced works that “speak overwhelmingly of loss and denial” and that “ache with expectancy”. This ability to paint an atmospheric void that lacks human presence was a gift he shared with Paul Nash. Nash, like Wadsworth and Nevinson, was born in 1889. He arrived at The Slade in 1910, and described his first encounter with Henry Tonks: “His surgical eye raked my immature designs. In cold discouraging tones he welcomed me to the Slade. It was evident he considered that neither the Slade nor I was likely to derive much benefit”. In July he reported to the collector Gordon Bottomley “I have made very slow progress I think, but already comes a little greater facility, and at the least a great DESIRE to draw”.



Paul Nash, “*Apple Pickers*”,  
1914, Chalk and watercolour on paper, 36 x 33 cms,  
Cecil Higgins Gallery, Bradford



Stanley Spencer, "*The Apple Gatherers*", 1912-13,

Oil on canvas, 71 x 92 cm, Tate

Nash, aged 21, eventually spent much of his time at The Slade playing billiards with Ben Nicholson, who was 16 at this time, and not yet ready to absorb the teaching the Slade could offer. Nash was briefly inspired by the human form when in February 1913 he met a girl called Margaret 'Bunty' Odeh, who was modelling for his Slade friend, Rupert Lee. Two months later they were engaged, and in 1914 Margaret modelled for Nash in *Apple Pickers* (Cecil Higgins Museum, Bedford), before marrying him in September. After his marriage, Nash famously avoided the human figure, creating his most famous work *We are Making a New World* (1918; Imperial War Museum) in which mounds of earth can be seen as gravestones for dead soldiers. Like Nash, Nicholson soon left The Slade, perhaps – as his grandson Jovan Nicholson believes – inspired by the billiards to take an interest in shapes and forms and their relationships to each other.

Richard Nevinson came from an intellectual Hampstead family and made an unlikely friendship with Mark Gertler who was the son of Jewish immigrants from the east end of London. They both enrolled at the Slade in 1908 and soon became firm friends. Nevinson was to create perhaps the most symbolic representations of the human body in the First World War with *La Mitrailleuse* (1915; Tate), in which man and machine gun fuse together, and *La Patrie* (1916; Birmingham Museums) which shows a great intensity of human suffering. In his early years Gertler concentrated on depicting his family, particularly his mother, and painting Jewish figures organised by Albert Rothenstein's brother William. Nevinson and Gertler's closeness – illustrated by a photo of the Slade end of year picnic in June 1912 – was torn asunder because of their mutual love for another Slade student, Dora Carrington. Gertler terminated his friendship with Nevinson by letter, and instead adopted John Currie as his new 'best friend'.



Mark Gertler, *Acrobats*, 1917  
Bronze, 60 x 42 x 37 cm, Tate

Dora Carrington was a very talented student who seemed to captivate many of the male students, Paul Nash included. She had a marvellous ability to depict the female form (female students at the Slade were denied male models), and won second prize for figure painting in 1912 with *Female Figure Lying on her Back* (UCL), along with a two year scholarship. In 1913 she won first prize for figure painting and painting from the antique, but was always riddled with self-doubts about her own abilities. She was a fine portraitist, but lacked the capacity for self-promotion that her male counterparts possessed. John Currie was older than most of his contemporaries, born in Newcastle-Under-Lyme in The Potteries in 1883. After studying engraving at the Royal College of Art from 1905-07, he briefly attended The Slade in 1910, where he met Mark Gertler. Currie often portrayed his mistress Dolly Henry, with whom he was obsessed, but just before the outbreak of the war in 1914, he shot both Dolly and himself, thus ending the career of a very promising artist. Perhaps the most talented draughtsman of all was Maxwell Gordon Lightfoot who in 1909, despite the intense competition, won first prize in figure painting, head painting, painting from the cast and the Summer Composition Competition. Unfortunately, like Currie, he had an unhappy love affair and took a razor to his throat in 1911. Carrington and Gertler were to add to the toll of suicides in the 1930s, and it is fair to say that nearly all of this 'golden generation' had troubled or unhappy lives. Despite this, they created some of the most compelling works of art of the twentieth century.

## **Further Reading**

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- MacDougall, Sarah. *Mark Gertler*, John Murray, 2002
- Nevinson, C. R. W. *Paint and Prejudice*, Methuen, 1937
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Dora Carrington, “*Female Figure Standing*” 1913,  
Oil on Canvas, 76 x 51 cm, UCL Art Museum