Realism in 20th Century British Art

Background notes

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Walter Richard Sickert, *Ennui,* 1914
Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 112.4 cm. Tate

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Where 20th century British art is concerned, it is wiser to speak of Realisms in the plural rather than the singular, because Realist art took many different forms and was used for widely different purposes. The influential critic, John Ruskin, insisted in the 1840s and 50s that artists should pay the closest attention to the world around them, and especially the natural world. In his view, Pre-Raphaelite Realism, which he championed, was an antidote to the corrupt, idealised and generalised images that were favoured by the Royal Academy. Before long, however, the scrupulous attention to appearances that Ruskin favoured was used by artists like Augustus Egg, George Elgar Hicks or Robert Braithwaite Martineau, to reinforce Victorian moral orthodoxies and gender stereotypes – a far cry from the political radicalism of Gustave Courbet or Edouard Manet. In the early 20th century, however, a Realist grouping emerged in British painting that was profoundly aware of developments in France. It was led by Walter Sickert and became known as the Camden Town Group, because its members were renowned for their depictions of gritty social realities in what was then a rundown suburb in north-west-London. Sickert's *Ennui* (Boredom) of 1914, is an affecting study of a loveless and joyless marriage which, unlike Victorian moral painting, provides neither moral nor narrative certainty.

With the outbreak of World War One in 1914, the British government used art to record all aspects of the conflict, at home and on the front line. The images produced by painters such as William Orpen, Muirhead Bone and Henry Tonks, and the sculptor, Charles Sargeant Jagger, bore witness to the experience of the new, mechanised warfare. It also paid tribute to the fallen and, above all, it provided useful propaganda. After the armistice, German art was regarded with some suspicion, but there were British artists who were drawn to the tendency known as Neue Sachlichkeit (New Objectivity). Glyn Philpot's *The Resting Acrobats* of about 1924, for example, draws upon the work of Otto Dix and Christian Schad.

During the 1930s, with the rise of fascism on the one hand and Stalinist totalitarianism on the other, there were vigorous debates concerning the purpose of art and the nature of Realism. On the one hand, the looming political crisis in Europe seemed to call for a socially engaged art, rather than the abstract art favoured by avant garde luminaries such as Ben Nicholson or Barbara Hepworth; but on the other hand, artists were acutely aware that Fascism and Stalinism hijacked and corrupted Realism for propaganda purposes. Like their American contemporaries, British artists became concerned that Realism had become 'contaminated' by totalitarianism. If they were to continue producing Realist work, it would have to be of a kind that distanced itself from developments in Germany and the Soviet Union.

In Britain, there was no 'New Deal' to foster ambitious Realist art, as there was in the USA, where the Federal Art Project gave a significant boost to ambitious, socially engaged painting, often on a large scale. British artists continued to respond to market forces, which meant that their paintings were generally modest in scale and that portraiture accounted for the livelihoods of many artists. There were portraits of distinction produced during the 1930s, including Gerald Brockhurst's portrait of the Lady Marguerite Strickland, *By the Hills* (1939) and Meredith Frampton's *A Game of Patience* of 1937. These highly sophisticated and flattering images of a wealthy elite offer a complete contrast to Cliff Rowe's 1937 study of a *Fried Fish Shop*, which depicted the other end of the social spectrum. In some cases, artists found an additional source of income by producing advertising imagery as, for example, in the case of Fortunino Matania's 1937 painting advertising the attractions of *Blackpool.* Generally speaking, in a competitive market, skilfully executed depictions of modern British life or the British landscape had an edge over abstract or surrealist painting.

Gerald Leslie Brockhurst, *By the Hills,* 1939
Oil on canvas. Ferens Art Gallery, Kingston-upon-Hull

Fortunino Montania, *Blackpool,* c. 1937
London, Midland and Scottish Railway poster artwork.
National Railway Museum, York

Since the beginning of the 18th century, there had been no real tradition of government patronage of the visual arts in Britain and therefore British artists did not, by and large, become government employees until the outbreak of World War Two. The war had two significant effects on the practice of art in the UK: it led the Ministry of Information to offer funding to the Mass Observation project and it also brought about the setting up of the War Artists Advisory Committee. Mass Observation was founded in 1937 by the anthropologist Tom Harrisson, the poet Charles Madge and the photographer and documentary filmmaker Humphrey Jennings. The aim was to carry out social research on a range of topics to do with the lives and experiences of ordinary Britons. The most ambitious Mass-Observation project of the early years was the *Worktown* project, a major study of the towns of Bolton and Blackpool between 1937 and 1940, and it was this project to which the artists William Coldstream, Graham Bell and Julian Trevelyan made a notable contribution. The founders of Mass Observation were interested not just in the artists' representations of Bolton, but also in what the people of Bolton made of their pictures.

The War Artists Advisory Committee operated under the aegis of Sir Kenneth Clark, Director of the National Gallery. During the war years it collected 5,570 works of art produced by over four hundred artists, including some of the most celebrated of 20th century British artists such as L. S. Lowry, Paul Nash, Edward Ardizzone, Henry Moore and John Piper. But one of the most remarkable contributors to the collection was Laura Knight; her 1943 painting of *Ruby Loftus screwing a breach-ring* in the Royal Ordnance Factory in Newport, was a vivid depiction of a young woman who, like Laura Knight herself, had demonstrated herself to be more than the equal of her male contemporaries. Knight was eventually given the title of War Correspondent and it was in this capacity that she recorded *The Nuremberg Trial* in 1945.

Dame Laura Knight, *Ruby Loftus screwing a breach-ring,* 1943
Oil on canvas, 86.3 x 101.9 cm. Imperial War Museum, London

The post-war British art world became increasingly heterogeneous. After 1945, there was no longer a political imperative to create accessible and comprehensible images as part of the war effort. William Coldstream, who had been both a war artist and a member of Mass Observation, continued to produce Realist work for the rest of his career, but his colleague and fellow member of the Euston Road School, Victor Pasmore, moved towards abstraction. The early work of Lucian Freud, the most distinguished of later 20th century Realists, was notable for its precision, its tightly controlled exaggeration and its ability to suggest the emotional states of his subjects, qualities that led the critic, Herbert Read, to dub him "the Ingres of existentialism". Freud's slightly younger contemporary, Richard Hamilton, was fascinated by the changing social and cultural realities of post-war Britain, which he famously anatomised in his celebrated collage of 1955/56, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* His collage is not Realism in the conventional sense of the word, but it dealt in a masterly way with British life in the 1950s. In the early 1980s, Hamilton would produce a triptych of far more conventionally Realist works, including *The Citizen,* in response to 'the troubles' in Northern Ireland.

Richard Hamilton, *The Citizen,* 1981-1983
Two canvasses, each 200 x 100 cm. Tate

In the last four decades, British Realist art has risen steadily in prestige, market value and visibility. During the early 1970s, when David Hockney was producing a superb series of double portraits of his friends, parents and patrons, he was simultaneously fighting what he perceived to be the Tate Gallery's bias towards abstract art and against figuration, naturalism or Realism. If there were such a bias, it is a thing of the past. Some of the finest recent British art would undoubtedly come up for the count as Realism, albeit of different kinds, from Hurvin Anderson's *Afrosheen* of 2009, a brilliant depiction of an empty Afro-Caribbean barber's shop, to the meticulous observation of a Coventry council estate in George Shaw's *Scenes from the Passion – Late* of 2002. Like many of the great Realist painters who preceded them, both artists present the viewer with a vivid picture of their own experience.

George Shaw (b. 1966), *Scenes from the Passion - Late,* 2002
Enamel paint on board, 91.7 x 121.5 cm. Tate

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