

Belonging and Not Belonging: The Immigrant Experience in Modern British Art

Background Notes

Monica Bohm-Duchen – 22 January 2020



Josef Herman, *Refugees*, c.1941

“We do not always think of Britain as a country settled at a deep level by immigrants. We prefer to construct mythologies of the national character as something stable, as a still and virtuous point in an often unruly world.”

Robert Winder, *Bloody Foreigners: The Story of Immigration to Britain*, 2004



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British art has been enriched by the presence of artists from elsewhere for many centuries. This seminar will examine an important yet frequently overlooked aspect of modern cultural history: the experience, reception and contribution of émigré artists to this country - many of them refugees - from the late nineteenth century to the present day. The diverse backgrounds of these artists notwithstanding, certain leitmotifs recur: the initially ambivalent, often hostile response of the “host” culture; issues of “otherness”, displacement, dislocation and loss; xenophobia versus internationalism; the creative tensions between integration and isolation, mainstream and margins; and the more recent concepts of globalisation, multiculturalism and cultural hybridity. Artists to be discussed include Hans Holbein and Anthony van Dyck, James McNeill Whistler and John Singer Sargent, David Bomberg and Mark Gertler, John Heartfield and Oskar Kokoschka, Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach, Anish Kapoor and Mona Hatoum, Chris Ofili and Yinka Shonibare. To coincide with the nationwide year-long Insiders/Outsiders Festival (<https://insidersoutsidersfestival.org/>), which Monica Bohm-Duchen initiated, those who came to this country as refugees from Nazism will receive special attention.

Timeline of Key Moments in British Immigration History

1290 Expulsion of the Jews from Britain by Edward I.

1656 Re-admission of the Jews to England under Oliver Cromwell. Most of these were of Spanish and Portuguese origin, but living in the Netherlands.

1685-1700 Some 100,000 French Protestants, known as Huguenots, fled to Britain from the persecution of Louis XIV.

1789 Roman Catholics and aristocrats came to Britain to flee the French Revolution.

1820s onwards Increasing numbers of British people emigrate, as missionaries, colonial rulers, convicts etc. By 1885, there were 5 million British people living outside the UK.

1840s Irish immigrants came to England fleeing poverty and the Great Famine. By 1861, 600,000 people, or 3 per cent of the English population, had been born in Ireland.

1848 This year of revolutions caused royalists, socialists, republicans and liberals to seek sanctuary in the UK, fleeing from political conflicts across the European mainland.

1880-1914 Approx. 120,000 Jews from Russia and Eastern Europe (mainly Poland and Galicia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire) fled anti-semitic pogroms and sought sanctuary in Britain.

1905 Aliens Act, aimed primarily at Russian and eastern European Jewish immigrants. This was the first legal measure of its sort, setting a precedent for all subsequent attempts to control immigration to the UK.

1914 Aliens Restrictions Act

1914-18 More than 250,000 Belgian refugees fled to the UK, as a result of the First World War. Most later returned to Belgium. Under amendments to the Aliens Act, Britain interned some 32,000 men for being 'enemy aliens'.



Mark Gertler, *The Rabbi and his Grandchild*, 1913

1937 Some 4,000 Basque refugee children fleeing General Franco's fascism in the Spanish Civil War arrived in the UK.

1933-39 The British government was slow to respond to the persecution of Jews in Europe. Eventually, some 70,000 people fleeing Nazi Germany, Austria and Czechoslovakia were admitted. In 1938, following the Nazi annexation of Austria, the British government introduced a visa requirement to restrict the refugee influx. However, following violent atrocities against the Jews on 'Kristallnacht' (November 1938) the government introduced a programme to allow approx. 10,000 'Kindertransport' children and some other categories to be exempt from the visa regulations.

1939 Nearly 100,000 refugees from Belgium, France, the Netherlands, Denmark and Norway came to the UK, fleeing from the advancing Nazi German army. Almost all of them returned to their countries of origin at the end of the Second World War.

1940-1 In the panic and paranoia caused by the end of the 'Phoney War', the British government interned approx. 15,000 Jews as 'enemy aliens' alongside Nazi sympathisers.

1939-50 Some 250,000 Polish refugees settled in the UK, having arrived during the Second World War or in 1945 as part of a group of Polish soldiers who fought in the British army. Aided by the Polish Resettlement Act of 1947, others settled here in flight from the new communist government in Poland.

1945-60 More than 50,000 refugees from the communist regimes of the Soviet Union, Romania and Czechoslovakia arrived in the UK.

1948 Arrival of the *Empire Windrush* passenger ship carrying 492 Jamaican immigrants, giving rise to the term 'Windrush Generation' and marking the start of a conspicuous Afro-Caribbean presence in this country.

1948 British Nationality Act, which actively encouraged immigrants from the British Commonwealth.

1950 Establishment of the British Council for Aid to Refugees (BCAR), the basis of the present-day Refugee Council, to assist in the resettlement of displaced people after the war.

1956 Some 21,000 Hungarians fled their country following the 1956 uprising against the communist regime.

Late 1960s - early 1980s Arrival of c.180,000 East Asians expelled from African countries such as Kenya and Uganda.

1968 Enoch Powell's anti-immigrant 'Rivers of Blood' speech



Tam Joseph, School Report, 1983

1971 Bangladesh Liberation War led to large numbers of Bangladeshis seeking refuge in the UK.

1972 Following the expulsion of 80,000 Ugandan Asians by Uganda's military dictator, Idi Amin, Britain eventually admitted 28,000 of them.

1973-9 Some 3,000 Chileans fleeing the violence of General Pinochet's regime were allowed to enter the UK.



Sutapa Biswas, *Housewives with Steak Knives*, 1985

1975-92 Some 24,000 Vietnamese refugees (popularly known as the 'boat people') entered the UK under a resettlement programme.

1992-96 Some 2,500 Bosnians fleeing the war in the former Yugoslavia were given temporary protection status by the British government under a small quota resettlement programme. Germany accepted more than 300,000. Several thousand other Bosnians applied independently for asylum in the UK.

1995-9 More than 4,000 mostly ethnic Albanian Kosovan refugees were given temporary protected status in the UK under the Humanitarian Evacuation Programme. The vast majority returned home within months. Several thousand more Kosovans applied independently for asylum.



Chris Ofili, *The Holy Virgin Mary*, 1996

1980s – present day Refugees and economic migrants from Ethiopia, Eritrea, Cyprus, Iran, Afghanistan, Iraq, Ghana, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, Somalia, Turkey, Congo, Burundi, Sudan, Angola, Sierra Leone, Rwanda, Kenya, Algeria, Nigeria, Zimbabwe, Colombia, the former Soviet Union and eastern European countries - and, most recently, Syria and Turkey - have sought asylum in the UK. Successive governments have tried to restrict their access to the country, and to create harsher conditions for asylum seekers to deter potential newcomers.

For further information see:

<http://www.makinghistories.org.uk/migration-timeline.html>

<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5748678dcf80a1ffcaf26975/t/5b27e23d8a922dfca10ddeb1/1529340490557/Immigration+Timeline.pdf>

<http://refugeeweek.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/HistoryofContributions.pdf>

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Issam Kourbaj, *Dark Water, Burning World*, 2016 (detail)

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