

# Curating the Pitmen Painters' Collection

## *Background notes*

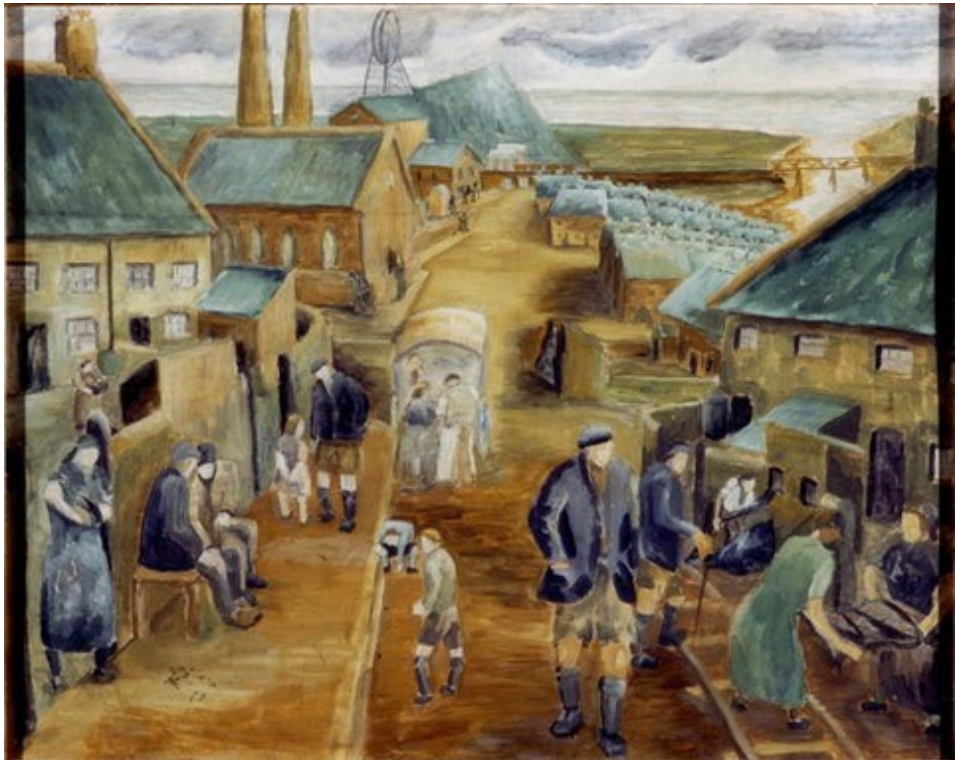
Dr Veronica Davies — 12 January 2022



Woodhorn Museum, Ashington, Northumbria

Photo: Veronica Davies

Our seminar focuses mainly on the work of the Ashington Group of artists, originally members of a WEA art appreciation class in the north-east of England in the 1930s and generally known now as the 'Pitmen Painters'. All of the group members were associated in some way with the coalmining industry, whether working down the pit, in administrative jobs on the surface, or in trades and professions that supported the local community. The day-to-day activities of this community, both at work and during leisure time, formed the raw material for the art made by the group, so that the collection offers a vivid picture of life at a specific time and place.



**Harry Wilson, *10 a.m. c. 1938* tempera on board**

Picture credit: *10 a.m.*, c.1938 (tempera on board), Wilson, Harry P. (1898-1972) / Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK / © Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums / Bridgeman Images



**Oliver Kilbourn, *End of Shift* 1934-41 oil on canvas**

Picture credit: *End of Shift* 1934-41 (oil on canvas), Kilbourn, Oliver (1904-1993) / Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle-upon-Tyne, UK / © Tyne & Wear Archives & Museums / Bridgeman Images

We are also looking, for comparison, at one or two other artists from the coalfields of the same geographical area whose work has come to be included under the same blanket term of 'pitmen painters'.



**Norman Cornish, *Bishop's Close Street, Spennymoor, County Durham* oil on board**

Picture credit: Darlington Borough Art Collection © the artist's estate.

What is interesting in the context of the theme for this seminar series is that the work of the Ashington Group was not originally made with a view to being subject to the usual curatorial activities of exhibition, collection, scholarly interpretation or even preservation. The following paragraphs outline the issues covered in the seminar, under those four headings.

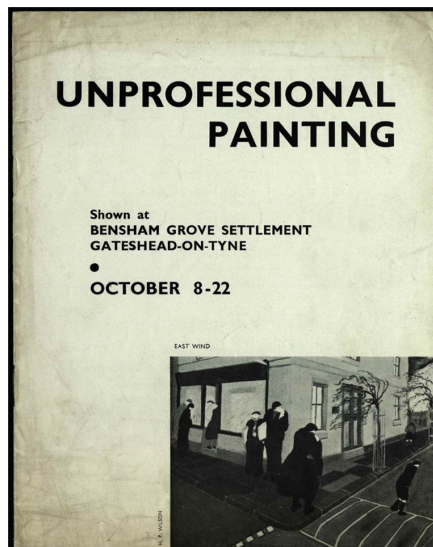
## Exhibition

The seminar covers ways the work of the Pitmen Painters has been exhibited from the 1930s to the 2010s. The variety of different organisations and institutions involved in temporary exhibitions of the paintings, and the different locations for these exhibitions, enables us to carry out some comparison of different curatorial approaches, while also taking into account the displays of permanent collections, e.g. at Woodhorn Museum and the Mining Art Museum.

Exhibitions discussed include:

1936 Hatton Gallery, Armstrong College, Newcastle: *Exhibition of Paintings by Members of an Art Appreciation Group, Ashington, Northumberland* (Group exhibition)

1938 Bensham Grove Educational Settlement, Gateshead, October 1938; Peckham Health Centre, London, November 1938: *Unprofessional Painting* (Youngs, Floyd, Beal, Rowe, Brownrigg L., Whinnom, Rankin, Brownrigg G., Kilbourn, Wilson, Foreman, Brown, Dobson A., Dobson J.)



Cover of *Unprofessional Painting* exhibition catalogue, Bensham Grove Settlement, October 1938

1939 Fulham Central Library, London; Borough of Mansfield Museum and Art Gallery: *'They Paint Their Own Lives': An Exhibition of Paintings by Bus Drivers, Housewives, Miners, Postmen, Sailors etc.*



- 1942 Lefevre Gallery, London: *The Ashington Group* (Group exhibition)
- 1950 AIA (Artists' International Association): *The Coalminers* (Kilbourn, Cornish)
- 1977 Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst, Berlin: *Englische Arbeiterkunst* (*English workers' art*)
- 1979-80 Arts Council/V&A: *Thirties: British Art and Design before the War* (Scott, Youngs, Floyd, Kilbourn, Wilson and Blessed)
- 2012 Genk, Belgium: *Manifesta 9* (Kilbourn, Spennymoor Settlement artists)

## **Collection**

The Group's Rule Book of 1946 made specific provision for the terms under which members' paintings became part of the permanent collection. After remaining in the Group's hut for a long time, it was kept temporarily at the National Coal Board Staff Training Centre, Newcastle, before being transferred to the care of Wansbeck District Council.

The bulk of the Ashington Group collection, administered by its Trustees, is now at Woodhorn Museum (formerly Woodhorn Colliery Museum) where it is displayed in a dedicated gallery, opened in 2007.



Ashington Group Gallery, Woodhorn Colliery Museum, Ashington, Northumbria  
Photo: Veronica Davies

Works by individual artists are included in the collections of a number of institutions, mainly, it has to be said, in the North of England, including the Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle (Kilbourn, Wilson), and the University of Northumbria (Cornish). Some are also in private hands, such as the painting by Jimmy Floyd, *My Uncle's Hobby*, purchased from the Lefevre Gallery exhibition in 1942.

## **Interpretation**

The Ashington Group's original tutor, Robert Lyon, was a great advocate for the group and its methods, with an article in *The Listener*, 'An experiment in art appreciation' (1935) and in the Ashington Colliery magazine (1938). The interest shown by *Mass Observation* in the 1930s and 40s also had an interpretative element. Most notably and more recently, William Feaver's book *Pitmen Painters* set the parameters for approaches to interpreting the Ashington Group's work, also influencing Lee Hall's theatrical interpretation. Meanwhile, joint publications by Robert McManners & Gillian Wales have broadened this out to include work by other artists associated with the mining industry in the North East.

In terms of academic scholarship, a growing art historical interest in, and discourse about, what has variously been termed 'Outsider', 'Other', 'primitive', 'naïve' or 'unprofessional' art (all, in their ways, contentious terms) lends itself to critical re-interpretation of this body of work. For historians, there is also scope for interpreting the Group's activities in terms of research into a vanishing/vanished way of life.

## **Preservation**

Papers in the Northumberland Archives contain vivid accounts of how specialist conservators set about the task of preserving paintings that had begun substantially to deteriorate. It is important in this context to keep in mind that the original intention had been to 'learn by doing' about composition and techniques, using whatever media were to hand, rather than to produce works for posterity.

## **Background notes**

### **Personalities**

Robert Lyon (1894-1978): Artist and educator, lecturer in fine art and Master of Painting at King's College, Newcastle upon Tyne, 1932-42. Principal of Edinburgh College of Art, 1942-60. WEA tutor to the Ashington Group 1934-42.

‘Pitmen Painters’ of the original Ashington Group:

Oliver Kilbourn (1904-1993): Miner from age 13, founder member of the Ashington Group, remained true to their ethos all his life. 1977: Exhibition of his series of paintings, *My Life as a Pitman*, also published in book form.

Arthur Whinnom (1899-1962): Founder member and group secretary of Ashington Group

Harry Wilson (1898-1972): Founder member

Jimmy Floyd (1898-1974): Founder member

Norman Cornish (1919-2014): Miner from age 14, learned art at Spennymoor Settlement, took up painting full-time on retirement from mining in 1966.

Julian Trevelyan (1910-1988): Artist, member of Mass-Observation, co-organiser of *Unprofessional Painting*.

Tom Harrisson (1911-1976): Explorer, anthropologist, co-founder of Mass-Observation, co-organiser of *Unprofessional Painting*.

William Feaver (1942-): Art critic, writer about and champion of the Pitmen Painters.

## **Organisations and institutions**

Workers’ Educational Association: The WEA, founded in 1903, brought together representatives of labour, union and cooperative movements in collaboration with university academics to offer high-quality education to working people. The Ashington Group were WEA students in a local class which could draw on this organisational network to provide tutors such as Lyon.

Mass-Observation: Formed in 1937, M-O was an organisation dedicated to carrying out and documenting anthropological/sociological investigations into contemporary British life. It was particularly active nationwide in the 1930s and 40s, often using working-class locations in the North of England as case studies.

Spennymoor Settlement: The Settlement Movement originated in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, when university academics ‘settled’ in deprived areas to share in the community and offer educational possibilities. Referred to as the ‘Pitman’s Academy’, Spennymoor Settlement was founded in 1931 as part of the Coalfields Settlements initiative.

Ashington Group Trustees: ‘The Agreement (1989) establishing a permanent gallery for the Ashington Group collection of paintings at Woodhorn Colliery Museum, was originally between Oliver Kilbourn (who held the collection in trust from all the other painters) and Wansbeck District Council.’ William Feaver was appointed co-trustee, and there are now 6 in total. ([www.ashingtongroup.co.uk/trustees.html](http://www.ashingtongroup.co.uk/trustees.html))

Woodhorn Museum: ‘The museum is proud to house the Ashington Group Collection of artworks – commonly known as the ‘Pitmen Painters’. This iconic display showcases what daily life was really like for miners in and around Ashington from the 1930s. It is reputed to be the first collection of amateur art to go on permanent display anywhere in the world.’ The Northumberland Archives, which holds relevant papers, are housed on the same site. ([museumsnorthumberland.org.uk/woodhorn-museum/about-us/](http://museumsnorthumberland.org.uk/woodhorn-museum/about-us/))

Mining Art Gallery, Bishop Auckland: A more recent venture, and part of the wider Auckland Project, ‘Containing the works of prominent artists – many of whom were local to the area, including Tom McGuinness and Norman Cornish – the intimate and awe-inspiring Mining Art Gallery gives visitors a truly unique insight into the lives and souls of coal miners.’ ([aucklandproject.org/venues/mining-art-gallery/](http://aucklandproject.org/venues/mining-art-gallery/))

## **Selected bibliography**

Ashington Group Trustees (2014 [2006]) *Catalogue of the Ashington Group Paintings at Woodhorn Colliery Museum*, 2nd edn, Ashington, Ashington Group Trustees.

Feaver, W. (1993 [1988]) *Pitmen Painters: The Ashington Group 1934–1984*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Northumbria Press.

Kilbourn, O. (2008) *My Life as a Pitman*, 2nd edn, Ashington, Woodhorn Colliery Museum.

McManners, R. and Wales, G. (2002) *Shafts of Light: Mining Art in the Great Northern Coalfield*, Bishop Auckland, Gemini Productions.

*Robson Green and the Pitmen Painters* (2011) Directed by Jon Blair [DVD], Jon Blair Films.

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