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Review of Walter Sickert at Tate Britain

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A review of the Walter Sickert exhibition at Tate Britain, London, 28 April–18 September 2022, which will travel to the Petit Palais in Paris, 14 October 2022–29 January 2023.



Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942) was master of the dramatic moment. He had a broad, roving intelligence and he gives one the impression of being a man whose mind seemed to move more quickly than his brush, and whose gift for imbuing narrative tension was matched only by his apparent boredom with his own easy facility with paint.

From the beginning, Sickert's life encompassed multitudes: he was born in Munich to a Danish artist and an English mother, herself the illegitimate offspring of a clergyman-astronomer and a stage dancer. His career spanned six decades — from the height of Victoria's reign to the early years of the Second World War — during which he nurtured these cosmopolitan origins, living between Dieppe, London, and sometimes Venice, while maintaining a reciprocated interest in avant-garde painters and critics in France. He detonated French modernism within a shocked, yet receptive British art world, where he moved fluidly not only in the company of artists, writers, and socialites but also, as his friend, the writer Osbert Sitwell recalled, with 'prize fighters, jockeys, painters, music-hall comedians, statesmen, washerwomen and fishwives'.¹ 'The more our art is serious,' Sickert proclaimed in an article of 1910,

the more will it tend to avoid the drawing-room and stick to the kitchen. The plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts [...] while they will flourish in the scullery, or on the dunghill, they fade at a breath from the drawing-room.²

Gross materiality did, in fact, become something of a guiding principle for him. Whether it was the peaks or scratches of deftly handled paint or sourcing his subjects from streets, music halls, or grainy news images, Sickert continually probed the limits around him in search of the challenging. And what he created is also often challenging for viewers.

Sickert's legacy is esteemed yet tumultuous. Popular, though never wealthy, during his lifetime, Sickert's posthumous prominence has risen and fallen according to the fluctuating taste for figuration, and yet he has always been an iconic 'painters' painter'. From his early role as a leading member of the New English Art Club to his inspirational contribution to the Fitzroy Street and Camden Town groups, he has long mesmerized artists — even being reclaimed as a posthumous figurehead by the influential generation

¹ Sitwell had known Sickert well since 1916. See Osbert Sitwell, 'Introduction', in *A Free House!: Or the Artist as Craftsman: Being the Writings of Walter Richard Sickert*, ed. by Osbert Sitwell (London: Macmillan, 1947), pp. xli–xlii.

² 'Idealism', *Art News*, 12 May 1910, in *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, ed. by Anna Gruetzner Robins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 228–30 (p. 229). See also, David Peters Corbett, "'Gross material facts": Sexuality, Identity and the City in Walter Sickert, 1905–1910', *Art History*, 21 (1998), 45–64.

of figurative painters after the Second World War, including Lucian Freud (1922–2011) and Francis Bacon (1909–1992).

At the moment, Sickert appears to be once more in ascendancy. The Tate retrospective (28 April–18 September 2022) brings together more than 150 of his works, primarily paintings, many of which are sourced from otherwise inaccessible private collections as well as those scattered around the globe. A beautifully illustrated, scholarly anthology accompanies the exhibition.³ The curation is the fruit of a British–French collaboration: resident Tate curators Emma Chambers and Thomas Kennedy constructed the exhibition alongside Caroline Corbeau–Parsons, curator of drawings at the Musée d’Orsay, and the late Delphine Lévy, former executive director of Paris Musées. After London the exhibition will continue at the Petit Palais in Paris and follows closely upon the heels of the Walker Art Gallery in Liverpool’s impressive exhibition ‘Sickert: A Life in Art’, which was curated by Charlotte Keenan McDonald around the gallery’s considerable collection of 348 drawings by Sickert. Together, these two major exhibitions constitute a special moment for Sickert enthusiasts.

It has been three decades since the last major Sickert exhibition: ‘Sickert Paintings’ at the Royal Academy in 1992–93, curated by Wendy Baron and Richard Shone.⁴ During this time, however, fascination with Sickert’s life has continued to flourish, even though, scholastically, Baron’s catalogue raisonné of 2006 remains the authoritative text on his oeuvre. Biographic interest has ranged from the salubrious, such as Matthew Sturgis’s *Walter Sickert: A Life* (2005), to the salacious, such as Patricia Cornwell’s debunked *Portrait of a Killer* (2002). Many reviews of the Tate exhibition have veered towards the sensationalism of Cornwell, reading all that is unsettling and powerful within Sickert’s work as akin to the genre of body horror — even weighing the claim that Sickert was Jack the Ripper.⁵ Such spectres haunt

³ *Walter Sickert*, ed. by Emma Chambers, exhibition catalogue (London: Tate, 2022). The exhibition supporters and private gallery Piano Nobile of London also offer an anthology as part of their recent exhibition ‘Sickert’ (24 September–17 December 2021): *Sickert: The Theatre of Life*, ed. by Richard Shone (London: Piano Nobile, 2021).

⁴ The lack of major exhibitions does not diminish the importance that smaller, more focused exhibitions have played in shaping Sickert scholarship, such as: ‘Sickert in Dieppe’, curated by Katy Norris at Pallant House in 2015; ‘Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes’, curated by Barnaby Wright at the Courtauld Gallery in 2007–08; ‘Walter Sickert: Drawing is the Thing’, curated by Alistair Smith and Wendy Baron at the Whitworth Art Gallery in 2004; and ‘Late Sickert: Paintings 1927 to 1942’, a travelling Arts Council exhibition curated by Richard Morphet in 1981.

⁵ Examples of these reviews include: Jonathan Jones, ‘Walter Sickert Review — Serial Killer, Fantasist or Self-Hater?’, *Guardian*, 26 April 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/apr/26/walter-sickert-review-serial-killer-tate-britain-london-show-women-victorian-painter>>; Laura Cumming, ‘Walter Sickert Review — A Master of Menace’, *Guardian*, 1 May 2022 <<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2022/may/01/walter-sickert-review-tate-britain-london>>; and Laura Freeman, ‘Walter Sickert Review — Dirty, Upsetting, and Very Powerful’, *Sunday Times*, 26 April 2022 <<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/walter-sickert-review-dirty-upsetting-and-very-powerful-dzf6kvnqx>> [all accessed 11 July 2022].

Sickert's legacy.⁶ A uniting feature among them is the difficulty of grasping who Sickert-the-man, let alone Sickert-the-painter, was.

Sickert enjoyed playing different roles. Beneath the theatricality, there is evidence that he deliberately cultivated an ineffability: during his early foray into acting, he chose 'Mr Nemo' as his stage name, which loosely translates from Latin as 'no-one'.⁷ The rapidity of Sickert's early self-transformations — from a sword-carrying Byronic *flâneur* to a barrow boy, and back to a frock-coated dandy — prompted his sister-in-law to call him 'a changeling'.⁸ This tendency to flit in and out of different guises and personas remained throughout his life. His biographer Matthew Sturgis has observed: 'Sickert [...] knew that his quick changes, outlandish outfits, and extravagant poses had the power to surprise, confuse, even shock.'⁹ Sickert's theatricality is inseparable from the power of his paintings, for he makes each painting a kind of theatrical production, where the spectators' position is moulded by the role that the painter played — which results in an ambiguous moment of tension for the spectator. This cavalier attitude to identity also presents tension for curators.

Retrospectives, like biographies, are forced to use the personality of an historical figure as the uniting feature of their enquiry, but unlike biographies, retrospectives must be sequential and consumed within a single visit. Tate resolves this particular awkwardness for Sickert by using two organizing principles. The first is to explore the great mass of shifting and slippery identities that was Sickert by grouping his oeuvre primarily by themed rooms, leaving the date of the works' creation a much less prominent role. The second innovation is to open with a room that functions as a synecdoche: entering the exhibition, we find ourselves in a space of powerful self-portraits, which range from an intimate early pen drawing to his later period play-acting, which includes a haunting inhabitation of the figure of Lazarus, where green, dead flesh retreats as the artist-actor-subject carefully chews, hunched over a spoonful of beans. Attendant texts are explicit about the ways in which these pieces reveal the depth of Sickert's playful and sometimes slippery theatricality. Each painting seems

⁶ Fuel is thrown on this fire by Anna Gruetzner Robins's essay in the exhibition catalogue, which presents evidence from a paper specialist hired by Tate that Sickert sent some of the letters to the police, which claim to be from the Ripper. Sickert is exonerated by many on the grounds that he was out of the country at the time of some of the killings. There is no conclusive evidence that he was the Ripper, only that he was fascinated by the Ripper as a character and as a weight on the public imagination — which was in keeping with the zeitgeist of his time. See Anna Gruetzner Robins, "'Catch me if you can": Sickert and Jack the Ripper', in *Walter Sickert*, ed. by Chambers, pp. 220–22 (p. 222).

⁷ As invoked by Charles Dickens in *Bleak House* (1852–53) as the alias for Captain Hawdon — Sickert was fond of the novel. See William Rough, 'Walter Richard Sickert and the Theatre, c. 1880–c. 1940' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of St Andrews, 2010), p. 23.

⁸ Maggie Cobden, letter to Dorothy Richmond (18 October 1880), Chichester, West Sussex Record Office, Cobden Archives (Trustees of Dunford House), Cobden Papers, 979.

⁹ Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: Harper Perennial, 2005), p. 83.

to constitute a self-reinvention with beards and props, stances and wardrobes coming and going. He is almost unrecognizable from one to the next. We walk his entire life, introduced to its vicissitudes, before beginning the retrospective by moving into a detailed examination of his apprenticeship with the master of wet-on-wet aestheticism, James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834–1903).

The Sickert exhibition is slow to unfold, but once it does, it is mesmerizing. To walk the course of an entire life in the first room only to delve next into the minutiae of its early development feels anticlimactic. The small canvases and works on paper by master and apprentice are arranged in pairs, like a call and response. The appeal of these little pieces lies in the visual poetry they draw from in the modern, urban scenes they depict, and yet their power is dampened by the largeness of the high-volume space around them and the emphasis on their contingency — it is an arrangement that assumes a prior enthusiasm for, if not also foreknowledge of, the artists. The turning point of the exhibition arrives with Sickert's *The Red Shop* of c. 1888 (Fig. 1). Here Sickert begins to find his own voice; he stops framing the picture around the frontal flatness of his shopfronts. Depth is allowed



Fig. 1: Walter Sickert, *The Red Shop*, c. 1888, oil paint on panel, 26.7 × 35.6 cm.
Photo credit: Norfolk Museums Service.

in. At the same time a flat effect is courted through colour: the shop's facade pops free from the gloaming greens around it through the use of a brilliant cadmium red. Here we can begin to appreciate Sickert's lifelong fascination with colour, specifically his interest in how paint can recreate the dreamlike experience of unstable light, be it dusk, stage lights, or a camera flash. He continued to develop this throughout his life, from the spotlight in *Little Dot* (c. 1888–89) and the glowing pink stripes on the blouses of *Two Women on a Sofa — Le Tose* (c. 1903–04), to the metallic gleam of gold in *St Mark's Venice* (1896–97), or the eviscerating shadows of *Sir Hugh Walpole* (1929).

The exhibition excels in its presentation of both the variety and the subjects that Sickert gravitated back to throughout his life. After the first rooms, the result is dizzying. Figures swim in and out of focus. Some artists suffer from being presented through such maximalism, but not Sickert. There is pleasure in regarding the many perspectives of a subject alongside one another. Doing so allows us to appreciate the sometimes delicate and sometimes bold shifts between their varying elements. One can almost feel the vibration of Sickert's mind as he gravitated towards and away from key elements in each series, such as the warping of mirrors, tense gestures of emotional interdependency, or the way a mattress dips around a heavy body.¹⁰ These details flicker between canvases as if viewed through a stop-motion camera, sometimes prominent and sometimes retreating, but always urgent. Paradoxically, this presentation denies a superficial reading of the works, whether for anecdote or by subject. Instead, we the viewers are unsettled, as if we are being edged out over the gaping strangeness within each picture, and we only recognize the similarities afterwards. The visceral lustre, topography, and pitch of Sickert's paint, let alone the vertiginousness of his compositions, become inescapable. In among the dreamlike tension, the seriousness of this work is overwhelmingly evident and urgent.

In Sickert's nudes and multiframe compositions gravitas is particularly heightened. While comprising a relatively small percentage of Sickert's output, his frank approach to the naked body greatly impacted the development of British painting, both during and long after his lifetime. It is unsurprising therefore that Sickert's nudes are the pieces that he is best known for — and especially those which meld painterly objectification with sexual and even murderous connotations. An exemplar of this is Yale's iconic double portrait of c. 1908 (Fig. 2). It presents an uncomfortably close view of a clothed man

¹⁰ It is possible that Sickert would be pleased with this experience of his works, since his architectural paintings were inspired by Claude Monet's (1840–1926) paintings of Rouen Cathedral, which are seen best when seen together, revealing how colour and perspective expand and contract across the over thirty canvases devoted to the same view. Monet produced his canvases depicting the cathedral in Rouen, Normandy between 1892 and 1893. Sickert's inspiration from Monet is noted in Emma Chambers, 'Introduction', in *Walter Sickert*, ed. by Chambers, pp. 10–13 (p. 12).



Fig. 2: Walter Sickert, *The Camden Town Murder* (or 'What Shall We Do for the Rent?'), c. 1908, oil paint on canvas, 25.6 × 36 cm. Photo credit: Yale Center for British Art.

sitting on a bed before a naked woman. She is clenched in an unnatural repose with her face turned away. He is sunken onto his knees, seemingly staring blankly at his hands. Originally titled '*What Shall We Do for the Rent?*', Sickert courted controversy by retitling it *The Camden Town Murder*.¹¹ At Tate this painting is tucked away towards the end of the exhibition, as if deliberately avoiding the controversy the curators knew would come.

We reach the nudes only in the sixth out of eight rooms and those works whose titles evoke murder are placed at the end of a long room, behind a partition. The room's entrance, and our reading of these pieces, is framed by works by Pierre Bonnard

¹¹ Sickert pronounced in a lecture at Thanet School of Art in 1934 that 'It is said that we are a great literary nation but we really don't care about literature, we like films and we like a good murder. If there is not a murder about every day they put one in. They have put in every murder which has occurred during the past ten years again, even the Camden Town murder. Not that I am against that because I once painted a whole series about the Camden Town murder, and after all murder is as good a subject as any other.' Quoted in Lisa Tickner, 'Walter Sickert: *The Camden Town Murder* and Tabloid Crime', in *The Camden Town Group in Context*, ed. by Helena Bonett, Ysanne Holt, and Jennifer Mundy, Tate Research Publication, May 2012 <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/lisa-tickner-walter-sickert-the-camden-town-murder-and-tabloid-crime-r1104355>> [accessed 11 July 2022]. See also, Corbett.

(1867–1947), Edgar Degas (1834–1917), and Lucian Freud. This structure continues the exhibition’s earlier use of call-and-response pairings. It firmly grounds the nudes in relation to those artists who inspired Sickert as well as those whom he would inspire. In keeping with French modernism, this contextualization also emphasizes the body as an artistic dilemma, rather than lingering on moral or narrative connotations. An alternative approach, which might have aided viewers in understanding the historical context of the morbid in Sickert’s works, would have been to include explicit sex-murder images, which came into vogue with artists operating within Surrealist or Neue Sachlichkeit circles. Such pieces used violence to question the hypocrisy of bourgeois morality and by extension ‘civilized’ man.¹² Sickert opened territory for such attacks, aesthetically as well as intellectually — in an article of 1908 he claimed that ‘taste is the death of a painter’ — and yet the violence in his paintings is implicit rather than explicit.¹³ It is subtler. It resides as much in the delicate thrill of mystery as it does by crude invocation of violence. In a single-figure picture, such as *La Maigre Adeline* of 1906, unease stems from the combination of subject, paint, and composition: the upper edge of the picture appears too shallow, as if it were a vice tightening around the unwittingly smiling woman, who is splayed, Christlike, on a bed. The brilliance of Tate’s curatorial strategy regarding the nudes is the emphasis on Sickert as a craftsman as much as a storyteller. By the time we reach *The Camden Town Murder*, we have forgotten our preconceptions — we are already trained to read Sickert’s work for his sensitive intelligence as it continually pushes against limitations, both material and moral. Despite being over a century old, the cumulative effect is that paintings like *La Maigre Adeline* remain remarkably fresh.

The urgency retained in these paintings is particularly pronounced in the final room. Here we return to the aged Sickert as he works from newspaper clippings and grayscale photographs. Sickert’s late period is often glossed over in favour of the flashier music halls and nudes; there are relatively few academic enquiries into its ramifications.¹⁴ It is a period marked by strange and monumental canvases, where pulp imagery is bloated

¹² In addition to the Surrealist circle around André Breton (1896–1966), which regarded sex and murder as anti-bourgeois fundamentals of the Freudian id, Lustmord (or sexual murder) images became particularly important for artists within the Neue Sachlichkeit (or New Objectivity) in Germany. George Grosz (1893–1959) even photographed himself as Jack the Ripper menacing his wife in *Self-Portrait with Eva Peters in the Artist’s Studio* (1918). See also, Maria Tatar, *Lustmord: Sexual Murder in Weimar Germany* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1995).

¹³ Walter Sickert, ‘The New Life of Whistler’, *Fortnightly Review*, December 1908, in *Walter Sickert*, ed. by Gruetzner Robins, pp. 178–88 (p. 185).

¹⁴ The exceptions to this scholarly neglect are: the Arts Council exhibition, ‘Late Sickert: Paintings 1927 to 1942’, curated by Richard Morphet in 1981; Sam Rose, ‘“With an almost pathetic fatality doing what is right”: Late Sickert and His Critics’, *Art History*, 37 (2014), 126–47; Rebecca Daniels, ‘Walter Richard Sickert’s “Echoes” from the “London Journal”’, *Burlington Magazine*, 150 (2008), 256–59; and Merlin Seller, ‘Material Memory: The Work of Late Sickert, 1927–42’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of East Anglia, 2016).

into epic proportions. Lurid lighting effects are translated back into queasy interlocking zones of colour on an immense scale. In *The Seducer* of c. 1929–30 (Fig. 3) — one of the ‘English Echoes’, reworked from Victorian illustrations — Sickert recreates high drama in a Victorian parlour in gaudy yellows and comic-ironic theatricality.¹⁵ It is easy to see the Victorian pomp plucked out of its time as an allegory for memory, anachronism, and old age, and yet it is also a prescient reflection on mass culture and mediation. It would not be out of place alongside pop masterpieces of the 1960s, such as Roy Lichtenstein’s (1923–1997) giant comic strips, or Gerhard Richter’s (b.1932) blurred family snapshots. ‘We cannot well have pictures on a large scale nowadays,’ Sickert proclaimed of another piece from 1929, ‘but we can have small fragments of pictures on a colossal scale.’¹⁶ Even as he approached the end of his life, Sickert rushes headlong at the question of what his ‘gross material facts’ could mean now with unflagging energy.



Fig.3: Walter Sickert, *The Seducer*, c. 1929–30, oil on canvas, 42.5 × 62.5 cm.
Photo credit: Tate, CC BY-NC-ND.

¹⁵ *The Seducer* is reworked from a cover by John Gilbert for the *London Journal* in 1856.

¹⁶ ‘Walter Richard Sickert, *The Servant of Abraham*, 1929’, Tate <<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-the-servant-of-abraham-t00259>> [accessed 11 July 2022]. Also quoted in the wall text at the exhibition.

Ultimately, the success of the exhibition lies in its deftness in spanning the various gaps that Sickert and his oeuvre present. The exhibition successfully orientates him within both the French realism that inspired him and the later British realism that he would inspire. That critical reviews of the exhibition have fixated on the horror of his works reveals just how effective the curation was in revealing the rawness and unsettling power of these paintings. In other words: despite these works being over a century old, one comes away from this exhibition in awe not only of Sickert's talent and the way that his observant intelligence haunts his brush, but also of the complex history around his development — and most of all the seriousness and unsettling power of individual pieces, which retain their ability to shock, even now.

