**Sickert, Walter, 1860 – 1942**

Walter Sickert is widely acknowledged as one of the most important figures in modern British art. He was instrumental in furthering acceptance of Impressionist art in Britain and the progression to modern British painting in the pre-war period as both a painter and a writer for periodicals such as *New Age*. Sickert's works demonstrate an abiding interest in the surface of pictures and in the essence of paint as a material. The painting *Minnie Cunningham at the Old Bedford*, 1892, shows Sickert at the confluence of his two great influences. Inspired by the tutelage of Whistler, its thin washes of wet paint and a shallow pictorial space depict a theatrical subject matter much favoured by Edgar Degas. A decade later, in early twentieth century London**,** Sickert found his place as the elder statesman amongst artists including Spencer Gore, Harold Gilman and Malcolm Drummond in the Camden Town Group and London Group. Through his teaching at, among others, the Westminster School of Art, he imparted his devotion to everyday, urban subjects and dispassionate recording of visual fact to future generations of figurative artists including William Coldstream and David Bomberg.

Walter Richard Sickert was born in Munich in 1860, the son of the Danish-German painter Oswald Sickert and Eleanor Louisa Henry, of Anglo-Irish descent. The family moved from Germany to Britain in 1868 where Sickert trained as an actor, sparking a lifelong passion for the theatre and popular entertainments. He undertook a general art course at the Slade in 1881, before working as a studio assistant for James Abbott McNeill Whistler. His friendship with the Impressionist artist Edgar Degas, whom Sickert met in 1883, proved a powerful influence and helped him to develop his style and technique beyond the rigid example that had been set by Whistler. Following Degas, Sickert created works in the studio from multiple sketches, often squared up to his canvases using a grid formation.

At the end of the nineteenth century, Sickert's sombrely coloured studies of markedly ordinary subjects set him apart as a progressive artist within the New English Art Club (NEAC). He submitted numerous works for display in NEAC exhibitions and, in 1889, helped to organise an exhibition of 'London Impressionists' at the Goupil Gallery in London. He spent much of the latter part of the nineteenth century in Dieppe, in Northern France, which later became a favourite holiday destination of the Camden Town Group artists. Between 1894 – 1904, Sickert made multiple painting trips to Venice where, alongside more traditional architectural studies, he began to paint tableaux of local prostitutes and labourers.

Upon relocating to London in 1905, he immersed himself in the urban and working-class life of the city by purposefully taking lodgings and studio space in the more impoverished Cumberland Market and Camden Town areas. His faith in the benefits of group artistic organisation for the purposes of criticism, encouragement and promotion proved a driving force in the foundation of the Fitzroy Street Group and later Camden Town and London Groups. He inspired younger artists including Spencer Gore to view the everyday urban environment and the activities of ordinary people as subjects befitting modern painting. In return, Gore's example led Sickert to experiment with the lightening of his colours and a dryer, more broken handling of his paint. During this period, Sickert painted some of his most enduring images as part of the Camden Town Murder series. In these frank and starkly naturalistic nudes (descendants of his paintings of Venetian prostitutes), such as *L'Affaire de Camden Town*, 1909, Sickert flaunts his eye for controversial subjects and lowly settings while painting in thick broken daubs from a characteristically muted palette.

During the First World War, Sickert’s travels within Britain resulted in paintings of sights in Brighton and Bath. In later years, due to failing eyesight, he pioneered painting from photographs and press clippings; this process led to swiftly executed works that display a vitality similar to contemporary street posters and signage.

**References and Further Reading**

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