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| **Camden Town Group** |
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| Founded in 1911 and active in London before the First World War, the Camden Town Group played an important role in the development of a distinctively modern British visual art. Its sixteen members promoted modern art's engagement with a modern world and, in particular, with the minutiae of everyday urban life across a range of characteristic subjects. These subjects included views of street corners, portraits of local girls, shabby bedsit rooms and theatre and music hall interiors, as represented, for example, in Spencer Gore's *The Balcony at the Alhambra* (c.1911-12). The group held only three official exhibitions, all between June 1911 and December 1912 at the Carfax Gallery, London, but the group's members participated in a great many more contemporaneous events and displays that contributed to the burgeoning British post-impressionist art scene. |
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File: camden1.jpg  1 Spencer Gore, The Balcony at the Alhambra, c.1911–12, Oil on canvas, 48.5 x 35.5 cm, York Museums Trust, York Art Gallery - http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/the-balcony-at-the-alhambra-8114  A list of members includes: Walter Bayes, Robert Bevan, Harold Gilman, Charles Ginner, Spencer Frederick Gore, Duncan Grant (following Doman Turner's death in September 1911), James Dickson Innes, Augustus John, Henry Lamb, Wyndham Lewis, Maxwell Gordon Lightfoot, James Bolivar Manson, Lucien Pissarro (the son of French Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro), William Ratcliffe, Walter Sickert, and John Doman Turner. Style and Subjects In style, the group was loosely connected by an engagement with the methods of the French Impressionists and, for certain members, with the more adventurous techniques of forebears including Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh, and Paul Cézanne. Members would go on to develop their own, more individual styles of post-impressionism in the longer lasting Fitzroy Street Group and London Group. Yet for the brief period in which they operated under the Camden Town Group moniker, they were united stylistically by the thick encrustations of colour applied in broken touches to their mostly small canvases.  The Group evolved from the casual acquaintances of artists in the first decade of the 20th century, centred around the artist and writer Walter Sickert. Following informal meetings at Sickert's studios and accommodation, they rented studio space at the same address, 19 Fitzroy Street, London, where members displayed and discussed each other’s works – as pictured in Malcolm Drummond's painting *19 Fitzroy Street* (c.1912–14) – and made informal sales.  File: camden2.jpg  Malcolm Drummond, 19 Fitzroy Street, c.1912–14, Oil on canvas, 71 x 50.8 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne - http://www.bbc.co.uk/arts/yourpaintings/paintings/19-fitzroy-street-walter-richard-sickerts-studio-36172  Before the infamous *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* exhibition, organised by Roger Fry at the Grafton Gallery in 1910-11, British art had remained relatively untouched by the more advanced abstract art emerging in Europe. While future Camden Town Group members such as Harold Gilman, Charles Ginner and Gore were aware of certain progressive currents and leading lights, this exhibition provided an opportunity for close examination of works by the likes of Van Gogh, Gauguin and Cézanne and certainly proved a catalyst for British artists to self-organise more innovative exhibitions.  Ginner, who settled in London in 1910, was instrumental in introducing the modern, urban landscape into the repertoire of his Camden Town Group colleagues. Ginner's brightly coloured and tightly cropped view of the traffic island at Piccadilly Circus (1912) captures the bustling street life at the heart of the urban metropolis. It demonstrates the group's concern with the clash of tradition and modernity, wherein coster girls sell flowers in the midst of passing vehicles bedecked with signage advertising the latest theatrical entertainments.  File: camden3.jpg  Charles Ginner, Picadilly Circus, 1912, Oil on canvas, Tate Gallery, London http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/ginner-piccadilly-circus-t03096  The output of the group's artists is not, however, blindly reverential or awestruck by the pleasures of the metropolis. Many of their works, especially those of quiet urban interiors, bespeak the alienation of modern city dwelling. The cropped and shallow pictorial space of Walter Sickert's *What Shall We Do for the Rent?* (c.1908), for example, evokes subjects including prostitution, debt and controversial allusions to a recent series of murders in the Camden Town area.  File: camden4.jpg  Walter Sickert, What Shall We Do for the Rent?, c.1908, Oil on canvas, 25.6 x 35.5 cm, Yale Centre for British Art, New Haven http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1669252  However, in fact only a few of the group's artists regularly created nude studies and it is likely, due to Sickert's importance in the history of the group and his lasting renown, that many commentaries overstate the association of the group with this subject. The paintings of Gore and Gilman may represent the most characteristically Camden Town Group painting. They offer a middle ground amongst the group's celebration of, or despair at, the urban environment. Sickert, seeking to urge Britsh painters away from the tasteful aestheticism of the late nineteenth century, famously stated in 1910 that:  The more our art is serious, 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 […] and while they will flourish in the scullery, or on the dunghill, they fade at a breath from the drawing-room. [Sickert]  Paintings such as Gore's *The Gas Cooker* (1913) and *The Shopping List* (1912) by Gilman, present intimate and unglamorous domestic interiors in which vibrant harmonies of flat colour elevate the everyday items depicted to the status of devotional objects, whilst the figures quietly and determinately go about their daily tasks.  File: camden5.jpg  Harold Gilman, Shopping List, 1912, Oil on canvas, 61.5 x 51 cm, British Council Collection  The Group held no further exhibitions after 1912 and its members gradually formed alternative organisations. Members of the Camden Town Group merged with outlying members of the Fitzroy Street Group to create the long lasting London Group. Later, between 1914-15, the so-called Neo-Realist artists – Ginner, Gilman and Robert Bevan – formed the Cumberland Market Group. The Camden Town Group's brief but highly productive existence had fulfilled Sickert's desire to foster and embolden a younger generation of British artists whose works accurately recorded their modern experience. Its core members were not interested in pushing abstraction to extremes but their determination and group organisation afforded them the space to experiment with modernist techniques whilst creating honest visual documents without recourse to pictorial artifice. |
| Further reading:  (Baron)  (Bonett, Holt and Mundy)  (Peters Corbett, Walter Sickert: Surface and Modernity)  (Peters Corbett, The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914)  (Sickert)  (Upstone) |