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| **Camden Town Group, The (1911-1912)** |
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| Founded in 1911 and active in London before the First World War, the sixteen members of the Camden Town Group played an important role in developing a distinctively modern British visual art. They 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. The subjects of their art include views of street corners, portraits of local girls, shabby bedsit rooms as well as 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 between June 1911 and December 1912, all at the Carfax Gallery, London. However, the group's members participated in a great many more contemporaneous events and displays which contributed to the burgeoning British post-impressionist art scene.  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 their forebears including Paul Gauguin, Vincent Van Gogh and Paul Cézanne. Many members would go on to develop their own, more individual styles of post-impressionism as members of the longer lasting Fitzroy Street Group and London Group. Nevertheless, for the brief period during which they operated under the Camden Town Group moniker, they were united stylistically by the thick encrustations of colour, which they applied in broken touches to their mostly small canvases.  The Group evolved from the casual acquaintances of artists in the first decade of the Twentieth century, and was centred around the artist and writer Walter Sickert. Following informal meetings at Sickert's studios and accommodation the group rented studio space at the same address, 19 Fitzroy Street, London, where members displayed and discussed each other’s works. Such can observed in Malcolm Drummond's painting *19 Fitzroy Street* (c.1912–14).  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 the close examination of works by the likes of Van Gogh, Gauguin, and Cézanne and 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 and 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.  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 often associated with modern city dwelling. The cropped and shallow pictorial space of Walter Sickert's *What Shall We Do About the Rent?* (c.1908), for example, evokes subjects including prostitution, debt and controversial allusions to a series of murders committed in the Camden Town area at the time. Only a few of the group's artists regularly created nude studies, Sickert being one of them. It is likely due to Sickert's importance in the history of the group and his lasting renown that many commentaries overstate the group’s association with this subject.  The paintings of Gore and Gilman may best represent the style of the Camden Town Group; they offer a middle ground that falls between the group's celebration of the urban environment, and the despair depicted at the hands of the city. Sickert, seeking to urge British painters away from the tasteful aestheticism of the late nineteenth century, famously stated in 1910:  “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.' Paintings such as Gore's *The Gas Cooker* (1913) and *The Shopping List* (1912) by Gilman, present intimate and unglamorous domestic interiors following Sickert’s directive. In Gore’s and Gilman’s respective paintings, vibrant harmonies of flat colour elevate the everyday items depicted to the status of devotional objects, while the figures quietly and determinately go about their daily tasks.  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, and 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 while creating honest visual documents without recourse to pictorial artifice.  **List of Members:**  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, John Doman Turner. |
| Further reading:  Baron, W. (2000) *Perfect moderns: a history of the Camden Town Group*, London: Ashgate.  Upstone, R. (ed.) (2008) *Modern Painters: The Camden Town Group*, exh. cat. London: Tate Publishing.  Bonett, H., Holt, Y., Mundy, J. (eds.) (2012), The Camden Town Group in Context, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group>.  Peters Corbett, D. (2004) ‘Walter Sickert: Surface and Modernity’ and ‘The Aesthetics of Materiality: English Modernism before 1914’, *The World in Paint: Modern Art and Visuality in England, 1848–1914*, Manchester: Manchester University Press: 169–261. |