“A Sense of Form”: the art of David Bomberg

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“A Sense of Form”: the art of David Bomberg

„Wyczucie formy”: sztuka Davida Bomberga

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Introduction

In an article published in *Art Review* in January 1996, Richard Ingleby referred to Bomberg as "a bright star in eclipse", a statement which well reflects the unjust neglect the artist had suffered most of his life[1]. He did not have a retrospective exhibition in any of the prestigious London galleries during his lifetime. It was only in 1957 – a year after the artist's death – that the Tate Gallery in London decided to hold a retrospective of his works, which came, however, too late to compensate Bomberg for the disregard he had experienced.

The ignorance of the major art institutions in Britain was further demonstrated by a truly misguided purchase made by the Tate. During Bomberg's lifetime the gallery purchased just two of his minor student works which could hardly be considered representative of his full artistic ability. Other mainstream galleries were not keen on buying his works either. The humiliation he experienced from the Tate was at its most extreme during the exhibition *Wyndham Lewis and Vorticism*, in which Bomberg, who never considered himself a Vorticist, was represented by these two insignificant works in a section called "Other Vorticists". During his lifetime, Bomberg mounted a number of shows in less prominent venues famous for their avant-garde character. But if critics were at all bothered to write their reviews of these exhibitions, they were rarely supportive or encouraging of Bomberg.

During the Great War, Bomberg had difficulties in acquiring a commission to paint, but when he finally did, his canvas *Sappers at Work* for the Canadian War Memorial Fund was rejected. This forced the artist to paint it again in a manner that was completely alien to his own vision of the scene, purely to please the officials. Such a lack of understanding was a harsh blow to an artist of his kind, but sadly it continued throughout his life. During the Second World War he only managed to obtain a small commission, following hundreds of requests, for a single painting, from the War Artists' Advisory Committee, who supported many artists of lesser abilities.

[1] Ingleby (1996).

Furthermore, Bomberg's name was excluded from major publications on modern British art that appeared during his lifetime, such as for instance Herbert Read's *Contemporary British Art* (1951) and John Rothenstein's *Modern English Painters* (1956)[2].

Bomberg was also denied many teaching posts, before he eventually was allowed to teach drawing to gun crews in Hyde Park, and later on at the Borough Polytechnic. Having realized, towards the end of his life, how badly ignored and abandoned he and his art had become, the embittered Bomberg became consumed by rage and despair, which undoubtedly brought about the artist's premature death in 1957.

Today, David Bomberg is considered to be one of the greatest British artists of the twentieth century. He is particularly well-known for his contribution to the avant-garde movement in Britain. He fought for the modernist cause as soon as his early art school years. When his professor criticized his Cubist work for its inappropriateness, Bomberg attacked him with his palette which well demonstrated his youthful buoyancy. He was never willing to compromise in his art which sometimes alienated critics and art dealers. His highly avant-garde style was even rejected by the Omega Workshops (associated with the Bloomsbury Group), where the young artist worked in 1912. Bomberg's urgency to paint the aforementioned *Sappers at Work* in a Cubo-Futurist manner again exemplifies his determination to pursue the avant-garde cause.

Even following the early stages of his career, Bomberg, remained innovative in comparison with other British artists. After he had abandoned his fascination with Cubism and the avant-garde distortion of the natural environment, he began to approach abstraction and arguably may claim to have become an Expressionist painter – not only representing a ground-breaking shift of direction but also disparate with the art produced within the British Isles at that time.

One could contend that Bomberg was born into an era which in itself was transitory to British art in general. When he was young, British painters were still working on pastoral views of the British landscape and portraits of prominent figures of the ruling class, mostly executed in a mimetic style to please the eyes of the bourgeois taste. While at the onset of the twentieth-century the British public were extremely sceptical towards new developments in art, today, a century later, they are more willing and open to accepting new ideas and art that breaks with tradition. Bomberg found himself in a position in which he was expected to accustom the public to the new developments from the Continent. The task was not an easy one, and although the artist succeeded, it cost him critical acclaim and financial success.

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[2] Cork (1987: 1).

Today, his paintings and drawings are some of the most desirable and expensive items for sale, appearing at famous auction houses, such as Christie's and Sotheby's, and reaching several hundred thousands pounds in value - more than that of works by Wyndham Lewis, Bomberg's major rival, who enjoyed great prestige during his lifetime. Today, all the major art catalogues and directories include Bomberg's name with descriptions of his major works, boldly introducing the leading British Cubist. Today, no single exhibition of British painting in the twentieth-century is mounted without Bomberg's contribution, such as for instance *Modern English Masters* at Bernard Jacobson Gallery in 1996. Many world famous galleries and museums now boast of having one of Bomberg's paintings including Tate Britain in London, who now hold the best of Bomberg's early works such as *The Mud Bath*, *In the Hold* and *Ju-Jitsu* and The Art Gallery of New South Wales in Sydney, Australia, where Bomberg's *The Garden and Tower of the Sacristy. Cuenca Cathedral* is held in the permanent collection together with William Roberts, Vlaminck and Auerbach, as well as alongside Picasso and Van Gogh.

Bomberg's legacy is further manifested by the success of his students, including Leon Kossoff, Frank Auerbach and Dennis Creffield, all of whom are considered among the finest contemporary, British painters. In 1995, Leon Kossoff represented Britain at the Venice Biennale, and both he and Auerbach received wide acclaim at the British Council exhibition *From London* at the Edinburgh Festival of the same year. Ingleby's view is that "Without Bomberg's teaching, Kossoff, Auerbach and Creffield would still be painters, but they would not be the painters that they are. They are Bomberg's legacy, almost as much as his own works", Ingleby reports[3].

Aware of the great recognition that Bomberg enjoys today, it is hard to understand the ignorance and neglect he suffered. It can, however, be partially explained by the radical changes his art underwent in the course of his life: from radical experiments in geometric splintering of the form, through topographical realism to near abstraction.

In the foreword to Bomberg's exhibition catalogue in 1964, David Sylvester, a critic, maintained that "there are two reasons for believing that David Bomberg is the finest English painter of the century: his early and his late work"[4]. And indeed, it has usually been either his early or late work that has received praise by the art world. Curiously enough the early works are entirely different to his late works, and that is why perhaps it is worth taking a look at his middle, transitory period, which naturally explains such a massive change in the artist's style.

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3 Ingleby (1996).
4 Sylvester (1964: 2).

It seems incomprehensible why the works forming the middle part of his career have attracted little critical attention, as they represent an anticipated stage in the artist's development. Such a drastic change in Bomberg's art was one reason for the lack of understanding. When he returned from his six-year stay in Palestine, his wife Alice, disappointed by the poor reception to paintings he executed there, admitted, "so many different styles. How is one to know the real Bomberg!?"[5] One of his friends remarked, after seeing Bomberg's Palestine works, that "it is almost like the work of a new man who has to gain a new circle"[6].

There were in fact two major shifts in Bomberg's style during his lifetime which made the critics, dealers, collectors and even his fellow artists fall out of sympathy with the artist and his works. Having successfully entered the art circles in 1912 with his radically simplified yet multi-layered art, Bomberg had won widespread admiration from the artists and critics of the new generation. His works, which seemed to merge his youthful experiences of life in the East-End ghetto with full understanding of the international avant-garde, gained him wide acclaim among the English modernists.

The radical change that took place in his art following the Great War was a result of the compromise with the Canadian War Memorial Fund which deprived him of his artistic individuality and shook his confidence. Moreover, the episode made him question the innovative language of his pre-war style. The other factor was the disappointment with the age of the machinery - once an object of veneration in his art, now creating the total destruction the artist witnessed during his period serving in the trenches. In Palestine, he developed a more mimetic approach to the natural environment that was immediately treated with disdain by the more advanced circles in London, but was admired by the traditionalists.

The second change was less extreme as Bomberg's style became, as he described it, a "more unrestricted expression which after all is the fundamental quality of an artist's work". The critics were not only unable to follow his developments but did not acknowledge them either. English art of the mid-thirties "shied away from German Expressionism and any exclamatory display of emotion, could not stomach the wild and ardent feeling in Bomberg's new work"[7].

Bomberg's new Expressionist style was not approved by the conservatives and equally he lost any sympathy from the avant-garde circles which practiced Surrealism and Geometrical Abstraction. This failure to gain support in the art

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[5] Cork (1987: 2).
[6] Cork (1987: 2–3).
[7] Cork (1987: 3).

world was further exacerbated by the general economic depression in Britain of the 1930s which deepened the financial instability of many artists.

Another reason for the neglect Bomberg endured can be partly explained by his uncompromising personality which often led to fierce conflicts with collectors, curators and fellow artists. Even his most faithful allies admitted that Bomberg was in some respects his own worst enemy, as he frequently alienated those whose support could have enhanced his reputation as an artist.

David Bomberg's life as an artist has remained relatively unstudied. There are only two monographs on his life and work. In 1968 William Lipke published an extensive survey, *David Bomberg: a critical study of his life and work*. In 1987 Richard Cork published *David Bomberg*, a thorough and wonderfully written tribute to the artist and his art, offering a very scrupulous examination of Bomberg's biography and legacy. Both works are referred to in this book to established the relevant backgrounds. However, both publications have a chronological and biographical character which the present monograph tries to avoid, putting stress on those aspects of Bomberg's achievement that have previously lacked detailed examination.

A number of museum catalogues which have been issued to accompany exhibitions of Bomberg's work since his death have also provided an invaluable source for information and criticism of his works. Although during his lifetime Bomberg did not enjoy wide popularity in the press, after his death he and his works have been frequently discussed in some of the higher quality British newspapers and art magazines. Bomberg's poetry has not as yet been given any extensive critical attention, except for a short essay written by Richard Cork in a volume published in 1992 by the Gillian Jason Gallery. In this book, his poetry receives much attention, viewed in the context of Bomberg's early art and life. Bomberg's critical essays on art have not been analysed at all, and so receive extended analysis here.

The book also reflects upon contemporary views of Bomberg's work, thus offering an extended timeline to show his achievement and criticism. Even as the book is being completed, Bomberg continues to remain in the headlines. Tate Britain has recently opened an exhibition *Sensorium* (26 August – 4 October 2015) in which Bomberg's *In the Hold* is used as an emblem of the entire show. The exhibition aims at involving and stimulating all the senses of the visitors – touch, smell and hearing, while viewing a given work of art. In the case of *In the Hold*, one is invited to enrich one's experience of the painting by breathing in the scent of London's Docklands (tobacco and diesel) as it would most likely have smelled in early twentieth century. There are also special sound effects involved, reflecting the jagged and cubic forms of the painting, and evocative of a ship sailing into the harbour.

Bomberg's original, often hand-written papers, documents, letters and notes, held at the Tate Gallery's Archives in London, have also proved an invaluable source of information, enabling the author to establish necessary data and the artist's thoughts and opinions on several subjects.

In this book, various aspects of David Bomberg's life and work are discussed in order to show that he was the major artist and poet of the British Modernist Movement, retaining his "independence of vision" despite the unfavourable reception of the avant-garde in Britain. The book takes as its focus Bomberg's quest for "a sense of form" which he pursued for most of his artistic life, and which he stated first in the introduction to his one-man show at the Chenil Gallery in 1914. The analysis of Bomberg's oeuvre is set in the context of artistic, cultural and socio-historical events of the first part of the twentieth-century, the aim of which is to make the reader visualize the environment in which the artist came to be.

Chapter One discusses his early work which ensured his position as one of the leading English modernists. It accentuates the stylistic autonomy that Bomberg maintained despite many attempts to recruit him to the ranks of Vorticism and Italian Futurism which were developing then. Some of his avant-garde paintings from this period encourage one to draw parallels with modernist poems from this era.

Chapter Two focuses on Bomberg's own poetry written in the trenches during the First World War as well as his involvement with the Canadian War Memorials scheme. His war poems have never previously been analysed to such an extent, and here they form a formidable analogy not only with Bomberg's paintings and drawings, but also with the verse by other soldier poets, including Wilfred Owen, Sigfried Sassoon and Isaac Rosenberg. What their poetry has in common is a growing antagonism towards the idealistic vision of war in its bitterness, detachment and disillusion, enhanced by the use of a variety of modernist poetic forms.

Chapter Three provides an art historical analysis of Bomberg's architectural landscapes. By accentuating his interest in architecture and design in the prewar period it reveals his fascination with architectural landscapes of Palestine, Petra, Toledo, Ronda, Cornwall and Cyprus in later years. It is argued that some of Bomberg's landscapes of Cornwall are comparable to Potworowski's paintings of the same scenery. His depictions of the blitzed London of the 1940s are given special attention as they are thought to be analogous with T. S. Eliot's "Little Gidding". It is argued that these architectural landscapes evolve gradually towards the abstract.

Chapter Four discusses exhibitions in which Bomberg's works were displayed, including group and one-man shows ending with the 2013 show "'Uproar!" The

First Fifty Years of the London Group" held at Ben Uri Gallery in London. The exhibitions, now mounted by some of the topmost galleries and museums, reveal Bomberg's persistence in broadening the understanding of his approach to painting as well as a growing popularity for his art.

Chapter Five discusses Bomberg's legacy and his importance for British contemporary art, by presenting him as a teacher at the Borough Polytechnic, where he taught art according to his unique and individual methods which were quite distinct from the methodologies adopted in other British arts schools. Bomberg's stress on the "spirit in the mass"[8], as he explained it, proved to be the major quality which shaped the character of a new generation of artists in Britain.

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[8] Lipke (1968: 93).

1 David Bomberg's early works and the making of modernism in Britain: 1890–1912

1.1. From Edwardian elegance to Post-Impressionism. Artistic groups in Edwardian England

At the turn of the century English society was still dominated by class, and wealth was accumulated in the hands of few. The result of the Education Act of 1870, which provided free state education virtually for all, was that the lower classes became literate or semi-literate. Although it did not diminish their poverty-stricken status, it enabled them to read the popular daily press, which not only prepared them for the age of democracy and advertising but encouraged them to come together into a strong unionized working class that soon would soon demand their rights and social justice. The Victorian loss of Christian faith was exacerbated by the legacy of Darwin and Freud which fostered the spread of different versions of Feminism and Socialism, such as for instance the Fabian Society which propagated reformist Socialism.

The growing awareness of the suppressed position of women in the Victorian era made the issue of their voting rights a crucial aspect of the political debate. In terms of foreign affairs, the imperialist claims of Germany was threatening Britain's security and power, while the Boer war made the British realize that their powerful army may not always easily defeat foreign forces even if they are far less operational. Edward VII, the patron of the time, came to symbolize the decadence and debauchery of the period. With his extravagant and pleasure-seeking lifestyle, involving excessive consumption, entertainment and frivolous love affairs he came to be associated with the ennui of the upper classes and intellectual elites bored with the previous era and enthusiastically anticipating the developments of the new century.

The arrival of the new ideas on the British Isles, where the strict Victorian values were cautiously preserved and maintained especially in the sphere of the arts, was delayed in comparison with mainland Europe, and "official

British culture was vehemently isolationist"[1]. Consequently, the Edwardian period in literature and painting was primarily concerned with the tradition and cultivation of the past, and insensitive to the new developments taking place in Europe, as if to respond to the headline that appeared in *The Times* at the beginning of the new century, warning of the "Fog in the Channel: Continent cut off"[2].

Although today one realizes the splendid isolation of Britain at that time, these words, just on the contrary, announce the disjointing of the Continent and the rest of the world from the British influence. By means of the Anglo-centric view of the relationship, it asserts that not Britain, but "abroad" is isolated and obscured by fog. It also highlights the British self-confidence that was gradually to lessen, as foreign currents were inevitably invading the very essence of Britishness, producing what came to be known a unique insular style of British modernism, different from Continental developments but not entirely Anglo--Saxon either.

Fog, in its Britishness, is also a British contribution to international modernism. Claude Monet, who came to London to depict the bridges on the Thames, appreciated the effects of the fog on his blurred vision of the river. Fog was also asserting its presence in Whistler's nocturnes of the city, liberating them from hard-edged representation. In literature fog had symbolic effects in Joseph Conrad's prose and Eliot's poetry where it was perceived as a corollary to darkness, not only preventing one from seeing clearly but also distorting the vision likewise. The fact that these early modernists were French, American and Polish proves how incapable Britain was in managing herself the new claims.

On the other hand, these foreigners decided to come to live and work in Britain and not in any other country, which implies that they must have regarded it as a place welcoming the fostering of their revolutionary beliefs. Eliot, feeling so comfortable in the Isles, even abandoned his American nationality and became a British citizen. The settling of foreigners in Britain also proves how international modernism really was, which Charles Harrison finely sums up, stating that "Modernism requires cosmopolitanism"[3]. The fact that modernism so readily developed in Britain, demonstrates that the Continent was never as totally cut off, as it may have initially seemed. The issue should not resolve around modernity versus British tradition but ought to be perceived in terms of cultural exchange[4].

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[1] Rylands (2010: 15).
[2] *The Times* (1957).
[3] Harrison (1992: 250).
[4] Hewison (2005: 16).

Although modernist European art has attracted much critical attention in general, little thought has so far been directed to British modernist art in particular. According to Frances Spalding, "one reason for this is that a concern with modernism has blinkered critical evaluation of twentieth-century art, encouraging historians, in its emphasis on innovation, to look for a linear evolutionary development, a tendency which has helped banish into temporary obscurity much that did not uphold the dominant avant-garde ideology"[5]. Most British artists of the twentieth-century refrained from following the abrupt move towards the avant-garde which was happening on the Continent and which resulted in a reactionary maintenance of the realist style and figurative art. Arguably the tradition of ideologically and socially involved art, just like in the case of the Victorian literature, played a crucial role here. Social claims of a (literary) work of art were more relevant than the purely aesthetic or formal qualities which were relegated to the background. In the more conservative circles that dominated at certain institutions (e.g. the Royal Academy) the form was not taken into consideration at all in contrast to the content, which was treated with excessive reverence to reinforce the narrative and realistic approach.

Some Edwardian painting, as that of for instance William Nicholson, was influenced by the art of Velásquez, which paradoxically was the opposite of the tradition practiced by the English School. The fashion for Velásquez coincided with a growing admiration for the heritage of Whistler, who was a great influence on young artists especially in the first decade of the twentieth century[6]. His views on art were radical: art for art's sake was his key principle, and he denied the need for illustrational art to convey moral or literary values. The relationship between art and music in his works was manifested by reference to music in the titles of his paintings. According to Spalding, Whistler's art is to blame for Britain's artistic 'splendid isolation' at the turn of the century. But paradoxically his concentration on the aesthetic and formal values of a picture prepared Britain for the reception of Post-Impressionism, on the other – his emphasis on tone opposed the recognition of Continental developments[7].

At the time the Royal Academy was still the major body to dictate painterly taste to artists and to uphold artistic conservatism. Many Victorian traditions, including the love of sentiment were reinforced in art through the Academy's annual summer exhibitions[8]. The traditional hierarchy of subject matter propagating mythological or classical themes was maintained as can be seen in works by

[5] Spalding (1996: 7).
[6] Spalding (1996: 11–12).
[7] Spalding (1996: 13).
[8] Spalding (1996: 13).

J.W. Waterhouse, Arthur Hacker, Herbert Draper or Frank Bernard Dicksee The cultivation of the Pre-Raphaelite taste and a compelling stylishness for pictorial and descriptive art was revived. These artists continued following this path of style at the beginning of the twentieth century and surprisingly remained untouched by any new trends sweeping in over from the Continent in the early 1910s. The Edwardian period developed a revived interest in the so-called "problem pictures" portraying every day tragedies affecting the underprivileged which indicated the still lingering Victorian morality and didacticism[9]. On the other hand, the nineteenth-century tradition of story-telling was now countered by the flamboyant love of the Edwardians for pleasure which also anticipated the approaching change in the arts and society brought by the fresh wave of modernism sweeping across the English Channel.

One of the most influential figures in the development of modernist ideas in England was the critic and artist Roger Fry (1866–1934). Though at the turn of the century Fry was still "an entrenched reactionary", aptly described by another critic, D. S. MacColl, as "a pastichist of the ancients and opponent of modern French painting"[10]. Fry was neither a supporter of the bleak romanticism practiced by the Royal Academy nor was he in favour of the innovatory claims forwarded by the New English Art Club, established in 1886 to counterbalance the conservatism of the Academy[11]. Fry believed that progress lay in retreat to pre-Impressionistic styles of painting which he found in the works of Italian Old Masters. In his contemporaries' works he found a lack of structural design and sentimental superficiality[12].

In the first decade of the twentieth century, Edwardian art, inspired by bygone models of the previous epoch, ground to a standstill, offering no future perspective for progress. Edwardian portraits reflected immodestly their lingering taste for aristocratic grace, as evidenced by the increased demand in the art market for eighteenth-century portraits. The isolated Impressionist style found in the paintings of the late nineteenth century of Philip Wilson Steer, was now abandoned and replaced by the classic British landscape tradition associated with Constable and Turner.

Hewison argues that the British landscape was not just the old-fashioned subject matter. It was a cultural aspect of life in the highly urbanized country in which, paradoxically, landscape and pastoral values were profoundly rooted in national identity. In such an industrial context as Britain at the turn of the

[9] Spalding (1996: 13).
[10] Spalding (1996: 18).
[11] Spalding (1996: 18).
[12] Spalding (1996: 18).

century, rural landscape was particularly appreciated for its alternative to the urban cityscape. Landscape consequently invokes a literary and artistic romanticism that is present in the British landscape tradition even in the highly abstract and modernist images of the 1930s and 1940s. Similarly, there is a parallel urban tradition which has occasionally reappeared in the twentieth-century, enhanced by Italian Futurists' urban fascinations. Such urban realism goes back to the legacy of Hogarth and the mid-Victorians, in whose work romanticism is replaced by empiricism of moral didacticism[13]. However, the pleasure-seeking Edwardians were more inclined to adore the romantic pursuit that they rediscovered in pastoral landscapes, or in Impressionist variations on open air scenery.

Those artists who pursued to imitate the Impressionist style of landscape painting seemed unconscious of its wide spectrum of colour and "comma-like brushstrokes"[14]. Yet, most of all, anchored in the foggy island, these painters were not exposed to the effects of intense sunlight radiating from the genuinely French Impressionist works.

The aforementioned New English Art Club[15] had a strong inclination to support paintings which incorporated French Impressionism into a typically British manner, and now as its reputation grew, it enjoyed a prestige comparable to that of the Academy. As Spalding asserts the fact that many NEAC artists had been lured by the paternalistic status of the Academy and exhibited at both institutions minimised the initially vast differences between the two institutions. Gradually the NEAC, from an ideological opponent to the Academic ideas turned into its ally in their shared hostility to acknowledge the change in modern painting[16].

The artistic conservatism of the Edwardian period is most evident in the response of the British public to the exhibition of French Impressionism organized in London at the Grafton Galleries by the art dealer Durand-Ruel in 1905[17]. Although works by Degas, Manet, Monet, Pissaro, Renoir, Sissley, Cassatt and Morisot had been shown in London before, never had so many as over three hundred paintings by these artists been exhibited together in one place. It appeared that by then the public should have been familiar with the Impressionists, since the movement was now thirty years old, and a number of publications related to it appeared in English: Camille Mauclair's *The French Impressionists* (appearing in translation from French in 1903), and Wynford Dewhurst's *Impressionist Painting* (1904) which not only presented the French artists' works but also

[13] Hewison (2005: 17–18).
[14] Spalding (1996: 19–20).
[15] Henceforth abbreviated NEAC.
[16] Spalding (1996: 20).
[17] Harrison (1994: 35).

pointed out to the importance of their influence on British painting, especially on Turner[18]. Although, as Harrison claims, the exhibition "had passed without arousing much controversy"[19] the lack of sympathy for the neighbour across the Channel, reinforced by the Academy's indoctrination, resulted in a scornful reception and poor sales of the works from Durand-Ruel's collection, with the very man not only accused of madness but nearly going bankrupt too.

At the time, the Slade School of Art was the most prominent art teaching institution similar in rank to the Royal Academy but was more innovative in its teaching methods. The Slade had been associated with the style of art teaching practiced in France since Alphonse Legros had been made the school's first professor of drawing and held the chair there from 1873 to 1893[20]. Especially important was the adoption of the "French studio practice and toned-down French 'plein-air' techniques"[21]. Life drawing classes emphasized the use of a swift, decisive line, as well as "precise and yet free, intelligent but nevertheless a little sentimental" idiom[22]. One of the more innovative artists who taught painting at the Slade was Wilson Steer, a NEAC member. With his unflagging support and embracing of French Impressionism in his work, especially visible in his "attractive sunlit beach scenes with the bright colour and speckled brushwork", he contributed greatly to the development of modernism in Britain[23]. And in spite of some conservatism in the later phase of his art, "at the Slade he was the most modern example among the principal members of staff"[24].

Another of the teachers, Henry Tonks (1862–1937), who joined the staff at the Slade in 1893, was a heartfelt supporter of the expressive methods of Watteau and encouraged his pupils to follow his ways[25]. Many students appreciated and shared Tonks's commitment and enthusiasm, and he appears in almost every artist's memoir of the period[26]. Although a snobbish socialite (apparently he would dine out in Mayfair most nights of the week), he promoted an outgoing attitude at the Slade which was not sufficiently appreciated by his contemporaries. However, Tonks's original teaching methods had far-reaching effects and found acclaim among many generations of his students. Only the Slade-trained students were admitted to exhibit at the NEAC annual shows as they were the only ones to fit its relative innovation. The system of visiting professors

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[18] Spalding (1996: 20).
[19] Harrison (1994: 35).
[20] Harrison (1994: 21).
[21] Harrison (1994: 21).
[22] Spalding (1996: 23).
[23] Harrison (1994: 21).
[24] Harrison (1994: 22).
[25] Spalding (1996: 23–24).
[26] Spalding (1996: 24).

maintained at the Slade brought its students into contact with several reputed Academicians, such as John Singer Sargent and Marcus Stone[27].

Elsewhere, as Spalding asserts, art teaching tended to be deeply rooted in tradition and dangerously self-indulging, forcing their students to analyse the ancient sculpture on the basis of plaster casts. The Royal Academy maintained segregated classes for men and women while provincial art schools refused to allow women to participate in life classes at all[28].

The Royal Academy, an art institution which had formerly enjoyed the highest cachet in Britain, had for some years been severely criticised. Towards the end of the nineteenth century it “was already serving as the negative of ambition for the more ‘advanced’ artists, and academic style was identified in terms of technically conservative treatment of ‘significant’ subjects.”[29] As Spalding argues, its long proclaimed conservatism in the choice of a subject matter, painting techniques as well as the superiority of certain modes of expression over others, was now threatened by the newly aroused interest in French Impressionism lurking furtively in Britain. Despite its elitism, trenchantly guarded to preserve its exclusiveness, the Academy was still the most powerful art institution in England entitled to dictate the painterly taste to the artists in Britain. Its establishment status was reinforced by the choice of its President Sir Edward Poynter (1836–1919) who was concurrently appointed in the position of the Director of the National Gallery[30].

Edwardian painting, which was propagated at the Academy, tended to be witty and decorous, playful and delicate, at times mawkishly sentimental. Its eclecticism, following the French example, combined antique and Renaissance sources into an amalgamation that was often unconvincing and too emotionally encumbered. However, away from mainstream trends, starting towards the end of the nineteenth century, there was a growth of attention for genre scenes based on everyday urban setting. Commonly this inclination towards realism has tended to recur on the margins of the twentieth-century British art[31].

The realism of Walter Sickert’s works is full of pictorial facts and emotion, but is far from illustrational accuracy. He “avoided the early-Impressionist tendency to ‘localize’ subject-matter by making it entirely specific in terms of time, place and weather-conditions.”[32] Sickert’s subjects “remain entirely credible as representations” referring to “actual but undistinguished people

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[27] Spalding (1996: 25–26).
[28] Spalding (1996: 24–25).
[29] Harrison (1994: 17).
[30] Spalding (1996: 26–27).
[31] Spalding (1996: 30).
[32] Harrison (1994: 34).