

Interstices: Discovering the Ben Uri Collection

Curated by René Gimpel

The Ben Uri collection is a treasure trove. It's an honour and a privilege to be invited to delve into it, with carte blanche as to my selection for this exhibition.

After several days sifting through the image library, I settled on two criteria. One based on aesthetic considerations; the other, on singling out artworks corresponding to a personal narrative. Inevitably, the two overlap because I consider the choices all to have artistic merit and this being a personal selection, it reflects my values. The professional, the political and the personal intertwine.

I am pleased to find a quantity of abstract works in the collection. Abstraction is my first love, it's what I grew up with, it's what I as a dealer have been most comfortable with. Within this genre I include a selection of works which might be termed geometric abstraction, or art concret to use a French rendering, and one which applies to many of the artists who show in my Paris gallery. As far as I can tell, abstraction in the UK tends to have a lower profile compared to figuration and realism, all the more reason to champion it. Personal links start here with Sandra Blow and Sonia Delaunay, both of whom exhibited at Gimpel Fils.

As for realism, there is an abundance of choice at Ben Uri. John Allin's view of Heneage Street and Brick Lane are familiar because I lived on Brick Lane for two years. I added his lithograph of a protest at Whitechapel, not just because it is pertinent to the history of the area, but also because it's an echo of my own student and not-so-student days of marching and protesting for radical causes. Drawing a line here to Herman Fechenbach's woodcut of Lenin, what struck me, beyond the quality of his work, is the agit-prop message within the context of the year, 1943. This was the year of Stalingrad, the battle of Kursk and the Allies' invasion of Italy. A turning point in the war, but not for Jewish, Sinti and Manouche inmates of ghettos and concentration camps. Something of the sombre mood of that year is reflected in the dark tones of this woodcut.

Turning to another work, I discover Jacob Kramer's *The Philosopher*. A lithograph which might have been a woodcut, the stark, angled Expressionist black-and-white image of a sage poring over documents, one hand covering his head in thought. I have a lay interest in materialist philosophy – tempered with Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism – so this image resonates. Existentialism is, arguably, now of historic interest but another philosophy is not: feminism. Feminism is the philosophy of the second half of the twentieth century because in my time, it begins with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* and de Beauvoir is Sartre's partner and equal. Marisol Cavia; Lélia Pissarro; Ruth Schreiber; Zory Shahrokhi. Different each and every one and yet and yet... the personal is political and curiously, these four artists use a restrained palette of silver, or soft black and for three of them, red. Schreiber's *Childhood Remembered* is also mine. Both of us were born in London in 1947. None of these four artists are, or need be philosophers in the manner that Jacob Kramer illustrates his subject; but their position as women in a world where patriarchy is still

dominant, means that as artists theirs is a material reflection on a material situation.

Vicky's cartoon Charlemagne, with its caricature of President de Gaulle, is another close-to-home reference. The cartoon is undated, but all points to 1958, when de Gaulle organised a referendum, which gave him a majority to create France's Fifth Republic (the 'V' on the Phrygian bonnet-crown being offered him). Vicky has accurately caught the significance of de Gaulle's seizing sweeping presidential powers under the new constitution. The President's sceptre bears the Croix de Lorraine, de Gaulle's wartime symbol of French Resistance, a symbol which features on the medal of the order 'Compagnon de la Libération', de Gaulle's personal creation to award leading actors in this fight and whose history is commemorated in a dedicated museum at the Invalides, Paris. My father was one of its 1,038 recipients, but his relationship to France and to de Gaulle remained complicated. Vicky's witty parallel of Charles with Charlemagne sums up my father's attitude, because he disapproved of de Gaulle giving himself such powers. However, the context for de Gaulle's declaration of a Fifth Republic was the crisis created by the Algerian War and two years later, when elements of the French army threatened a putsch against de Gaulle, my father announced to the family that in such an eventuality he would don his uniform again and return to fight alongside the President.

Hans Schleger and Leopold Pilichowski share something in common with Chaïm Soutine in this exhibition. Something visible and something invisible. Schleger's Hands at Your Service (Ticket Collector) from 1946, is a remarkable London Transport poster. It does something that is rarely seen nowadays on TfL posters: it points to the manual labour, in the literal and metaphorical sense, of transport workers. The composition is a fine balance, with one hand pointing and the other holding the ticket punch which clips out a hole in a ticket to show that it has been used (on the buses, conductors were affectionately referred to as 'clippies'). Manual labour is being honoured; but so is the intellectual labour of this member of the working class, because the pointing hand and text refer to the knowledge about London that this man – or woman – possesses and can impart. The hands in Pilichowski's The Labourer (Old Man in a Blue Smock) are relaxed, because his labour is over for the day, but they are prominent in the composition, occupying the foreground and in their colouring, standing out from the leather smock that the man appears to be wearing. He looks down, weary. In France, blue is the traditional costume colour for manual workers though I like to think that Pilchowski's figure was painted in Whitechapel, where the artist made several portraits of poorer Jews. A line can be drawn back to the Ben Uri, where Pilchowski served as president.

Chaïm Soutine's charming Jeune Servante (Waiting Maid, also known as La Soubrette) is another depiction of a working-class figure, but it is her hands – or more accurately, her lack of them – that drew my attention. It has been observed that Soutine had a problem painting hands. A few years ago, I was invited to give an opinion on a Soutine portrait that was being offered under the 'In Lieu' scheme to a national collection. The issue with this portrait was expressed as a doubt about its worth because the figure's hands appeared unfinished. My reply to this comment

was to quote an extract from my grandfather's diary from 1930, when he was a Parisian art dealer. My grandfather owned a Soutine which the artist wished to rectify, claiming that the painting was in some manner not right. Knowing of Soutine's reputation, when the artist arrived with his paintbrushes, he asked if instead of working on the painting in situ, he could take it back to his studio. My grandfather refused, saying bluntly to the artist: "You're too dangerous." Eventually, under close

supervision and without the painting leaving the premises, Soutine was allowed to make some minor adjustments.

I am pleased to say that the Soutine gift to the nation was accepted.

René Gimpel, September 2020