

# The Slade: Early Work, 1909–1913

The Slade School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture was founded in 1871 by a series of endowments made by the collector and antiquary Felix Slade, and formed part of University College London. By 1893, when Fred Brown became Slade Professor, it had established a reputation for its liberal outlook and high standards of draughtsmanship. As his assistants Brown appointed the surgeon Henry Tonks to teach drawing, and Philip Wilson Steer to teach painting. Their students in the 1890s included Gwen and Augustus John, Spencer Gore, Ambrose McEvoy, William Orpen and Percy Wyndham Lewis. Tonks would later dub this era the Slade's first 'crisis of brilliance'.

Students drawn to the School between 1908 and 1914 included the six young artists featured in this exhibition: Paul Nash, C.R.W. Nevinson, Stanley Spencer, Mark Gertler, Dora Carrington and David Bomberg. Though born in England, Bomberg and Gertler were the sons of Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, and grew up in relative poverty in the East End of London. Their fees at the

Slade were paid by a loan from a charitable organization, the Jewish Education Aid Society. Carrington, Nash, Nevinson and Spencer all came from middle class families, and grew up respectively in Bedfordshire, Buckinghamshire, Hampstead and Berkshire. Their peers at the School included other such ambitious young artists as Adrian Allinson, John Currie, Ben Nicholson, William Roberts and Edward Wadsworth. Tonks called this flourish of talent and torment the School's second and last 'crisis of brilliance'. Most went on to become the leading British artists of the twentieth-century.

In a course that could last up to four years, the focal point of the School was the life class. Here students spent hours each day drawing the human form. Tonks also encouraged them to study the great European artists whose work could be seen in the National Gallery and the British Museum. For a period between about 1908 and 1912, early Renaissance masters such as Giotto, Botticelli and Piero della Francesca would be the leading influences on their work.

# The Slade and After: Works on Paper, 1910–1914

In November 1910 the exhibition 'Manet and the Post-Impressionists' opened in London. Organised by the painter and critic Roger Fry, it included works by Cézanne, Gauguin, Van Gogh, Manet, Matisse and Picasso. The Pall Mall Gazette described it as 'the output of a lunatic asylum'; the reviewer from The Times observed that such work 'throws away all that the long developed skills of past artists had acquired and bequeathed. It begins all over again – and stops where a child would stop'. Brown and Steer feared that if the Slade did not embrace the new movement it would lose out to other art schools. But Tonks declared, 'I shall resign if this talk about Cubism does not cease; it is killing me'.

According to Nash, Tonks told his students that while he could not prevent them visiting Fry's exhibition, he could tell them 'how very much better pleased he would be if we did not risk contamination but stayed away'. They ignored his request – though it took some time before Post-

Impressionism made a marked impact upon their work. When Gertler asked Spencer what he thought of Picasso, he responded: 'I haven't got past Piero della Francesca yet'. When the Second Post-Impressionist Exhibition opened in 1912, however, it included Spencer's painting *John Donne Arriving in Heaven*.

Futurism was another potential new influence. The brainchild of the Italian writer Filippo Marinetti, it arrived in London in 1910. The Futurists 'are young men in revolt at the worship of the past', Nevinson's mother observed in the *Suffragette* press. 'They are determined to destroy it, and erect upon its ashes the Temple of the future. War seems to be the tenet in the gospel of Futurism: war upon the classical in art, literature and music'.

Modernism and the avant-garde had finally arrived in England. It was a moment of crisis. As a Slade student observed in *The UCL Magazine*: 'Not every student can bear with equanimity the burden of dozens of semi-digested principles, the bewilderment of theories

innumerable, each claiming for itself superiority over all others.'

# The Slade and After: Works on Canvas, 1910–1914

By 1913 the young Slade students were a loose but identifiable group. Roger Fry called them 'Les Jeunes', and invited Bomberg, Carrington and Nash to join his Omega Workshops. Soon afterwards, Bomberg left and joined Nevinson at the Rebel Art Centre, recently established by Percy Wyndham Lewis in an effort to counteract the influence of Fry and the Bloomsbury Group. Other 'Rebels' included William Roberts, Edward Wadsworth and the sculptors Jacob Epstein and Henri Gaudier-Brzeska. When Nevinson carelessly linked the Rebels directly with the Futurists, Wyndham Lewis relaunched them as the Vorticists. Intent on maintaining his independence, Bomberg declined to join them.

It was all too much for Gertler. 'Oh! God!', he declared, 'keep me from all these noisy, Horrible, competitive, struggling, Heartless, schools of painting! Cubism, Futurism! God knows what!' Paul Nash was more sanguine.

He and his brother John were invited to show their watercolours at the Camden Town Group and Others exhibition in Brighton, where Bomberg and Nevinson were among Slade artists exhibiting in a separate 'Cubist Room'. 'This is amusing to us', Paul remarked; 'so we're Post-Impressionists and Cubists are we?'

Spencer, meanwhile, worked in peaceful isolation in Cookham, producing a series of remarkably precocious paintings. Gertler helped bring him to the attention of the collector and patron Edward Marsh, who was gathering an intimate circle in London. These young 'Georgian' artists and poets included Gertler, Nash, Nevinson and Spencer, as well as Rupert Brooke and Siegfried Sassoon.

Carrington, who did not complete her studies at the Slade until 1914, remained reluctant to exhibit her work.

The foundation of The London Group helped bring the young rebels to public attention. To be a modern artist was suddenly to be newsworthy. 'Art', The Manchester Guardian declared in 1914, 'is getting herself talked about again.'

## War: Works on Canvas, 1914–1918

On 4 August 1914 Britain declared war on Germany. Nash was the first of the Slade artists to enlist, albeit reluctantly. He sympathised with Carrington, whose three brothers had immediately volunteered. 'Yes isn't this an abominable business,' he told her. Though Carrington became increasingly political, for four years she did her best to ignore the war. And when a friend suggested that Gertler should volunteer, he raged against the 'wretched sordid Butchery!!' 'I am I believe what you call a "Passivist"', he told his patron Edward Marsh in 1915. 'I don't know exactly what that means, but I just hate this war and should really loathe to help in it.' Spencer was also reluctant to enlist, fearing it would mean the 'ruination' of his work.

Yet it was also compelling. Bomberg volunteered, but was rejected on the grounds of his accent and scruffy appearance. 'I should hate the slaughter,' Nash told a friend. 'I know I should but I'd like to be among it all, it's no ordinary War.' Nash would not be sent to the Western

Front until 1917, but in November 1914 Nevinson went to France as a volunteer in the Friends' Ambulance Unit. He was appalled by the experience; though also saw its potential. 'Unlike my Italian Futurist friends,' he told a journalist on his return, 'I do not glory in war for its own sake, nor can I accept their doctrine that war is the only healthgiver. This war will be a violent incentive to Futurism, for we believe there is no beauty except in strife, no masterpiece without aggressiveness.'

Many critics thought it would be impossible to paint the conflict. Nevinson's paintings proved them wrong, and his war paintings made him the most famous young artist in England. 'Mr Nevinson gives you the black gloom,' The Manchester Guardian observed in September 1916, 'the horror, the feeling of despair that make even death and mutilation seem trivial incidents in an epoch of horror.' One of Carrington's brothers was among the tens of thousands lost that year on the Somme. It was also the year she met the writer and pacifist Lytton Strachey; their friendship would change her life forever.

# War: Works on Paper, 1914–1919

1916 saw the horrors of the Somme and the introduction of conscription. It was also the year the British Government launched a scheme to commission artists to record the Great War. Nevinson became one of the first official war artists, though he largely abandoned the Futurist techniques that had helped make him famous. On Nevinson's advice, Nash also joined the scheme. 'O it is unspeakable, Godless, hopeless,' he wrote to his wife from the Western Front in November 1917. 'I am no longer an artist interested & curious, I am a messenger who will bring back word from men fighting to those who want the war to last for ever. Feeble, inarticulate will be my message but it will have a bitter truth and may it burn their lousy souls'. His works, like Nevinson's, proved to be some of the most powerful records of the conflict.

Bomberg enlisted with the Royal Engineers in 1915, and served on the Western Front. The Canadian Government commissioned him as an official war artist in 1918 to undertake a major oil painting. Spencer went to Macedonia

with the Royal Army Medical Corps in 1916. He transferred to an infantry battalion, and saw action in the last months of the war. 'A genius pitched in the mud,' as Tonks observed. He was invited to become an official war artist in 1918. Notwithstanding his position as a conscientious objector, Gertler was also invited by the British Government to join the scheme. It was suggested that he paint the home front – an offer he eventually declined.

The Great War ended with the Armistice on 11 November 1918. With Germany defeated, all six artists sought new subjects for their work. Nevinson, who had already sought respite by the seaside, headed for New York. Nash also went to the sea to recover, settling at Dymchurch in Kent. Carrington travelled to Spain and Gertler returned to Paris, whilst Bomberg, abandoning the radical abstraction of his youth, eventually travelled to Palestine.

# War and Aftermath

When Lytton Strachey died suddenly in 1932 Carrington was devastated: 'no future interests me,' she wrote. 'I see my paints, & think it is NO use for Lytton will never see my pictures now.' Two months later she shot herself.

Increasingly debilitated by tuberculosis, Gertler struggled in the years after the war. In 1939, following the breakup of his marriage, a disappointing exhibition, and the looming threat of another war, he gassed himself in his London studio. Nevinson would never again experience the great reputation he enjoyed during the Great War. 'I am a painter today because I was a failure at everything yesterday,' he told a journalist in 1926, 'but I always go on painting, painting, chiefly because I am so hopelessly bored by everything else'. A year later he described himself as 'utterly haunted with futility'. He died in 1946, an almost forgotten figure.

Following his success as a war artist, Nash established a reputation as one of Britain's leading modern artists. But late in his life he struggled to complete his autobiography.

'When I came to look into the early drawings I lived again that wonderful hour,' he told a friend. 'I could feel myself making those drawings – in some ways the best I ever did to this day. And because of this I suddenly saw the way to finish my "life" ... I feel I could make a complete thing by taking it up to 1914 – just up to the war. After that it was another life, another world.' He died in 1946. Despite painting and drawing a series of remarkable landscapes in Palestine and Spain, Bomberg struggled to make his name. After World War Two he taught at the Borough Polytechnic in London, where his pupils included Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. It is only in recent decades that his importance in the history of British art has been fully recognized. Despite various crises in his personal life, Stanley Spencer enjoyed the greatest artistic success. He would be knighted in 1959, a few months before his death from cancer.