

WALTER RICHARD SICKERT (1860-1942) PAINTER OF THE BATH SCENE

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During his long career as a painter Sickert twice visited Bath. The second occasion was in 1938, immediately before the outbreak of war, when as an old man he came with his wife Thérèse Lessore to spend his final years here. The first occasion was twenty years earlier, towards the end of another war, during the summers of 1917 and 1918. Already by then he had reached his late fifties, with a substantial reputation and a body of work that encompassed a variety of subjects. He was known for his penetrating character studies, which made him sought after as a portraitist. Also his love of the theatre drew him to paint the interiors of the old music halls of Camden Town and Islington. At this time, too, he was producing a number of atmospheric townscapes; and the locations where he found most inspiration happened to be abroad, in France and Italy.

He always felt at home on the continent, perhaps because he came of mainland European stock. His grandfather and father, both artists, were Danish in origin. His father, Oswald Adalbert Sickert, after working in Germany, decided to settle in England in 1868 with his English wife. Sickert himself felt proud of his foreign heredity which – paradoxically – he claimed contributed to his Englishness. At a dinner party during the Great War he startled the assembled company by declaring ‘in a voice loud enough for the whole table to hear: “And no one could be more English than I am – born in Munich in 1860, of pure Danish descent”’.¹ He might also have mentioned the fairly exotic background of his mother Eleanor. She was illegitimate, the offspring of a liaison between an Irish dancer and a distinguished Cambridge astronomer, the Revd Richard Sheepshanks. In order to conceal as far as possible the fact of her existence she was despatched abroad for her education to an English school at Neuville-lès-Dieppe. Whether or not prompted by this family association, in 1885 Sickert chose to honeymoon at Dieppe with his first wife Ellen Cobden. In any case, through his work as pupil and etching assistant to the cosmopolitan artist James McNeill Whistler, he was inevitably being drawn into the circle of painters attracted to the influential French school which migrated to Dieppe from Paris during the spring and summer. The Café des Tribunaux – one of Sickert’s favourite subjects – became the meeting ground where the English avant-garde such as Whistler, Sargent, and Sickert himself mingled with their French counterparts such as Degas,

Pissarro, Renoir, Monet and Jacques-Emile Blanche. As Blanche remarked, 'Eight months out of the twelve, Paris and the universe arrived in Dieppe'.

In addition to the practising artists, wealthy cultivated patrons were an important part of this social mix. At one of Blanche's dinner parties Sickert was introduced to Celia, Lady Noble,² the granddaughter of Isambard Kingdom Brunel, who commissioned him to paint her portrait. Much later, when she was living in Bath, she presented this portrait to the Victoria Art Gallery. It shows how, under the influence particularly of Degas, his art was developing a much greater lightness and freedom of touch. At about the same time that Lady Noble sat to him Sickert was entranced by a couple of models he used in London: 'I am deep in two divine coster girls – one with sunlight on her indoors'.³ A similar treatment of light and shadow on her half-averted head is apparent in the portrait of Lady Noble.

He chose to settle in Dieppe from 1898 to 1905, a period that was only broken by visits to Venice. In both places the architecture and the settings inspired him to begin the first of his townscapes. Although he returned to live more permanently in England in 1905, he was drawn back each summer to France. The outbreak of the Great War in 1914 brought this most agreeable phase of his career to an end. With London now as his permanent base, he worked mainly in two studios in Fitzroy Street. One – known as the 'Frith', at No 15 – he had for his own use, while in the other – the 'Whistler', at No 8 across the street – he instructed his many students.⁴ Inevitably, as the war dragged on into its third year, the Zeppelin raids began to have an effect on civilian morale. The critic Roger Fry, in a letter written in the autumn of 1917, described how the warning would send everyone down to the basement:

People have been much shaken – Walter Sickert ... is however much pleased, as the place where he teaches has good cellars where he sits and smokes and drinks with his pupils and gets a guinea for doing so.⁵

Possibly Sickert was more shaken by the bombing than this insouciant character sketch would suggest. He was in any case concerned for the health of his wife Christine,⁶ and had already decided that Bath would provide the ideal peaceful retreat. Their initial visit in the summer of 1917 proved such a success that they returned the following summer. Their address was The Lodge (fig.1 overleaf), a house situated high on the slopes of Entry Hill, with extensive views over the city and surrounding countryside. It had originally been built in about 1828-9, with the name of Entry Hill Villa, and designed by the architect Edward Davis as the first of a group of neo-Tudor houses to occupy an idyllic wooded site among open fields.⁷ Although the house had changed its name several times since then, the setting had hardly altered. One could get down into Bath by taking what was virtually a country walk.

All Sickert's expectations were fulfilled. In May 1918 he sent an ecstatic telegram to Nina Hamnett in London – 'Bonjour Nina. Bath spiffing' – and followed it up with a letter:

I am dying all obvious selfishness apart, for you to come to Bath. It will rest and amuse and refresh you, and week for week will cost you less money than in London. The beauty of the place is incredible. My walk down after breakfasting à l'Anglaise in the kitchen at about 6 is like a German woodcut of the views down through beech trees on the elaborate town ... You could walk in these gardens and orchards in perfect peace. Such roofs, such roses, such contorted walls ... such bracing air.

Though not strictly one of his pupils Nina Hamnett was one of a number of aspiring young artists in whom he detected promise. With characteristic generosity he had given her permission to use the studio at 8 Fitzroy Street for her portrait painting while he was away. Now, because he felt that Bath would benefit her, he bought one of her paintings for £15 so that she could afford the fare, and found her lodgings in a row of workmen's cottages half-way down Beechen Cliff: 'From the bed it looks as if someone had chucked the

roofs of the whole town in at the two windows, with the Abbey in the middle and the towers of your old school on the horizon. It takes ones breath away'.⁸

Bath provided a tonic and an inspiration. In accordance with the regime he had established during his time in Dieppe, Sickert would get up at 6 am to make his drawings and colour studies before going down to his studio in the city where he would settle to the serious business of painting. At noon he would break off for a swim, then have lunch, and a nap in the afternoon; followed by tea at 4 pm, and more work. At 7 he would return home to Entry Hill, where Christine would be waiting with their



Fig.1 View of The Lodge, Entry Hill Drive, Bath, from the northwest.
(reproduced by courtesy of the present owner)

maid Marie to serve dinner. Nina Hamnett, who had responded to his invitation to come to Bath, was privileged to hear his views on art, though she hardly seems to have received them with a great deal of respect. She would go along to his studio in the late afternoon, and listen to him discoursing on his methods as he painted sketches of the river and Pulteney Bridge. She wrote to Roger Fry:

He ... spends at least two hours daily at teatime in holding forth. I always say 'yes' and go home and do the opposite. He admits he can understand nothing of modern art. I understand that he doesn't, but why he doesn't I don't see. I am giving him all the available literature on Rimbaud which thrills him.⁹

The way in which Nina dismisses the outpouring of technical advice lavished on her from Sickert's years of experience reveals the gap between their generations. Did she adopt the same brusque contemptuous tone if ever allowed to interrupt his monologue with a few words of her own? She certainly felt able to express her opinion of his work with brutal frankness in another letter to Fry: 'W.S. now paints on four small panels a day and paints them in ink colour black and tan boots colour, the architecture is getting more and more minute and laborious. I sit beside him in a garden in the last sitting after tea. How silly he is!'¹⁰

Sickert, if he had been made aware of her critical resistance to his advice, would doubtless have acknowledged it with a certain tolerant amusement, and made allowance for the fact that it expressed the point of view of the youthful avant-garde. He too had been avant-garde in his time, as a pupil of Whistler and above all as a disciple of Degas: the lessons he had learnt from them formed the basis of his technique painstakingly worked out through his development as a painter. Following Degas's dictum, 'On ne donne l'idée du vrai qu'avec le faux' ('Only by artificial means can reality be revealed'), Sickert advocated the use of photography as an essential preliminary to the creation of a picture. From 1892 onwards he was using photographs in support of his portraiture, and to an even greater extent in his pre-war Dieppe townscapes. The practice continued in Bath. As Clifford Ellis recalled:

The photographer would come in the morning, find a message from Sickert: 'Go to Camden Crescent, third lamp-post on the right, take a photograph facing so-and-so when the sun is facing in the right direction'.¹¹

Duncan Grant, who attended a lecture given by Sickert in 1938, summarised the way in which the painting would gradually evolve from there: 'Sickert's method ... is this. He sees a subject ... [and] has it photographed, he squares out the photo, he draws it in charcoal on the canvas'.¹² Grant might also have noted the number of pen or charcoal drawings and sketches in oil (often on

board) which Sickert made to assist in the creation of the finished work. It was ideas like these for Pulteney Bridge that Nina Hamnett mentioned with such disfavour in her letter to Roger Fry. Sickert was clearly fascinated by the contrast between the fixed classical immobility of the bridge itself and the movement of the river beneath; and the tension between these two is beautifully conveyed in the several finished versions of the subject.

For such finished compositions the canvas itself would have been carefully prepared beforehand with a basic underpainting that he termed a '*camaieu*'.¹³ In one of the many letters he wrote to Nina Hamnett on the subject, Sickert outlined the next stage of the operation with the boast: 'I have certainly solved the question of technique ... It is extraordinary how agreeable undiluted paint *scrubbed hard* over a coarse bone-dry *camaieu* ... becomes. It tells semi-transparent like a powder or a wash'.¹⁴ This was the basis for the final touches, which would appear 'fatter and more opaque'. Helen Lessore (his future sister-in-law), commenting on Sickert's work after his death, remarked that he 'attached great importance to what I think he called the cooking side of painting'.¹⁵

Apart from his fascination with the river bank by Pulteney Bridge, he was also captivated by the streets and views on the upper slopes of Lansdown. As Clifford Ellis remembered, the services of the photographer would often be needed at Camden. There the house on the corner of the Crescent, with its distinctive semicircular balcony, had a special family interest for Sickert since it had belonged to his great uncle, the brother of the Astronomer Royal.¹⁶ Just as he had done with the subject of Pulteney Bridge he produced several finished versions of *Mr Sheepshanks' House, Camden Crescent*. While he was working in that area his eye was also taken with the possibilities of the view down the hill and across to Beechen Cliff. Before completing two finished versions of this he worked at a number of preliminary drawings as well as doing a small study in oil on board.¹⁷ From a viewpoint on the curve of the pavement at the top of Belvedere he looked down to where the street appears to narrow at the bottom, and then allowed his gaze to rise over the roofs of the houses to the massed bluish-green cloud of trees on Beechen Cliff opposite (fig.2). In the finished versions he enlarged the composition on the right, to include a homely everyday detail of a horse and cart just coming into view, with the horse's legs stuck out stiffly in front to prevent it slipping on the hill.

Bath struck him as a place of 'incredible beauty', the phrase he had used in his letter to Nina Hamnett. She for her part found the place utterly boring and stagnant by contrast with her lively Bohemian existence in London. There was nothing in the townscape of Bath that appealed to her as a subject to paint. After five weeks of listening to Sickert discoursing at length in the afternoons, and occasionally going to dinner with him and Christine in the

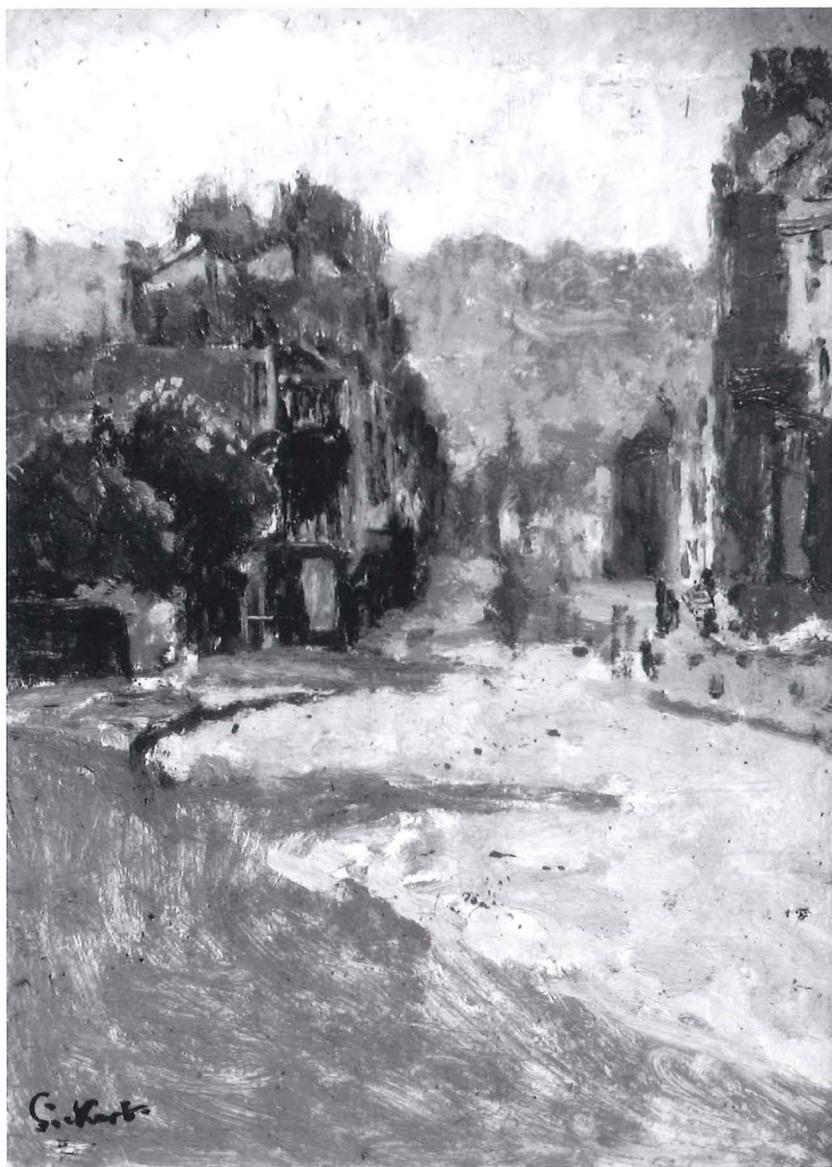


Fig.2 *Beechen Cliff from Belvedere, Lansdown, Bath*, 1917-18, by Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942). Oil on board, 35.6 x 25.4 cm. A preliminary study for the painting now in the collection of Tate Britain, London.

(reproduced by courtesy of the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath and North East Somerset Council)



Fig.3 *Paradise Row, Holloway, Bath*, 1917-18, by Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942). Pen and ink drawing on squared paper, 24.8 x 20.7 cm. A preliminary drawing (which shows Sickert's method of 'squaring up') for the painting now in the collection of Manchester City Art Gallery. (reproduced by courtesy of the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath and North East Somerset Council)

evening, she packed her bags and returned to London. Sickert, on the other hand, clearly found the old part of Bath where she had lodged a great source of inspiration; and the result was his painting of *Paradise Row, Holloway* (fig.3). He must have noted this picturesque convergence of the little narrow streets when he was on his morning walk down from Entry Hill to the 'elaborate town' on the further bank of the river. The house behind the garden wall on the left is Paradise House, built in the early eighteenth century with a terrace of attached houses known as Paradise Row.¹⁸ In Sickert's day it was a flourishing artisan area, lived in by painters and carpenters among others. Just up the hill, at No 94 Holloway, was an 'oil, colour and hardware store' which would certainly have stocked items useful to artists in their work.

It would be interesting to know whether any of the views that Sickert completed in Bath over the course of his two-year stay found an immediate or ready market. Denys Sutton¹⁹ mentions that the collector Montagu Shearman wrote to Sickert saying that he liked what he was doing; but it is unclear whether Shearman bought any paintings from him at this point, or later. Probably Sickert's best move would have been to leave them with his dealer at the Leicester Galleries in London.

As soon as the War was over Sickert and his wife returned to France to settle in their favourite spot near Dieppe, at Envermeu. Bath had served its purpose while he was prevented from working on the Continent. They may also have considered that the climate and conditions in France would somehow help to improve Christine's health. But she was now in the advanced stages of tuberculosis, and died in 1920. Sickert, who hardly seems to have realised how ill she was, felt overcome by a mixture of guilt and misery. He shut himself away in his loneliness, and produced very little work. Various close friends from his London circle of art students and pupils came out to Envermeu to be with him, and try to comfort him. Thérèse Lessore was the one who eventually filled the void left by Christine's death.

Lessore, like Sickert, was descended from two generations of foreign artists. Her father Jules, a Frenchman, had settled in England in 1871 and made a name for himself as a painter and etcher. Thérèse, following in his footsteps, had begun by exhibiting with groups such as the Allied Artists. Sickert later claimed that he had noticed her work in their show of 1913, and had been 'profoundly elated' by her picture of a vegetable market. In his review of the exhibition of 'Twentieth Century Art' at the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1914 he wrote:²⁰ '... she [Lessore] will always appear to be the most interesting and masterful personality of them all ... First and foremost she has human interest, without which art on this planet probably cannot exist'. Two years later, reviewing the London Group exhibition,²¹ he confessed: 'The artist who

has always thrilled me in these and kindred groups is Thérèse Lessore ... [who] has the gift of stimulating perpetual curiosity and leaving it unsatisfied'. Undoubtedly she stirred him to admiration of her looks and personality as a whole. Something of her quiet elusive charm was conveyed in his comparison of her to a Persian miniature. Before the War he enjoyed meeting her and her then husband Bernard Adeney at their house in Hampstead. When the Adeneys moved to become close neighbours in Fitzroy Street, there is a suggestion that Christine Sickert felt some jealousy of her husband's increasing involvement with Thérèse.

After Christine's death, and Thérèse's divorce from Adeney, their relationship became close, both personally and artistically. When Sickert decided to return to England in 1922, he still continued to isolate himself and keep the doors closed even against old friends. It was Thérèse who managed to overcome the barrier; and she did so through the art they both practised. By this time she was not only using paint on canvas but also on ceramics. Her sister and brother-in-law Louise and Alfred Powell worked as decorators and designers for the firm of Wedgwood, and it was probably through them that Thérèse began decorating the blanks from the kiln. She in turn introduced the artists of the Omega Group – Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, Roger Fry, and inevitably Sickert himself – to the same line of work. Her designs were pictorial, often on a contemporary theme. Sickert is known to have painted, and signed, three teapots with a view of Pulteney Bridge, which remained one of his most enduring memories of Bath. Two of the teapots were lost in the kiln; the third he kept, until on his death it passed to Thérèse.²²

After his marriage to Thérèse in 1926, Sickert was not to revisit Bath for another twelve years. In the intervening time, however, he would be represented here by some of his paintings of the city from his earlier stay. A number of them were shown as part of the three important Festivals of the Arts organised in Bath in 1930, 1935 and 1936. The first Festival of the Contemporary Arts was held from 20 March to 5 April 1930, under the joint aegis of the Bath Spa Committee and the Library and Art Committee. An impressive programme of concerts, lectures, theatre, and even an avant-garde novelty such as the first provincial performance of William Walton's *Façade*, was put on. In addition, the generous space allotted to literature and every conceivable branch of the visual arts and crafts would doubtless astonish the organisers of the Festival today. The displays scattered throughout the whole complex of rooms and corridors in the Pump Room must have been quite staggering. On the walls were hung paintings, drawings, prints and woodcuts by a wide variety of established artists such as Sickert himself, James Pryde, William Nicholson, in company with some of the slightly

younger generation such as Augustus John, Henry Lamb, J.D. Innes, Roger Fry and Duncan Grant, Mark Gertler and Harold Gilman.

The Festival was widely publicised as part of the Mayor's successful campaign to raise money for a new hospital, and received good coverage in the press both locally and nationally. On the same day²³ that the *Daily Herald* noted how well the contemporary paintings and sculpture looked in juxtaposition with reminders of Bath's historic past, the special correspondent to the *Morning Post* picked out Sickert's painting of *Mr Sheepshanks' House, Camden Crescent*²⁴ in order to praise it for its 'local touch and some charming local colour ... incidentally [showing] how a modern electric light standard can take its place beside eighteenth century architecture'. Sickert might also have appreciated the discerning appraisal of this picture by the critic of the local *Bath & Wilts Chronicle* who commented on its

architectural originality ... Most contemporary artists are becoming more original in their points of view, and are bringing out that originality on their canvases. But it is rational originality. It strikes the medium between the first modern movement and the cubist. Particularly noticeable and delightful are the blendings of tone and the perfect balance of colour.²⁵

It was a critique which appreciated the careful preparation of the canvas and application of the paint in order to produce that 'perfect balance of colour'. Nina Hamnett had impatiently rejected Sickert's exposition of his methods of painting, and had found him unreceptive to the most avant-garde forms of art. But here the critic sums up Sickert's position very accurately, midway 'between the first modern movement and the cubist'. It also applies to the other artists of the Camden Town Group who were influenced by him and whose works were shown alongside his in this exhibition of 1930 at the Pump Room.

Bath had to wait another five years for the Second Festival of the Contemporary Arts, held from 24 April to 8 May 1935, when Sickert was again represented in the exhibition in the Pump Room by his painting of Sheepshanks' house. Without further detailed evidence as to its size, and without knowing if it was painted on canvas or panel, it is impossible to be sure whether this was the finished work on the subject (sold just before the Second World War to Durban Museum and Art Gallery, Natal, South Africa), or one of the four or so smaller preparatory oil studies which Sickert is known to have done. Another painting of Camden Crescent by Sickert was also included in the 1935 exhibition, as well as a picture of his titled in the catalogue simply as *Beechen Cliff, Bath*.²⁶ Could this have been a version of the picture already described, taken from Belvedere on Lansdown and looking across to Beechen Cliff, or was it a view just of Beechen Cliff itself that has somehow escaped further notice? Again, the question has to remain open.

The Festival for the following year took a different title – ‘The Art of Three Centuries’ – and was of rather a different nature. In the Victoria Art Gallery there was an eclectic exhibition of paintings and drawings covering the eighteenth century to the twentieth. Sickert’s contribution consisted of a view of *Dieppe Harbour* (no. 280, priced at £21), and two views of Bath including his favourite *Camden Crescent* (no. 279, lent by the National Art Collections Fund).²⁷

By the time that works like these of Sickert’s were being sought for exhibitions, admired by the critics, and acquired by public institutions as well as by enlightened private collectors, he himself was no longer regarded as the *enfant terrible* he had been in his younger days, but rather – now that he was in his mid-seventies – as the grand old man of British contemporary painting. Meanwhile he and his wife continued their careers, first in Islington, then at Margate, and then at St Peter’s-in-Thamet where they moved in 1934. While they were in London he had opened the last of his private schools at 1 Highbury Place; and when they had settled at St Peter’s he taught at Thanet School of Art. He delighted the students with his now famous eccentricity of dress and behaviour. They also revered him for his art and the evident pleasure he took in passing on what he had learnt over the years. He was always generously encouraging of young talent. Basil Jonzen, then living in London, later wrote an affectionate tribute²⁸ describing in vivid detail the Sickert ménage at this time:

Four of us had been invited to visit him next Sunday at his house near Broadstairs. He had even promised to meet our train. What hospitality from an old man ... ‘Of course’, said his niece when I told her, ‘you will never recognise Uncle Walter. He changes so. Last time I saw him he had shaved off all his hair except for a fringe and behind that, perched on his head, sat a brilliant red fez. He wore,’ she added, ‘a tail coat, bottle green with age, black and white check trousers, elastic-sided boots and coffee-coloured spats’.

Actually, when the four students encountered Sickert waiting for them on the platform, his theatrical costume had been transformed into ‘a violent orange tweed suit, no collar or tie, only a collar-stud in his shirt-front [flashing] in the sun. His carpet slippers gave him the appearance of a woolly bear’. The lunch – saddle of lamb – was an enormous success:

Our glasses were filled again and again and more bottles opened. I do not remember the sweet. I remember Mr Sickert waving his spoon and singing more French songs. I remember Mrs Sickert sitting there smiling, still sipping her wine and refusing a second glass. After some excellent gorgonzola, and a glass of port ... Mrs Sickert rose from the table and led us to the drawing room.

Then they got down to the business of the visit, first being shown Mrs Sickert's studio, 'quite bare except for an easel, a tidy palette, a neat bundle of brushes on the table, and a grey carpet'. One of her canvases was displayed, a circus scene:

'That's got it', Sickert said as he held her arm. 'The whip is cracking and there's plenty of drawing in that horse. You've got it, my dear, what splendid light ... Those rich reds of yours are splendid. You must paint more'.

They then adjourned to Sickert's studio, a complete contrast to his wife's. It was 'a room of hopeless confusion ... Paint brushes and palettes were strewn on every table and chair. A pier glass reflected the litter of drawings, engravings, newspapers and the rest that made up the kaleidoscopic effect'. Later, when they had returned to the drawing room:

'Mr Sickert', I said, 'in your studio I noticed you had drawn over a number of photographs'. [He replied] 'Ah yes, people think I paint from photographs. Yes, so I do when I've teased what I want out of them. I draw what I want on top of them. I take a piece of charcoal or a bit of colour and draw, putting in a few tones. There is my secret. I photograph that and work from the new photograph. Sometimes I have it made into a slide for my magic lantern and throw it on to the canvas and draw round ... There's my secret, there you are, you go away with something' ... We continued to talk in the hall as we put on our hats and coats. 'We will soon be leaving St Peter's. We're going to live in Bath. As soon as we are settled you must come and see us', he said. We thanked them again and looked forward to the day in Bath.

With the threat of another war and the possibility of invasion, it seemed inadvisable for the Sickerts to remain where they were in Kent. He remembered the haven that Bath had been once before, and the inspiration that its fine streets and crescents on the steeply sloping hills had offered for his art. They decided to take a house, St George's Hill, at Bathampton on the outskirts of the city, to which they moved in December 1938. Although many of their friends – including Sir Alec Martin, Sylvia Gosse, and Marjorie Lilly – came to visit them there, it is unrecorded whether Basil Jonzen and his companions managed that 'day in Bath' they had looked forward to. Sickert, however, certainly continued doing what he so much enjoyed: keeping in touch with the young, entertaining and instructing them. Clifford Ellis, the headmaster of the Bath School of Art, recalled how in March 1939

...he wrote to me, and it's a marvellous letter, saying that in due course he will be gathered to his fathers and it would be a pity not to offer to come to my establishment to tell people of the people he'd been fortunate enough to know and then he lists the great French contemporaries and



one thing that I think is very interesting now, that on no account should I think of paying a fee because he was really quite well off. He got £100 or even £150 per painting. In this he was helped by his wife.²⁹

Sickert would turn up at the school (then situated on the top floor of the Technical College in Lower Borough Walls), 'regular as clockwork every Friday morning at 11 o'clock'. Kate Fryer, one of the staff at the school, remembers those occasions:

To get the ball rolling, illustrations were thrown into the epidiascope. At first Clifford selected reproductions found in books – Manet, Degas, etc – but later Sickert brought along his own selection taken from the back numbers of *Punch* or the *Illustrated London News*. Thus we came to know the drawings of the Victorian illustrators, Georgy Bowers, Leech & Keen. Sickert's allusions were sometimes obscene particularly when he was referring to people he had known personally, and he often lapsed into French. But it was all very enlivening and broadening to the minds of a young and unsophisticated audience.³⁰

Thérèse was there too, sitting quietly attentive and apparently unremarked. Clifford Ellis, however, describes how on one occasion at least she was brought into the limelight and used to illustrate an important point. While Sickert was discoursing on one of the slides he was irritated

because out of the tail of his eye he saw something hanging on the wall. This was in fact a lithograph by Duncan Grant in his most Post-Impressionist vein, quite bright bits of colour dancing against one another. Sickert glared at this and he said, 'You know, you don't let off fireworks every day. Life is more sombre and more beautiful'. Then he tried to think of some way of making this statement clearer and he looked around and he saw sitting next to him his wife, long suffering Thérèse and he said, 'You know, it isn't done to say that your wife is dowdy but she is, isn't she? She has got that dark almost dirty red ribbon around her hat, and a hat that isn't quite black and that nondescript grey coat and that grey scarf with slightly darker grey flecks in it, but if you go on looking at her and as you look, you realise that this is all relative, and that when you see her there and these marvellous colours she has chosen you begin to see the ribbon burns out bright crimson and that scarf is a tiger skin'.

He was a marvellous talker - he'd think of things like this to say.³¹

As well as lecturing to the students Sickert would also give practical instruction to selected groups in a barn which formed part of the outbuildings

Fig.4 (left) Walter Sickert opening the exhibition of work by students of the Bath School of Art at the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath, in June 1939.

(reproduced by courtesy of the Sickert Collection, London Borough of Islington)

in the grounds of their house. St George's Hill was an extensive property, perched high with spectacular views over the garden and meadow at the rear, taking in the canal, the railway, and the river, and beyond that the city enclosed by further hills. The house itself, built in the early nineteenth century with generously proportioned windows, was spacious enough to allow him and Thérèse to have three studios between them. Sickert had always enjoyed spreading himself over a number of painting rooms: 'My advice to a young painter who wants to get on, is, "Take a large studio! – If you can't afford to take one, take two!"'.³² The third studio in this case must have been allocated to Thérèse. From the description given by Jonzen of the arrangements at their previous establishment one can imagine the spare and immaculate orderliness she would have preserved in it, contrasting with the chaotic accumulation of objects in Sickert's two workrooms. As well as producing her own work she provided essential help to her husband in taking the photographs that formed the preliminary stage of his compositions. The recipe that he had offered Jonzen for creating a picture reveals that in old age Sickert had become increasingly dependent on photography: the artificial image now needed very little further transformation to turn it into a painting. Thérèse would also assist in preparing the canvas with gesso primings. It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that between them they may then have collaborated in applying the first transparent layer of colour, so similar are their works in tone and texture from this late period of their respective careers.

In his earlier paintings of Bath Sickert had portrayed the stone in rich browns and golds, with touches of deep violet, seen against the blue of predominantly sunny skies. Now, however, he was viewing the scene through different eyes, with the colours dimmed to pale pinks and mauves of an overall chalkiness. His subjects were taken from lower down Lansdown hill than before, including *The Vineyards*, *The Paragon*, and *Walcot Parade*.³³ Thérèse Lessore, using a range of pastel colours very close to Sickert's, also painted views in the same area: *Walcot from Hedgemoor* and *Walcot Church*.³⁴ She was certainly recognised as an artist of quality in her own right, if not of equal distinction and fame as her husband. It was doubtless at the instigation of Clifford Ellis and his wife Rosemary – both influential members of the Bath Society of Artists – that in May 1940 Sickert and Lessore were honoured by being invited to contribute to the Society's annual exhibition. The works they submitted had no particular Bath connection. Thérèse was represented by *Love in a Mist*, and Sickert by *A Domestic Bully* and *The Miner*. He had always liked to keep a number of canvases going at the same time, some perhaps temporarily laid aside in order to be able to rework the subject later with a slightly different slant. *A Domestic Bully*, for instance, portrays the kitchen of their former house,

Hauteville, at St Peter's-in-Thamet, which had been used as the setting for his painting entitled *The Coffee Mill*. In this version, however, he added a self-portrait on the right (hence the title, possibly ironic) and a female figure (suggesting Thérèse) seated reading a newspaper in the background. *The Miner*, by contrast, is one of the comparatively few subjects he took straight from contemporary life, based on a newspaper photograph of a miner just up from a 'stay down' strike in the pit and embracing his wife. The original title was *Black and White*, emphasising the dramatic clash of their embrace, as the man streaked with coal dust holds his wife close. It had probably been painted about 1935, while they were at St Peter's, and had been noted there by Denton Welch on the occasion of his memorable visit to the Sickerts.³⁵

Although this was the last time that Sickert showed his pictures at an exhibition in Bath, Lessore maintained her connection with the Bath Society of Artists, exhibiting as an ordinary member for the next three years. As well as views of Bath including *Pulteney Bridge*, she seems to have returned to her first love of circus scenes. *Swallow's Liberty Horses* now belongs to the collection of the Sickert Trust in Islington Public Libraries; and *Circus in Bath* was presented to Leicestershire Museum and Art Gallery by the Sickert Trust in 1947.

During his final years in Bath Sickert concentrated his attention on subjects that he could paint literally from home, as he looked out of the window at his garden or back from the garden towards the house. He observed the maid scrubbing the doorstep, his wife standing at the window,³⁶ and the changing aspect of the garden from summer to winter. He painted a poignant self-portrait, titled *The Invalid*, which depicts himself from the back as he gazes over the end wall of the garden at the view beyond. Now in his eighties, he was growing increasingly feeble, and needing the support of a stick. When Cecil Beaton, the most famous photographer of the day, visited the couple in September 1940, he made an unforgettable image of the two of them in the garden (fig.5 overleaf). Sickert dominates the foreground, seeming to act the part of a Biblical patriarch with his flowing white beard ('a magnificent wild and farouche head', Beaton noted), while Thérèse hovers like a self-effacing wraith in the background. She struck Beaton as 'an exquisite objet de vitrine'. The local paper also sent its photographer to record husband and wife together, this time inside the house. She sits upright watching over him, while he lies back reading, with cigar in hand and on his head the favourite nautical peaked cap that he affected when not wearing the fez (shown in another of the Beaton photographs). A makeshift reading stand seems to have been rigged up from a cigar box resting on a plank laid across his armchair. His picture of *Temple Bar* appears in the background. Sickert characteristically saw the potential of this photograph for a painting. The composition that he made from it, entitled



Fig.5 Walter Sickert and his wife Thérèse Lessore in the garden of their home, St George's Hill, Bathampton, September 1940.
(Cecil Beaton photograph, reproduced by courtesy of Sotheby's, London)

In the Cabin, gives greater immediacy to the two figures in the foreground, while altering the background to the strong vertical lines of a large bookcase (fig.6).

It was the last time that he painted them together, in the semi-dramatic form that he liked to use for portraiture. It was a splendid way to celebrate their relationship which had developed over the years of their marriage into something so fruitful and fulfilling for them both. Thérèse looked after him tenderly and devotedly during his last year of illness when he suffered a



Fig.6 *In the Cabin*, 1940, by Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942). Oil on canvas, 43 x 78.5 cm. Based on a photograph taken for the *Bath Chronicle and Herald* in 1940. (reproduced by courtesy of the Methuen Collection, Corsham Court, Wiltshire. Photograph from the Photographic Survey, Courtauld Institute of Art)

series of strokes. Marjorie Lilly, his student from the Fitzroy Street days, visited them in the autumn of 1941, by which time Sickert was confined to bed upstairs. She found Thérèse, appearing 'tinier and more frail' than ever, having to cope with a number of evacuees from Balham who had been billeted on them, as well as keeping the peace between Sickert and the nurses who attended him. Lilly offered to take up Sickert's supper, which consisted only of his favourite rice pudding:

[He] was sitting with his back to the window, dark against the ebbing day. He was so still in his pose of dumb acceptance that he seemed like a figure in one of his own interiors; drifts of light floated over his head and shoulders but the rest was lost in shadow, all depths and blurred contours, losing and finding themselves in the gathering dusk. He was thinner, the concavities of his face more sharply marked, but his hair was thicker than ever, rising from his head in close-piled curls, his eyes blue and clear in their deep orbits. He moved slightly and the shadows fled. I thought what a portrait he would make with his lime green checked coat, the crimson rug wrapped round his knees and the background of trees beyond the window.³⁷

Sickert died on 22 January 1942, and was buried in Bathampton churchyard.³⁸ Thérèse wrote to Marjorie Lilly a month or so later:

... thank you for your kind letter. I know you would have come to help if you could. I had one great difficulty which was solved by the very great kindness of Clifford Ellis. No words can say how kind he has been. He came in every day and sometimes twice, to lift Walter for weeks. When you think of his busy life, it was wonderful. Doing it with such tact and tenderness.

What I shall do now, I just do not know. Find a studio somewhere I suppose – are there any Hendon way? I have no desire to do anything.³⁹

In fact what she did was to offer part of the space in St George's Hill as a refuge for the senior students of Clifford Ellis's School of Art. After their premises in Bath had received a direct hit in the bombing raid of 25 April they were invited to work up at the Bathampton house and take their exams there in the summer. It was a gesture appropriately setting the seal on the happy relationship that had existed between Sickert and his students.

Meanwhile Sickert's own work was receiving a great deal of publicity. Even before his death, in the autumn of 1941 a major retrospective exhibition of his paintings and drawings organised by Lillian Browse (and originally intended for the Tate) opened at the National Gallery. Lord Methuen, his former pupil, contributed a perceptive introduction to the catalogue, in which he applied Sickert's own words to what was on show: 'Real quality, like style in literature, is the result of complete knowledge of the subject treated, and of simplicity and directness in the treatment.'

After the exhibition closed at the National Gallery, the various owners of the works generously agreed to an extension of their loans so that it could travel round the country, under the auspices of the Council for the Encouragement of Music and the Arts. It was eventually opened in Bath on 7 January 1943 at the Victoria Art Gallery by Reginald Green. He recalled Sickert as 'a marvellous teacher ... [whose] influence has been expressed as much through his writings and through his teaching as through his pictures'.⁴⁰ Since then Sickert has been honoured by numerous national and international exhibitions acknowledging the importance of his work both as creative artist and inspirational teacher.

Immediately after his death in 1942 Sickert's dealers at the Leicester Galleries in London had mounted an exhibition in which they displayed his later work, concentrating on the recent street scenes of Bath, as well as his paintings of the house and garden at St George's Hill. His friend, T.W. Earp, wrote an appreciation for the *Daily Telegraph* in which he praised the masterly skill shown in capturing 'the classic beauty of Georgian street and crescent ... In splendour of perspective and loving detail [the paintings] reach a flawless truth of record; but with it goes a sense of atmosphere, of spirit of place, that

only Sickert could convey'. Sadly, only a month or so later some at least of that classic beauty would be disfigured by the bombing raids in April 1942. Sickert's vision of the peaceful streets would be succeeded by dramatic accounts of the destruction particularly in the areas round Lansdown Crescent, recorded by artists such as John Piper and Clifford Ellis.

Although none of Sickert's later works is yet included in the collection of the Victoria Art Gallery, the small group of his earlier paintings at present belonging to the gallery is a rich and varied one. It begins with the flower piece, *Violets* (c.1883-4), a rare example of him tackling a still-life subject; then the portrait of Lady Noble, which demonstrates the kind of dramatic character study he had perfected following his first stay in Dieppe; while the view of Beechen Cliff from Belvedere – painted in Bath about ten years later – reveals the pleasure he took in recording the urban scene. Another from the same period, of a view from the Assembly Rooms looking up towards Belvedere, is a sparkling account of the effect of sunlight on Bath stone. This little jewel had apparently been left behind in the studio he rented at 10, Bladud Buildings during 1918. It was going to be consigned to the dustbin by his landlady, but was fortunately saved from such a fate in 1925, eventually to find its way to the safe keeping of the gallery. The fact that Sickert was so prolific, and is known to have worked in a number of different studios in the city, leads to the hope that more treasures like this may still lurk somewhere waiting to be unearthed. He himself had found Bath a marvellous source of inspiration. As he put it with such relish: 'Bath is it! There never was such a place for rest and comfort and leisurely work. Such country, and *such town*'.⁴¹

Notes

- 1 Osbert Sitwell ed., *A Free House! The Writings of Walter Richard Sickert* (Macmillan, 1941), Introduction p.50.
- 2 Celia Noble, née James (1871-1962). Lived at 23 Royal Crescent, Bath (1947-50), and at 22 Royal Crescent (1952-62).
- 3 *L'Américaine*, 1908 (Tate Gallery, no. 5090). The title refers to her hat, which Sickert explained was called 'an American sailor'.
- 4 Marjorie Lilly, *The Painter and his Circle* (Elek, 1971), p.43.
- 5 Denys Sutton ed., *Letters of Roger Fry* (Chatto & Windus, 1972), p.417, letter dated 6 October 1917.
- 6 Sickert's marriage to Ellen Cobden ended in divorce in 1896. In 1911 he married Christine Angus.
- 7 The Lodge was presumably rented from its current owner, Robert Goldsworthy. For the previous history of the house, see Michael Forsyth, 'Edward Davis: Nineteenth-century Bath Architect and Pupil of Sir John Soane', *Bath History*, Vol. VII (Millstream Books, Bath, 1998), pp.110-111.
- 8 Undated letter quoted by Denise Hooker, *Nina Hamnett; queen of Bohemia*

- (Constable, 1986), pp.116-118. Sickert is referring to the Royal School on Lansdown, where Nina had once been a boarder.
- 9 Undated letter quoted by Denys Sutton, *Walter Sickert* (Michael Joseph, 1976), p. 190.
 - 10 Undated letter quoted by Denys Sutton, *ibid.*, pp.190-1.
 - 11 BBC Transmissions, 10 February 1961; 19 November 1966.
 - 12 Richard Shone, 'Duncan Grant on a Sickert Lecture', *Burlington Magazine*, November 1981.
 - 13 Wendy Baron, *Sickert* (Phaidon, 1973), p.136. She explains *camaieu* as 'like a grisaille underpainting but composed of two colours'. Sickert's recommendation to Nina Hamnett was white with cobalt for the lights, and white with three strengths of indian red for the shadows. This kept the colours very light in tone, as he wrote: 'practically all white, only just enough coloured to distinguish light from shade'.
 - 14 Quoted by Wendy Baron, *ibid.*, p.136.
 - 15 BBC Transmissions, 10 February 1961; 5 November 1966.
 - 16 Richard Sheepshanks never acknowledged Sickert's mother Eleanor as his daughter, but instead passed himself off as her guardian. It was left to his sister Anne to take an interest in her niece and family, particularly in the upbringing of her godson, the young Walter Richard. In the early 1930s Sickert painted his godmother's portrait, retrospectively, on the basis of an old photograph.
 - 17 Entitled *Beechen Cliff from Belvedere, Lansdown, Bath*, and now in the collection of the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath (no.1942.7). One of the finished versions is in the Tate Gallery, London (no. 5087).
 - 18 This area of Holloway was badly hit in the bombing raids of April 1942. Paradise House (originally No 8 Paradise Row, later No 88 Holloway) fortunately still survives as the Paradise House Hotel, and now incorporates the only other remaining house in the row. All the buildings depicted by Sickert on the opposite side of the road, at the corner of Calton Road, have been demolished.
 - 19 Denys Sutton, *op. cit.*, p.191.
 - 20 *New Age*, 28 May 1914.
 - 21 *Burlington Magazine*, January 1916.
 - 22 See documentation in Victoria Art Gallery archive. The teapot is illustrated in *Wedgwood Ceramics*, by Guy Morrison, fig.364.
 - 23 Friday 21 March 1930.
 - 24 Lent by the Leicester Galleries, London, price £147.
 - 25 Thursday 20 March 1930.
 - 26 Commended by the *Morning Post*, 8 May 1935, as 'a clever portrayal of one of the local beauty spots'.
 - 27 For the first time Lessore also was represented in the 1936 exhibition with her painting of *Newbury Fair* (lent by the Leicester Galleries, and priced at £21.10s.).
 - 28 'A Visit to Mr Sickert at Broadstairs', *Horizon*, September 1943, pp.194-203.
 - 29 Derek Pope ed., *A Celebration of Bath Academy of Art at Corsham* (privately printed, Corsham, 1997), p.99.
 - 30 *Ibid.*, p.11-12.
 - 31 *Ibid.*, p.99.
 - 32 Sitwell ed., *op. cit.*, Introduction p.32.
 - 33 All three were shown in the retrospective exhibition of his work at the Leicester Galleries, London, 1942.

- 34 These are now in the collection of the Victoria Art Gallery, Bath (no.1946.73 and no.1952.1 respectively).
- 35 Denton Welch, *A Last Sheaf* (Lehmann, 1951), pp.11-12.
- 36 Now known as *The Open Window*, in the collection of Leeds City Art Gallery.
- 37 Lilly, *op. cit.*, p.172.
- 38 Clifford Ellis carved the tombstone, and added Thérèse's name to it after her death in 1945.
- 39 Quoted in Lilly, *op. cit.*, p.173, letter dated 1 March 1942.
- 40 *Bath & Wilts Chronicle and Herald*, 8 January 1943.
- 41 Quoted by Baron, *op. cit.*, p.156, letter written to Ethel Sands in 1918.

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