

# THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

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## MASTERS OF BRITISH PAINTING 1800-1950 TO BE ON VIEW AT MUSEUM OF MODERN ART, N. Y.

MASTERS OF BRITISH PAINTING 1800-1950, an exhibition of 119 paintings by 31 artists will be on view at the Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, from October 3 through December 2. Selected by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie, Director of the Museum's Department of Painting and Sculpture, this major exhibition is being presented in collaboration with the City Art Museum of St. Louis, where it will be on view from January 10 through March 2, and with the California Palace of the Legion of Honor in San Francisco where it will be seen from March 28 through May 12.

The exhibition is planned to show the progressive tendencies in British painting from the revolution in landscape painting led by Constable and Turner at the beginning of the 19th century to recent work by such internationally recognized modern artists as Nicholson, Sutherland and Bacon. Most of the paintings come from Great Britain and many are being shown for the first time in the United States. All the major British museums have lent choice examples of British art of the period. For example, the Tate Gallery has lent a total of seventeen paintings, including Turner's famous "Norham Castle, Sunrise," and an important group of Blake watercolors. The National Gallery is lending some of its most important Turners, including the well-known "Snowstorm," and Constable's "Salisbury Cathedral from the River." From the Victoria and Albert Museum there are a number of Constable's sketches and watercolors by Cotman and de Wint. The British Council has made all necessary arrangements for collecting, boxing and shipping all loans from the United Kingdom and has given generous support to the exhibition from its inception.

Significant loans have also been made by the Art Institute of Chicago, the Albright Art Gallery, Buffalo, the Detroit Institute of Arts, the Art Gallery of Toronto, the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa and the National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne, Australia.

The British are a contradictory people, Mr. Ritchie notes in his introduction to the catalog\* of the show, and the century and a half to which the present exhibition is devoted is eccentric in its artistic personalities and its mixture of revolutionary and reactionary movements.

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\*MASTERS OF BRITISH PAINTING 1800-1950 by Andrew Carnduff Ritchie. 160 pages, 104 plates, 16 in color. To be published by the Museum of Modern Art, New York on October 3 and distributed by Simon & Schuster. Price: \$5.50.

The exhibition opens with eight landscapes by Turner (1775-1851) whose discovery that light is color and color is light, Mr. Ritchie says, we now see is the foundation on which much of modern art has been based. His paintings in the show were selected to stress the most revolutionary, light-exploring side of his genius and are pictures in which he emphasized the abstract appeal of light and space unrestricted by topical or specific reference to place.

His contemporary, John Constable (1776-1837), is represented by eleven paintings.

"Like Cézanne," Mr. Ritchie says, "he concentrated on a limited number of landscape scenes. Instead of abstracting or idealizing them, as Turner with his Byronic discursiveness had done, he chose to observe the same tree, the same Hampstead Heath, the same Salisbury Cathedral, the same River Stour over and over again, seeking to penetrate beneath the skin of appearance to an inner core of reality. His love of nature is as romantic as Turner's but the difference in their approach to her is a striking reminder of how complex the romantic spirit is and how dangerous it is to generalize about it."

In contrast to these paintings and the work of the other early 19th century painters shown, such as Girtin, Cotman, Cox and de Wint, the paintings by the mystic and eccentric William Blake (1757-1827) show another facet of British art. They are "so personal, so filled with his own visionary experience, they take on a life that is parallel with, rather than subservient to, their literary origins," Mr. Ritchie says. Included in the exhibition are illustrations for Dante's Divine Comedy, the Bible and for Milton's Paradise Lost. Blake and Palmer (1805-1881) and others of their circle, Mr. Ritchie says, appear as eccentrics who foreshadowed a later group of rebels, the Pre-Raphaelites, who are represented in the exhibition by paintings by Millais (1829-1896), Hunt (1827-1910), Rossetti (1828-1882) and Ford Madox Brown (1821-1893) who, although he never joined the Brotherhood, was closely associated with it.

The Pre-Raphaelite reaction to the brutal realities of the Industrial Revolution expressed itself in different ways. Brown turned to Christian Socialism, as seen in his masterpiece "Work." Hunt, the wheelhorse of the Pre-Raphaelite movement and the most literal exponent of the Brotherhood's tenet of exact truth to nature, is represented by "The Awakening Conscience;" Rossetti by "The Annunciation;" and Millais by "Christ in the House of His Parents" and "The Blind Girl."

Whistler (1834-1903), who lived for over forty years in England, came to London in 1859 when Victorian anecdotal painting had begun to sink into ridiculous depths of sentimentality. He attempted to turn the tide by the sheer force of his

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wit and example, Mr. Ritchie says.

"As a one-man revolution, he was more successful than he was ever willing to admit and dissipated much valuable time and energy in an increasing campaign of self-advertisement and in the cultivation of enemies.... The drastic exclusion of all literary associations and his insistence that painting was first of all a thing of color, form and design were the most important shocks which Whistler applied to Victorian taste. The great arbiter of this taste, Ruskin, was understandably outraged, and in his charge that Whistler was 'flinging a pot of paint in the public's face,' joined battle with him and the result was, in 1878, the most famous court case on an artistic issue in modern history. Whistler had sued Ruskin for libel and, technically, won the case, but was given only one farthing damages.

"During the course of the trial one of Whistler's pictures which came under discussion was his 'Old Battersea Bridge.' The judge questioned whether it was a correct representation of the bridge. Whistler assured him it was not; that it was simply a moonlight scene. He was again asked whether the shapes on top of the bridge were supposed to represent people and he assured the judge that: 'They are just what you like.' In short, Whistler's contention was that the subject matter of a painting was immaterial, that exact representation of actuality had nothing to do with painting as an art, and, by implication, that the artist alone was the judge of his artistic intentions. Here in essence we have expressed, of course, the main principles of much modern art. That they sounded radical to Victorian ears is hardly surprising. While they are now accepted as truisms by many modern artists, they are still unacceptable, because incomprehensible, to a majority of the public today."

"Old Battersea Bridge," "Nocturne in Blue and Green," and "Portrait of Thomas Carlyle: Arrangement in grey and black, II" (a companion piece to the famous Whistler's "Mother") are included in the exhibition.

Nine paintings by Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942), a pupil of Whistler's whose work has seldom been seen in this country, are shown. Sickert's "contribution is sufficiently distinctive to set him apart as a master in his own right," Mr. Ritchie says. "His command of tonal values is perhaps greater than Whistler's and much less 'tasteful.' He has a sense of formal structure that Whistler lacked...." Included are two of his theater paintings and "Ennui," most famous of his Camden Town, low life pictures.

As another example of the contradictions in British art, the exhibition includes some fine examples of portraiture, which had originally inhibited much creative accomplishment in England. Augustus Edwin John's (b. 1878) portraits of Dylan Thomas and of Dr. Gustav Stresemann are far above the dull level of academic face-painting, Mr. Ritchie says, while his sister, Gwen John, whose work has only begun to be appreciated since her death in 1939, is represented by a self-portrait and a portrait of Mère Poussepin. Wyndham Lewis' (born c.1884) penetrating portrait of the American poet, Ezra Pound, is also included.

Stanley Spencer (b. 1891), described by Mr. Ritchie as a primitive artist,

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unmoved by foreign ideas, a throw-back to Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites, is represented by four paintings, while Sir Matthew Smith (b. 1879), a Matisse pupil whose preoccupation with color sets him apart from practically all his English contemporaries except Hitchens, is represented by five paintings.

Ben Nicholson (b. 1894) is represented by nine paintings, dating from 1926 to 1953. "Nicholson's exquisite sense of balance in the arrangement of his shapes, his linear precision and the delicacy of his palette are, surely, in the long tradition of line and color wash that--starting with Anglo-Saxon drawings and continuing through Elizabethan miniatures and eighteenth and nineteenth-century watercolors--has always been a fundamental one in English art," Mr. Ritchie says.

Three decorative, lyrical landscapes by Ivon Hitchens (b. 1893) are shown and six paintings by Paul Nash (1889-1946), a draftsman and lover of Blake, whose interest in cubist-constructivism was submerged in his preoccupation in the later 30's with surrealism.

Graham Sutherland (b. 1903) also began as a draftsman and a lover of Blake. "They have much in common in their romantic search for the essence beneath the skin of English landscape in contrast to the Whistler-inherited impressionism of the New English Art Club, the Camden Town 'realists,' and the more recent Euston Road group, whose chief exponents have been Coldstream and Pasmore. All are romantics of a peculiarly English kind, but the intense, mystical romanticism of Sutherland and Nash, based as it is on Blake and his followers, Palmer and Calvert, has produced the most significant painting in England in the past few decades," Mr. Ritchie says.

Victor Pasmore (b. 1908) is another of the living painters represented in the exhibition. This artist, practically self-taught, now recognized as one of the most sensitive and experimental painters in England today, owes something in his early work to both Whistler and Turner, Mr. Ritchie says.

The exhibition concludes with six paintings by the 46-year old Francis Bacon who had his first one-man exhibition in London only seven years ago. Pointing out that Bacon's own explanation of his painting acknowledges one of the chief tenets of the surrealist faith, Mr. Ritchie continues:

But a label is futile at best to describe the eccentric art of Bacon. The object of his macabre painting is to terrify the beholder into a sense of reality from which he would otherwise choose to hide. Working from newspaper photographs of war subjects, accidents, and screaming political demagogues, where the ink of the press has stained and soaked into the paper until the photograph becomes one with the pulp on which it is printed, Bacon, by a comparable soaking and staining of his canvas has projected an imagery of such excruciatingly painful suggestion that its reality becomes almost unbearable to behold.