

An Awkward Genius

David Bomberg was the awkward genius of early 20th Century British Art. Of Polish-Jewish origin and brought up in poverty in Whitechapel, his fiercely independent mind and powerful sense of his particular cultural and intellectual background, allied to a precociously developed technique - learnt in his teens from Walter Sickert - developed early into a classic case of an artist always doing the right thing at the wrong time. Seen now as one of the major figures in British avant-garde art, he died in abject poverty and critical neglect in 1957, aged 67, after a career in which he painted cubo-futurist paintings quite unlike anyone else's before the First World War, following that with a lyrical, expressive landscape style between the wars. In doing so he went very much against the prevailing modernist movement towards extreme abstraction.

Then, after the Second World War, his work took on an ever more fiercely Expressionist direction that put him equally out of sync with the cool Modernism then favoured by the Arts and British Councils, not to mention the art-school establishment. His typically radical response to this final setback was to start teaching in a disused bakery school at Borough Polytechnic in 1947. Here his 'Borough Group' became one of the more significant and influential of post-war schools of teaching - the remarkable careers of major contemporary figures like Auerbach and, indirectly, Kossoff, among others, being almost unthinkable without his teaching and ideas.

There has been a similarly erratic path to his posthumous career too; despite an Arts Council retrospective immediately after his death in 1957, it took another 30 years before Richard Cork's 'David Bomberg' book (1986) and a Tate retrospective of the same year finally gave some impetus to his critical reputation. Even so it has been surprisingly slow going with periods, in the late 90s especially, when his sale-room reputation was surprisingly depressed. It has, as a result, taken until now, some 60 years after his death and a major retrospective at Pallant House, in Chichester, for it finally to reach the level it has, in truth, always deserved.

The reasons why this should have been so are not always easy to make out. His fiery, awkward personality quite obviously didn't help during his lifetime - he was often hard to support at the best of times - but that, on its own, really is not quite enough to explain the subsequent reluctance to acknowledge his extraordinary achievements. The often distinctly Romantic narrative, still being constructed today, essentially that of the artist as a troubled, influential genius at odds with his times is simply too glib.

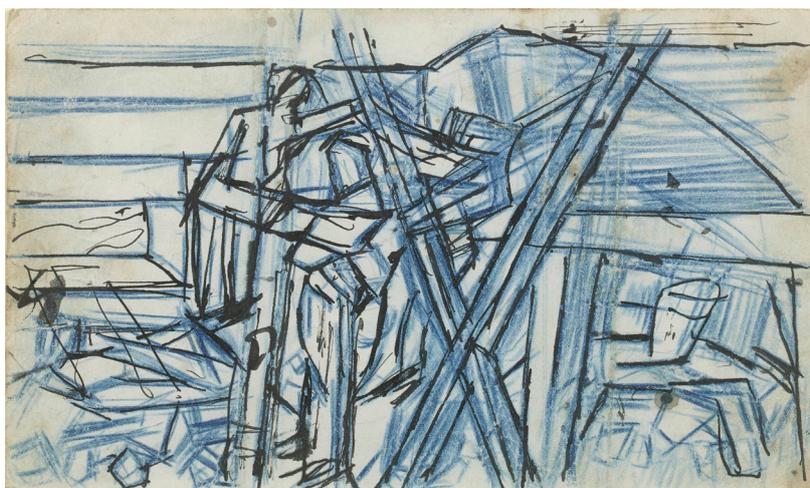
There is, in short, another story to be explored here and now, with this superb group at Beaux Arts, London of paintings and drawings originating from the Artist's Estate in the late 1950s. We need to look again at some of the profound complexities of Bomberg's upbringing and creative and intellectual life, the steady and tenacious deepening of his ideas over a lifetime - above all his remarkably prescient responses to the major events and movements of his age.

Fundamental to his art is that unmistakable sense of separateness that one always feels in Bomberg's life and work, in his own attitudes to other artists and artistic groupings, throughout his working life. It was apparent from the moment when, in 1911, he entered the art-world proper, as part of the 'crisis of brilliance' group at the Slade where, along with fellow 'Whitechapel Boys', Gertler and Rosenberg, he was made to feel the deep differences of his Jewish-Polish background. Bomberg's response to this appears to have been one of confident self-assertion, with his pride in his cultural roots backed up by an already formidable drawing technique.

More distinctly still this sense of 'apartness' can be seen in his intuitive grasp and profound understanding, arguably far more subtle than that of any of his English colleagues, of the real nature of the developments in European avant-garde art, Futurism in particular but French art in general. It was, above all, a knowledge based on first-hand experience rather than simply what he had seen second-hand at Roger Fry's two big Modernist shows of 1910 and 1912. In 1913, he had also travelled to Paris with Jacob Epstein to select work for the Jewish section of the Whitechapel Art Gallery's big 'Twentieth Century Art: A Review of Modern Movements' where they met Picasso, Derain and Modigliani among others.

Combined with what should now be properly seen as his innately European rather than English intellectual sensibility, it stood him well apart from his English contemporaries, Wyndham Lewis and his Vorticist group in particular. It also gave him the confidence to reject the invitation Marinetti issued to join his Futurist group after he had visited Bomberg's astonishing 1914 Chenil Gallery exhibition (*The Mud Bath* et al). It was an early example of Bomberg's always remarkably well developed sense of his personal artistic destiny, the intuition that the real direction and character of his art might ultimately lie elsewhere.

That intuition may have become rather more apparent to him when his three years of service in the trenches of the First World War was followed by the fiasco of his major wartime commission for the Canadian War Memorials Fund. His attempts to take the radical and largely abstract character of his pre-war work in a more figurative direction, so impressive to us now, *Sappers at Work: A Canadian Tunnelling Company* 1919, (for which the drawing in this show *FG Sappers under Hill 60* 1919 is a study, Pg.7) being rejected by the Fund's committee as 'a Futurist abortion.' Meanwhile the admirable immediate post-war works in the same vein (*The Players*, Pg.8 and *Bargees*, Pg.44, all of 1919 and *Composition* of 1921, Pg.57) were no more successful, being frowned on by collectors and ignored by critics, and there is the strong sense that that Bomberg was at something of a loss at quite how to go forward in these immediate post-war years.



David Bomberg

FG Sappers Under Hill 60
1919, Crayon and Ink, 12 x 19 cms

Yet it was out of this crisis that Bomberg started to fashion the roots of what was to become his late, essentially Expressionist, style, when his one admirer on the Fund, the painter Muirhead Bone, wrote him a remarkably perceptive letter in 1922, advising him to develop his own individual voice. "I should go back to a franker naturalism if I were you. You should attack an important thing and stick to that," Bone going on to advise him how we had to find out what was "personally at the bottom of our souls." The advice, self-evidently, struck some kind of major chord with Bomberg for when Bone also suggested he would be the ideal choice of artist to record the progress of the Zionist cause in Palestine, he jumped at the chance despite the fact that he had little sympathy for Zionism itself.



David Bomberg

The Players

1919, Pen and Blue Ink on Paper, 26 x 20 cms

Palestine was, for Bomberg, essentially a revelation about the nature of light -"I was a poor boy from the East End and I'd never seen the sunlight before". Certainly it hadn't really formed a crucial element in his art up to this point but now it became, almost overnight, a painterly obsession as he began to get to grips with the dazzling Eastern Mediterranean light. As it has been observed, Jerusalem (Study for Quarrying, Palestine 1923, Pg.54/Church of the Holy Sepulchre 1925, Pg.23) marked the first tentative steps towards what was to become that key idea of the "Spirit in the Mass" which was to dominate the final two decades or so of his career.

Gradually, as he explored the city and landscape here and further south around Jericho and Petra, Bomberg began to think of 'form' as a subjective thing, to be determined by the artist's individual experience of a landscape, an attempt to capture the 'spirit' that underpins the natural world, above all that this world is in a constant state of change. And it was the transformative qualities of Mediterranean light that now became, in a sense, the core position for his painting of the landscape from this point onwards. With the exception of a brief spell in West Cornwall in 1947, it was to the Mediterranean that he kept returning, to southern Spain in particular, first to Toledo in the late 20s and then again, in the early 30s, to Cuenca and, more famously, Ronda and Linares and the Asturias Mountains and, finally, to Ronda again in the last three years of his life, from 1954-57. (Mountains of Asturias 1935, Pg.43 or Goyaesque II 1937, Pg. 27)

With its heavy emphasis on the brush stroke or charcoal mark as the defining element in the setting down of his subjective feelings or experiences of form it is, if rarely described as such, Expressionist art in the wider European sense of the form. It was certainly this aspect of the work which attracted Harry Fischer of Marlborough Fine Art to taking on the Bomberg estate when David Sylvester made the recommendation to his widow Lilian Bomberg in the late 50s. This, ultimately, formed the collection which is the subject of this exhibition.

There is nothing remotely like Bomberg's late style in 20th Century British art of the period and this may also play a large part in explaining why English critics, curators and collectors always found Bomberg so difficult to deal with in his lifetime – German Expressionism itself has always had difficulty finding a wider audience in this country. Yet, when you look again at works like Underground Bomb Store 1942, Pg.53, one of the remarkable group of studies and paintings he made at this date of a vast underground munitions store in the Midlands, there really is no term other than Expressionist which can effectively capture the intensity of feeling in the painting's ferocious, agitated brush-strokes.

It was an intensity of feeling that was only to grow stronger in the work Bomberg produced over the last decade or so of his life, an artistic development that has often been put down to his ever increasing sense of artistic and critical isolation and neglect in these years, the idea, in a sense, of the Jewish prophet crying in the wilderness.

Yet, there is something else perhaps also going on in Bomberg's ideas and thinking around this time, a process which finds its focus in his often referenced idea of "the Spirit in the Mass." One of his closest students in these final years, both at Borough and in Spain, Miles Richmond, defined this in terms of how Bomberg came to resolve the exhilarating, polarising experiences of the weight and mass of the rocks and the sheer volume and radiance of the light that he found in the mountains in Spain.

For it is just this which gives Bomberg's later work a whole new urgency, one that not only gets to the heart of the work's continuing relevance and significance for a contemporary audience but also to its wider implications in the history of ideas.

It is just that we have not, even yet, quite caught up with Bomberg.