

London Group still in uproar 100 years on



Fitzroy Street Nude No2 by Matthew Smith is part of the exhibition

John Russell Taylor

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In the first decades of the 20th century artists and critics seem to have been enamoured of the idea that artists should organise themselves, or be organised by others, into groups and schools. Think of the Bloomsbury Group, the Camden Town Group, the New English Art Club, Vorticism, the London Group.

Whether this helped the cause of art is dubious, and many artists belonged to several different groupings simultaneously, each one offering some kind of forum for the dissemination of their work and ideas.

The centenary of the London Group, still going strong, began last year, an event marked by the Uproar! exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery, which covers the first 50 years of its existence. The dramatis personae of the show are amazing: it constitutes virtually a *Who's Who* of significant British art in in the Twenties and Thirties. Not only that, but the sensational-sounding title is fully justified by the number of bold initiatives launched in and by the London Group during its first decades.

It was boldness, at least, in the stiffly conservative context of Royal Academy art at the time. Even today, Mark Gertler's extraordinary imagining of *The Creation of Eve* (1914) creates a certain frisson. Not only its strong Fauve colouring, but the very idea of a Blakean

bearded God dragging a very pink and anorexic Eve out of Adam’s ribcage is still slightly shocking. In 1914 it was, incredibly, castigated for, as Dame Ethyl Smythe said of Violet Woodhouse performing Bach on her harpsichord, “playing the German game”. No wonder Gertler was taken aback, though not sufficiently to mend his artistic ways.

If one supposes that such a violent reaction must be confined to wartime hysteria, consider only Rodrigo Moynihan’s painting *Objective Abstraction* of 1935-36, which looks like nothing so much as a blow-up of a patch of light-suffused vapour from one of Turner’s late paintings, though the only parallel that *The Observer* could angrily adduce was “the bottom of parrots’ half-cleaned cages”. Moynihan also, be it noted, continued unrepentantly to go his own way, veering backwards and forwards between abstraction and representation.

Throughout its earlier career, the London Group remained splendidly eclectic in its admissions. Bloomsburyites such as Duncan Grant and Vanessa Bell rubbed shoulders with Vorticists such as Wyndham Lewis and Frederick Etchells, Camden Towners such as Spencer Gore and Charles Ginner shared walls with the great 1912 generation from the Slade, David Bomberg and Bernard Meninsky among them, sculptors ranged from Gaudier-Brzeska to Barbara Hepworth (represented here by an exquisite white marble *Mask* from 1928).

The great advantage of the show is that it picks largely unfamiliar works, mostly from private collections, by even its most overwhelmingly famous artists. The various phases of British art avant-gardism never looked so good.

Uproar! The First Fifty Years of the London Group, 1913-1965, Ben Uri Gallery until March 2

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