

Moving with the times: 100 years of the London Group

The English are an essentially conservative people, their suspicion of anything new or innovative, unless it can be seen to have an immediate usefulness or purpose, innate. The arts, whose lifeblood depends on precisely those qualities, have not been immune to its effects, as the current plight of the arts in the school curriculum makes only too plain while the history of the visual arts in England, certainly over the last two hundred years or more and probably since the Reformation, has been dogged by its influence. The response has nearly always been the determination of a small group of artists to set up new societies or artistic groupings; first and foremost, of course, there was the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768 and, in the 19thC., when that institution had slipped back into full-blown academic conservatism, there were first the Pre-Raphaelites and then, in 1886, the New English Art Club on hand to stir things up once again. Indeed the history of English Modernism could, from this point on, almost be written in terms of constant reaction and renewal through such associations of artists, culminating in that heady period, just before the First World War when the flurry of new artistic associations stirred up by the response of younger artists to the Modernist revelations of Roger Fry's two great French Post-Impressionist exhibitions of 1910 and 1912 – the Camden Town Group, the Fitzroy Street Group and the Allied Artists' Association in particular - in their turn reacted against the by now largely establishment New English. Subsuming all their apparent differences of approach they formed, in 1913, the association for which sculptor Jacob Epstein suggested the nicely neutral name of The London Group.

By all normal reckoning it should have long gone the way of almost all of its predecessors, contemporaries and even successors, either sucked back into the conservative mainstream or reduced to irrelevance by myriad contemporary developments. And yet, here we are celebrating 100 years of an artistic society that, on the evidence of this impressively vital and richly eclectic showing, not to mention the stream of exhibitions they have organized all over London in the last year and in the months to come, seems to be as relevant and important to the needs both of artists and the cultural energies of the city as it ever was- the exception perhaps that proves the rule!

So, how and why has it happened? It's an interesting question since its history, it has to be said, has been one of substantial lows as well as such current peaks, the answer to its remarkable resilience lying, I believe, in its very particular origins and early history. Unlike most such artistic groupings, which are largely held together by common artistic interests – French Impressionism, Cubism, Abstraction, Social Realism or whatever – the London Group was, from the very first, a distinctly diverse coming together. You only have to look at its earliest members – powerful exponents of diverse modern interests like Wyndham Lewis, Edward Wadsworth, C.R.W. Nevinson and Jacob Epstein alongside altogether much gentler Camden Town artists like Harold Gilman, Spencer Gore and Robert Bevan, Post-Impressionist like Duncan Grant and independents like John Nash to sample just a few of the 32 Founding Members names – to realise just how broad its spread really was. And there were plenty of tensions from the 'off' – Sickert soon resigned because of the inclusion of the 'Futurists' (Wyndham Lewis et al), Spencer Gore, who had done much to keep the

various factions together, died suddenly in 1914 while, by the end of that year, many members were involved in the fighting of the First World War, Gaudier-Brzeska being killed in 1915. Yet, somehow – an interesting ‘somehow’ – it all essentially held together. A clue, perhaps, lies in the observation made by the Group’s first Secretary, the painter J.B. Manson that the move to expand the Camden Town Group which essentially established the London Group had the effect of extending “the means of free expression thus won to other artists who were experimenting with new methods, who were seeking or who had found means of expression – Cubism meets Impressionism, Futurism and Sickertism join hands and are not ashamed, the motto of the Group being that sincerity of conviction has the a right of expression.”

Even so, at a moment when there would appear to be the most open of climates in history for artists to get their work seen or known about in one way or another – more galleries, both public and private, more exhibition opportunities, greater ease of communication and dissemination of information via the web and greater patronage too – what realistic rationale can be put forward for the continuing existence of an exhibiting society that was founded just a century ago with the modest aim of “advancing public awareness of contemporary visual art by holding exhibitions annually”? The battles are all more or less won surely? And yet, as I observed in a piece I wrote for a London Group show some 8 years ago “as my own daily experience of talking and meeting with artists, going to exhibitions, reading what’s been written about them, talking to the people who go and see them makes increasingly apparent, things aren’t at all what they seem to be, the spin newspapers, books and magazines, television and radio, not to mention curators and gallerists, give to the situation not, even remotely, beginning to square with the reality such experiences actually bring.” That would seem too, to be the same reality that now faces the members of the TLG, as indeed it has done over the eleven decades of its existence. Always plenty of arguments and debates, from time to time resignations, but always, too, recognition, and understanding, that without these the London Group would end up like every other society, clique-y and basically an irrelevance or dead-end – and, sooner or later, die.

For there are, when you come to look at it more closely, huge virtues in its original, simple statement of intention that square very well with the essential individualism of the artist. We have become so habituated by art-history and criticism to think of artists as forming part of some movement or other that we tend to forget that, however true that may be of some part of their lives, they are also by definition, individualists forming and shaping their own idiosyncratic creative history. The essential role of a group in such circumstances has never been to ensure stylistic conformity but always to provide support both morally and physically. The best people to do that are often, in the end, other artists. Such ideas seem, hopefully, to be in the very genetic code of the London Group, so much so that another 100 years would not really seem to present any very serious problem. Indeed, in terms of providing a vital strand of artistic diversity and free-thinking in an art-world increasingly dominated by market forces and curatorial conformity, it would seem to be of some importance that it should. As Mike Philipson, writing around the time of the London Group’s

90th birthday shrewdly observed, its survival may well lie in its “ability to slip through the cracks of the global economy” and “the entrenched interests of the usual museum/gallery sites” and that what the TLG “seeks to show is that art’s inner strength (and thus its outer weakness) lies in the co-operative multiplication of differences beyond all ties to non-art interests...” The journey continues!

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