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# MODERN PAINTERS

THE CAMDEN TOWN GROUP  
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BRITAIN

TATE

# MODERN PAINTERS: THE CAMDEN TOWN GROUP

## Introduction

The Camden Town Group was formed in 1911. Its artists employed a wide variety of styles but shared a common desire to explore everyday subjects using consciously modern painting techniques. This exhibition at Tate Britain provides the first major survey of the Camden Town Group for more than twenty years. It focuses on the key themes of their work and examines their lasting impact.

The impetus for the Camden Town Group's formation was Roger Fry's highly influential exhibition *Manet and the Post-Impressionists* (1910–1911), where avant-garde continental artists, such as Gauguin, Van Gogh and Cézanne, were seen in Britain for the first time. This heralded a new spirit in British painting in which The Camden Town Group, briefly, led the way. Camden artists pursued greater modernism of style and subject matter. Many, such as Spencer Gore and Harold Gilman, adopted the Post-Impressionists' use of vivid, bright, pulsating colours, which were applied in dabs of thick, matt paint. They also displayed a strong awareness of the decorative potential of simplified forms and the startling impact of unpredictable compositions. Their subject matter challenged Edwardian propriety with its vision of gritty urban interiors, music halls, prostitutes, cityscapes and suburbia. They embraced the lives of ordinary, humdrum humanity, without the moral comment or specific narratives of Victorian convention.

London in 1911 was a city of change in which the foundations of modern urban living were being established. In this fermenting flux of new roads, railways, the underground and newly interacting social classes, the Camden Town artists successfully captured the mood of an era producing images ranging from garishly coloured crowd scenes to solitary, alienated figures - images that still have resonance today. However, the group itself did not last long. Gradually dissolving towards the end of 1913, some went on to form The London Group, allying themselves with more radical artists such as the Vorticists, while others moved in a more conservative direction. Nevertheless, as Camden Town artists they had helped develop a powerful new vocabulary in British art with which to record modern life.

## Visiting the Exhibition

Exhibition tickets for school groups of more than ten students are available in advance only, at a cost of £4 per student or teacher (we ask for payment to be received two weeks before the visit). As tickets are limited it is essential to book well in advance. Tickets for students visiting independently are £7.

To make a booking, please call the Education Bookings line on 020 7887 8888.

To avoid overcrowding in the exhibition, all groups with more than thirty students will be split into smaller groups and entry to the exhibition will be staggered at one-hour intervals.

You are welcome to use the Schools Area to have lunch or to use locker spaces; please book these at the same time as your exhibition tickets there are a limited number of locker spaces and lunch slots available.

As all exhibitions at Tate Britain can get busy you cannot lecture in the exhibition rooms, but you can discuss works in a conversational manner in groups of no more than six students at a time. If possible, please brief your group before they enter the exhibition and if you have a large group we recommend that you divide them into smaller groups and perhaps follow the suggestions in this pack.

## About the Teacher and Student notes

This short pack is intended as an introduction to the exhibition and some of its themes and covers four works in depth, taking in the range of the show. It offers ideas and starting points for visiting teachers to use with all age groups, as well as for A-level and GCSE students to use on their own. Some of the activities or discussion points can be used as preparation for the visit, some are for use in the exhibition itself, and others are more suited to class work after your visit.

The works discussed are reproduced at A4 size so that you can print them out and use them as a resource in the classroom. The notes aim to give a few jumping-off points to explore not only the featured works but also the exhibition as a whole.

## Other Resources

In the exhibition there is an information leaflet which gives further information about the works on display. The exhibition catalogue is available in the Tate shop, which also has a range of books, journals, postcards and other related materials.

## Websites

Modern Painters [www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/modernpainters](http://www.tate.org.uk/britain/exhibitions/modernpainters)  
Tate Schools and Teachers [www.tate.org.uk/schoolsteachers](http://www.tate.org.uk/schoolsteachers)

Cover Image:  
Walter Richard Sickert *Ennui* (detail) 1924  
Tate, presented by the Contemporary Art Society



Charles Ginner *Piccadilly Circus* 1912  
Tate, purchased 1980

## Charles Ginner *Piccadilly Circus* 1912

Oil on canvas 81.3 x 66cm Tate, purchased 1980

By 1900 London was the biggest city in the world and Piccadilly Circus was its epicentre. Popular for its shops and nightlife it was also famous for its large advertising boards - the first in Britain to be illuminated at night. As a contemporary review in the *Pall Mall Gazette* records, Charles Ginner captured the character of this new urban phenomenon in his painting:

*"Piccadilly Circus* both in its crude tones and jumbled composition happily suggests the noise and confusion of that busy thoroughfare."

*Piccadilly Circus* describes the central traffic island around the famous statue of Eros. A flower seller sits just off centre. She wears a straw boater and a shawl and is clearly working class. In contrast, to the right, a smartly dressed middle class lady walks by. The women are facing opposite directions, their faces averted in accurate mimicry of urban crowd behaviour. Ginner also records the vehicles - a taxi and two buses - at a time when the impact of new, motorised modes of transport was transforming London. We can almost feel the flower seller being hemmed in by all these vehicles, a sensation exaggerated by the low viewpoint. Ginner clearly also enjoys painting the advertisements whose lettering he renders in a crude yet enthusiastic style. The close view and cut-off composition make the viewer feel as if they are in the midst of this hectic, frenetic scene - as if in a film still.

Ginner trained in Paris where his admiration for Van Gogh's work led him to paint in such bright colours that his teacher asked him to leave! In *Piccadilly Circus* he adopts both Van Gogh's strident colours and his use of bold outlines. In addition, he also employs extremely thick paint, which sticks out dramatically from the flat canvas. But here paint is applied in a controlled fashion, unlike Van Gogh's more gestural marks. Small, regular strokes are imprinted with the patterned linear texture of his brush giving added movement and decorative impact to the painting.

## For discussion

Compare this painting with one by Van Gogh. Discuss their similarities and differences. (If possible look at the actual paintings rather than reproductions, to appreciate fully their textured surfaces).

Like many Camden Town artists Ginner found it hard to make a living from his art. We know that in 1912, when this painting was made, he only earned £54, which was equivalent to an agricultural labourer's wage. Would you buy this picture? What do you think it is worth today?

In what ways would this scene look different today and how might a contemporary artist record it?

## Activities

Make your own image of a busy urban centre. You could paint it or use photography or a video clip. Try to include cut off compositions like Ginner and note their effect.

Ginner was one of the first artists to include adverts in his paintings. He clearly relishes their modernity as well as their bright colours and their lettering. Compare Ginner's interpretation with the way Pop artists of the 1960s explored advertising. How do you think you could make an interesting image relating to today's advertising?

Imagine you are the flower seller, the taxi driver, the lady or the people on the bus. Using role-play, re-create this scene and imagine what the figures might be saying.



Walter Richard Sickert *Ennui* 1924  
Tate, presented by the Contemporary Art Society

## Walter Richard Sickert *Ennui* c1914

Oil on canvas 152.4 x 112.4 cm

Tate, presented by the Contemporary Art Society, 1924

Sickert was both a leader of the Camden Town Group and, paradoxically, distinctly separate from it. He was very active in the group's formation, seeing it as both an opportunity to pursue new developments in art and, through group exhibitions, to gain increased picture sales. However, he was some twenty years older than the other artists and already had a well-established career and his own distinct painting style. Although he was familiar with the vivid colours employed by avant-garde Continental artists (he had recently returned from France), he chose to retain a dark palette, in marked contrast to most other Camden Town artists.

This is one of Sickert's most famous paintings. Its title, *Ennui*, means boredom in a way that is suggestive of world-weariness or apathy. Sickert describes the couple's dislocated relationship through the way they are positioned, each turned to face in opposite direction, each lost in their own thoughts. The room's furnishings act as props, reinforcing the theme. The stuffed birds in their bell jar cannot fly free, the oversize glass dominates the foreground and the painting of a young woman in the background is reminiscent of the youthful aspirations of happier times. The whole image is staged and although it might appear that this is a genuine couple, they were in fact Sickert's cleaner and handyman who posed for this carefully constructed painting. Sickert worked in a traditional and methodical way, making preliminary drawings and then carefully squaring up a final study to be transferred to canvas. This image, which looks almost like a 'snapshot' photo in its spontaneity, is in fact the work of many hours of preparation. Unlike his Victorian predecessors with their highly moral and conventional narratives Sickert's very modern skill lies in allowing the viewer to invent their own narrative.

### For discussion

Why do you think this painting is very popular? What do you like or dislike about it?

What alternative title might you give this painting? Do you think they are bored or are they simply thinking deeply about something?

Does it matter that this is not a "real" couple but instead a contrived scenario in which models act out the parts?

### Activities

Create a drawing in comic-book style depicting what happened before and what happens next, including some dialogue.

Props or meaningful objects are very important in this painting, suggesting the couple's class or status. Using a copy of the painting try changing some of the objects. How do your new objects change the character and meaning of the painting as a whole?

Sickert uses unusual, subtle colours which are hard to name accurately using conventional terms. Try describing his colours in other ways, for example using similes or emotional responses. You could for instance describe the table as the colour of bruised bananas! Try mixing paints to match some of Sickert's colours. It may help to know that he often worked in thin layers of paint, placing one colour on top of another.



Spencer Gore *Inez and Taki* 1910  
Tate, purchased 1948

## Spencer Gore *Inez and Taki* 1910

Oil on canvas, 40.6 x 50.8 cm

Tate, purchased 1948

Spencer Gore came from a family of amateur entertainers and sportsmen (his father was the first Wimbledon tennis champion). He frequently attended the popular London music halls and even helped decorate a fashionable cabaret club. This painting was made at the Alhambra Theatre in Leicester Square, where he would go twice a week to make quick sketches of both the audience and the performers.

Inez and Taki were an unusual act. They sang to lyre guitars, whose strange shape can be discerned in this painting. Taki's deep, resonant voice reportedly sounded like "a gigantic bumble bee", which must have made for an unexpected and rather comical effect! In order to recreate this unusual sound visually, Gore employs a high oblique angle from which the stage is viewed. He would have been familiar with such perspectival tricks from Degas' ballet and Sickert's music hall scenes. This extreme viewpoint is complemented by the use of vivid colours, making this painting unmissable, despite its small size. *Inez and Taki* was met with critical acclaim when it was first exhibited, where it was praised for its originality.

In this early painting Gore employs small dashes of complementary colours next to one another, setting off an optical vibration which is reminiscent of the work of Post-Impressionist artists, such as Seurat. In his subsequent work Gore took this interest in the decorative qualities of colour and pattern in a different direction, by applying his paint in larger flat areas of colour, bounded by dark lines, in a style which is similar to that of Gauguin.

## For discussion

What is the effect of including the dark triangles of the orchestra pit to the right and the balcony to the left? Consider what this point of view suggests and how changing it might affect the reading of the work.

"Simplification of nature necessitates an exact knowledge of the complications of the forms simplified. This may be done to produce a greater truth to nature as well as for decorative effect." (Art News 15 December 1910). Discuss what you think Gore means by this and whether you agree.

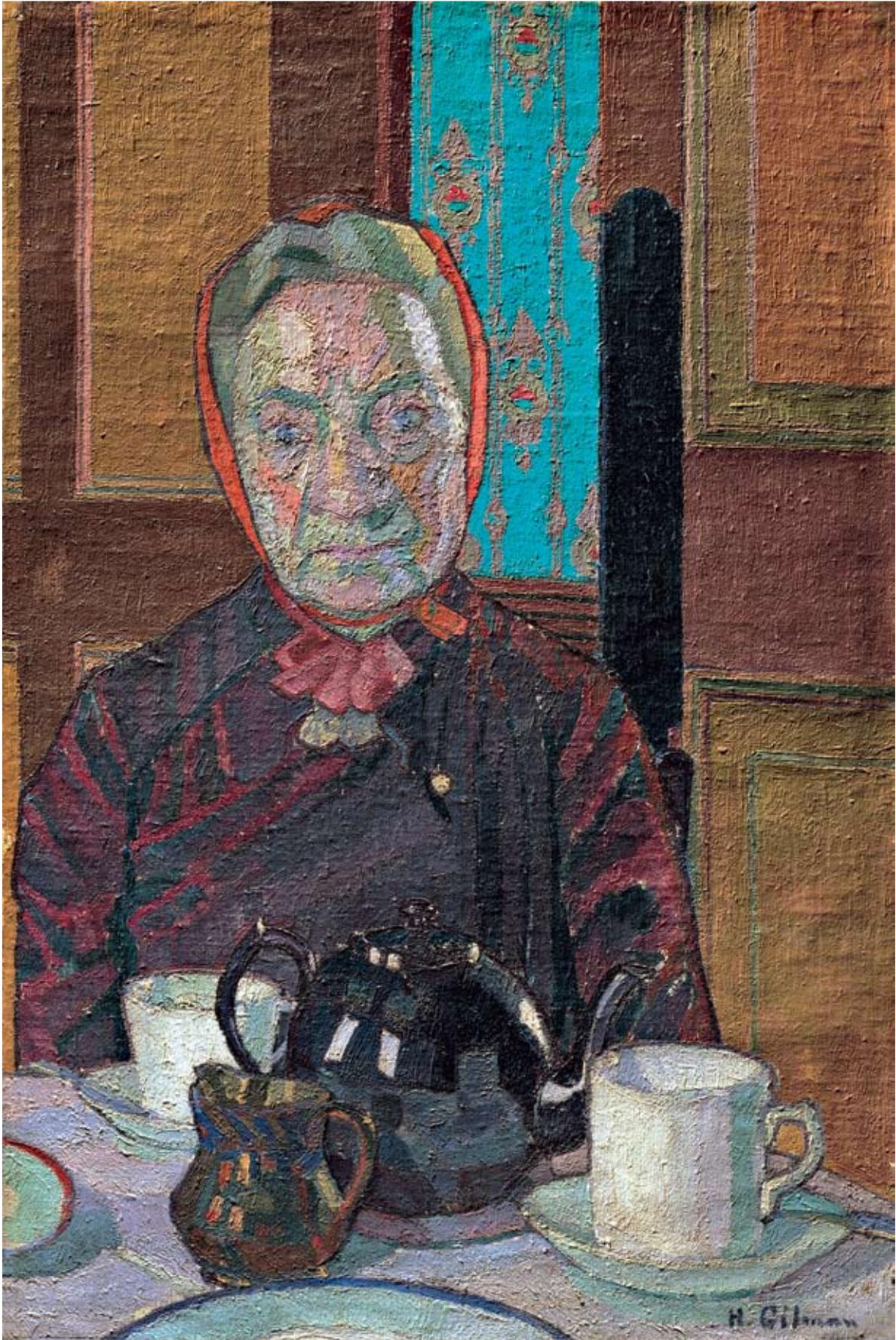
Can you think of any contemporary musical acts that make a strange noise? How might you represent them?

## Activities

Take photographs or draw an object from several different extreme angles. How does the shape of the object and its overall character change?

Do some image research to find out about music halls, comparing the colours, lighting and costume design to popular entertainment spaces or events of today.

Divide a page into ten sections and in each section try out different combinations of two colours, side by side. In particular observe the different effects of combining two complimentary colours (such as orange/blue, yellow/mauve) to a combination of two primary colours (such as blue/yellow, red/blue). How do the colours react? What is their mood?



Harold Gilman *Mrs Mounter at the Breakfast Table* exhibited 1917  
Tate, purchased 1942

## Harold Gilman *Mrs Mounter at the Breakfast Table* exhibited 1917

Oil on canvas, 61 x 40.6cm  
Tate, purchased 1942

Harold Gilman painted several portraits of Mrs Mounter, his landlady. She was a practical choice of model given that she was available to pose (presumably for no charge), but beyond this she seems to have held a particular fascination for Gilman, given the intensity of his portrayals of her. Gilman's paintings of Mrs Mounter are often interpreted as proof of his socialist beliefs and his support for Sickert's dictum: "The more our art is serious, the more it will tend to avoid the drawing room and stick to the kitchen" (Art News, May 1910). It has been suggested that the two table settings imply that Mrs Mounter and Gilman are breakfasting together and that this painting therefore describes the interaction between social classes, which was a new feature of Edwardian life. In any event, such a portrait of a working class woman, accompanied by her very plain tea service, would have seemed radical to audiences used to seeing portraits exclusively of the rich surrounded by their far more lavish objects.

Even more controversial is Gilman's use of non-representational colours. The pinks, greens and mauves on Mrs Gilman's face are framed by a blinding red headscarf, which pushes her face forward from the strident angular patterning of the wall behind. Gilman has combined Sickert's demands for scenes of ordinary life with a love for the colours and flat simplified designs of the Post-Impressionists.

At a time when the women's Suffragette movement was making a major impact, it seems extraordinary that the Camden Town Group was an all male society, which excluded women. It is also surprising that Gilman actively supported this reactionary position, despite the fact that his numerous portraits of women show such sympathy and insight. Mrs Mounter, for example, seems a remarkably insightful portrait as she sits with an expression of great stoicism and melancholy. In this late work, made during the First World War, it is almost as if Mrs Mounter has come to represent the pain and hardship of a nation enduring war and loss.

### For discussion

How would you describe Mrs Mounter's expression? If she could speak what would she say?

Gilman prepared his paintings very carefully using detailed drawings. His graphic skill was immense. The drawing for *Mrs Mounter* is similar to the painting but has a couple of significant differences; there is a chair to the right of Mrs Mounter and there is no bronze coloured jug next to the teapot. Why do you think he made these changes?

Investigate the impact of the Suffragette movement and in what ways life changed for all classes of Edwardian women after the First World War. (Look at the changing roles of women explored in the final room of the exhibition.)

### Activities

Make Mrs Mounter smile! Make your own version of Mrs Mounter but this time make her smile, using digital collaging and photo manipulation. Change the colours (and possibly other aspects of the painting such as the objects or background) to suit her changed mood.

Look straight at a mirror and practise expressing different feelings using your eyes only. Do not move your head or use any other part of your face. Working with a partner, take two photos of one another. For each photo you need to express a different feeling using your eyes only. Now share the photos. Can people guess what feeling you were trying to express?

Make an art work (in any media) dedicated to your own ordinary yet extraordinary unsung hero! It could be a friend, a parent or a teacher, whomever you want. Think how to describe them using colour, viewpoint, meaningful objects and style.