

SEPTEMBER ART CHALLENGE

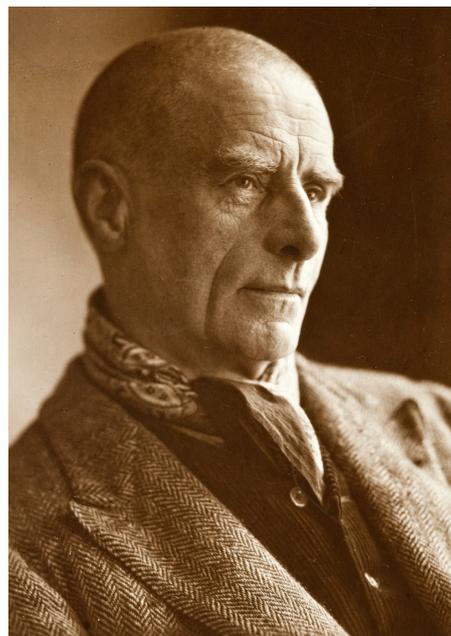
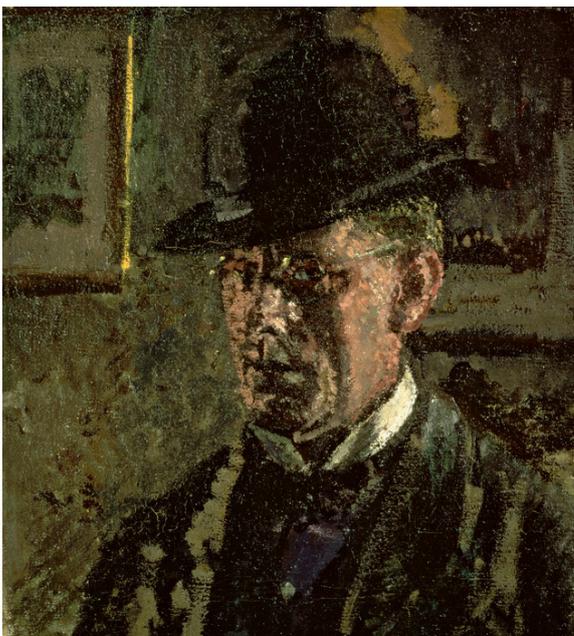
'In the Style of ...'



Walter Sickert - Exploring Tonal Values

By Dr Chris Davies

The first essay, '*In the Style of*', invites you to explore tonal values referencing the work of the German/British painter Walter Sickert. Exploring a subtle tonal range, with nuances in tonal values, provides variation and depth in painting, drawing and printmaking. Walter Sickert was a master at using a limited tonal range to create three-dimensionality in limited interior spaces. After initially providing biographical context, the essay provides an insight into Sickert's working methods, is didactic in approach, inviting readers to reflect on Sickert's working practises and experiment in creating artworks 'in the style of' one of the finest artists of his generation.



Left **Fig 1** | **Walter Sickert**, *The Juvenile Lead (Self-Portrait)* 1907, oil on canvas

Right **Fig 2** | **Walter Richard Sickert** with his Head Shaved, 1920

Walter Sickert was a prolific artist, producing over 450 finished canvases in a career spanning sixty years.

Sickert came from a European artistic background, born to a Danish father (with German nationality) and an Anglo-Irish mother; both father and grandfather were painters. Born in Munich in 1860, he moved with the family to London in 1868. Initially, he considered a career as an actor; under the alias 'Mr Nemo', he appeared in several minor roles in touring repertory productions. Although he eventually decided against a career, the theatre remained an abiding interest with 'the boards' a frequent subject (see Fig 3).



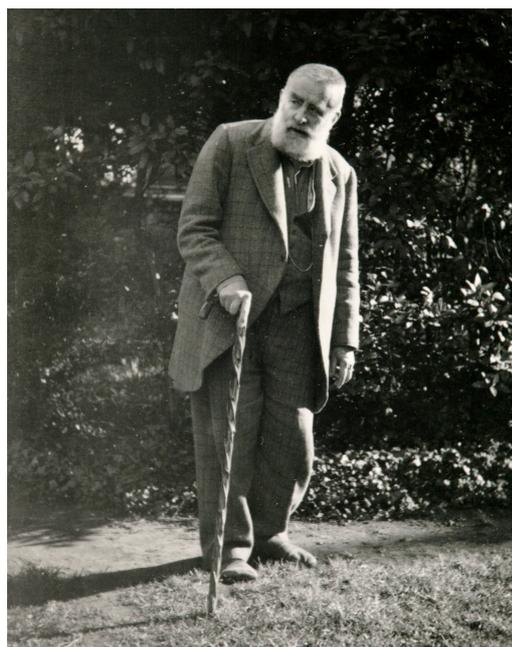
Fig 3 | Walter Sickert, *Brighton Pierrots*, 1915, oil on canvas

In 1881 he enrolled at the Slade School of Art but dropped out, finding the traditional formal approach to art education not to his liking. Instead, he worked in James McNeil Whistler's printmaking studio and in 1893 visited Paris and met with Edgar Degas. Until he eventually settled in Bathampton, Sickert led a nomadic existence, not remaining in one place for long; Dieppe, Paris, Venice, Chagford in Devon and Bath to name a few of his stopping-off places.

Although moving in illustrious wealthy circles, a well-connected socialite, he nevertheless retained his 'outsider' profile and led a somewhat bohemian lifestyle until settling at St George's Hill House in Bathampton in 1938.



Left Fig 4 | Portrait of Walter Richard Sickert and Thérèse Lessore at St George's Hill House, Bathampton, 1939-42



Right Fig 5 | Portrait of Walter Richard Sickert in the garden at George's Hill House, Bathampton, 1939-42

But even this home was distant from conventional bourgeois values; the British fashion and celebrity portrait photographer Cecil Beaton commented, 'I loved the atmosphere of the house – rather shabby, down at heel, infinitely charming.'

Sickert was an active supporter of Bath School of Art; students were frequent visitors to St George's Hill House, and without charge, he ran practical workshops for undergraduates. Sickert passed away at home in 1942, and his final resting place is the churchyard at Bathampton Church.

There is much to be gained from looking carefully at Sickert's working practises. His subject matter was varied, from landscapes to scenes from daily life - the theatre, portraiture (though Sickert was somewhat scathing about professional portrait painters, referring to them as 'the wriggle and chiffon school'). Irrespective of the subject matter, his skill at making paintings, notably his tonal aptitude, has had a lasting impression on painters; his paintings can be viewed as studies of illumination. He used light symbolically. A fine example of this is his series of paintings of Venice, a city he first visited in 1895. In *St Mark's, Venice (Pax Tibi Marce Evangelista Meus)* (see Fig 6). The Latin *Pax Tibi Marce Evangelista Meus* translates as 'Peace be unto to you, Mark, my Evangelist'. Sickert's focus was how light impacted the front elevation of the basilica, one of a series of paintings he made of it. Although inspired by Monet's series of paintings of Rouen cathedral (see Fig 7), Sickert's approach and aesthetic, however, was different; unlike Monet, he was not concerned with the fleeting effects of light but instead endeavoured to capture the structure and form of the architecture by exploring tonality - light sources - to accentuate the sparkling gold pinnacles and to emphasise the spirituality of the basilica. To highlight these features, Sickert used 'accents' to heighten the tone in the lighter area of this painting, chrome yellow. The painting explores chiaroscuro, the tension between light and dark; the painting can be 'divided' into two sections, along the horizontals. The three dark pinnacles topped with yellow and the smaller pinnacle to the left, in the background adds depth to the composition, creating the illusion of three-dimensionality.

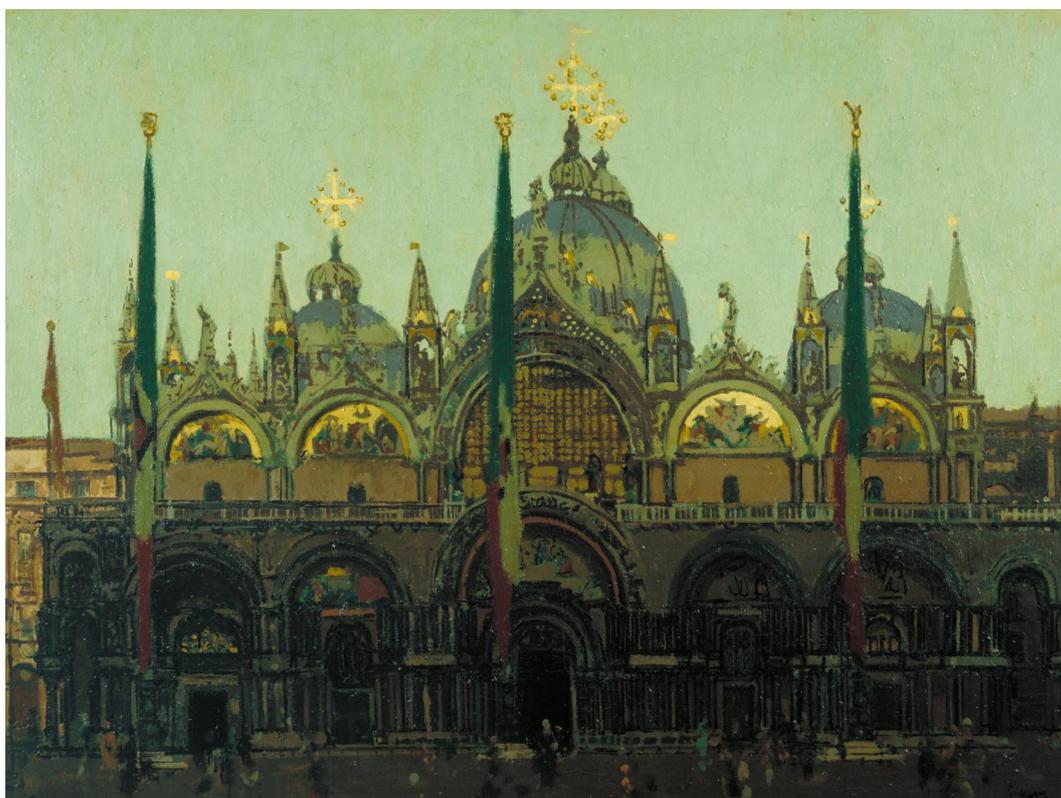
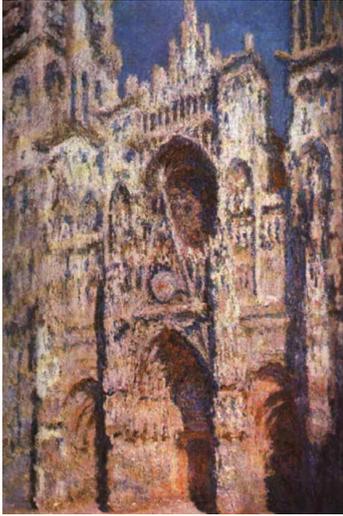


Fig 6 | Walter Sickert, *St Mark's, Venice (Pax Tibi Marce Evangelista Meus)*, 1906, oil on canvas



Left Fig 7 | Claude Monet, *Rouen Cathedral, Full Sunlight*, 1894, oil on canvas



Right Fig 8 | James McNeil Whistler, *Nocturne: Blue and Gold, St Mark's, Venice*, 1880, oil on canvas

The influence of Whistler's painting of Venice is evident, notably *Nocturne: Blue and Gold, St Mark's, Venice* from 1880.

Sickert was fastidious and methodical in approach, each canvas a process of abstraction of complex forms, however always aware of the underpinning geometry of the composition. For Sickert, paintings were viewed as journeys, records of process, the subject matter subjugated to painting. He would begin by squaring up (2-inch squares) the canvas or paper, a technique recommended to him by Degas. Often this squaring up would be left, often visible to the viewer, evidence of his studio practice and process. For example, it is visible in the top left of Sickert's painting *The Obelisk* (see Fig 9).

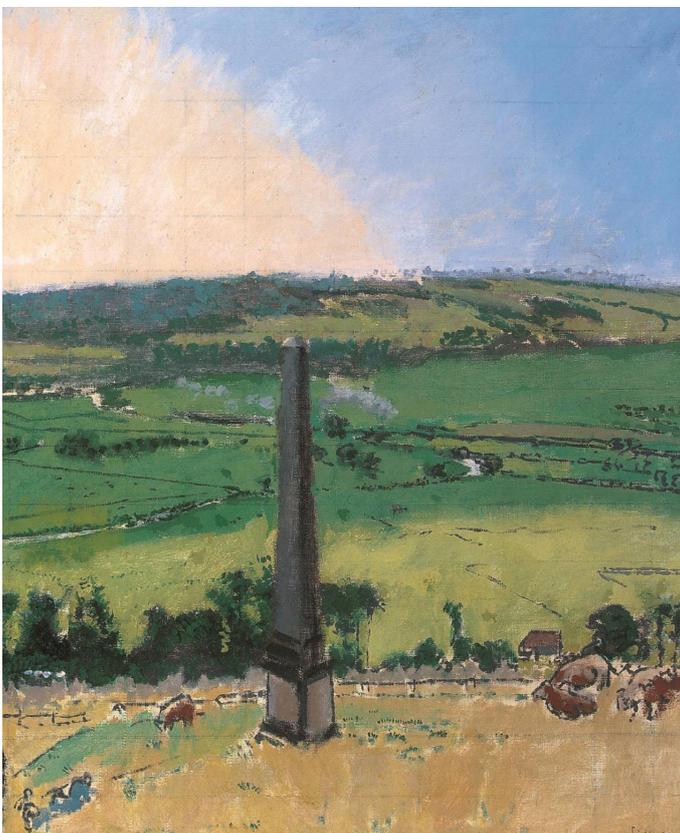
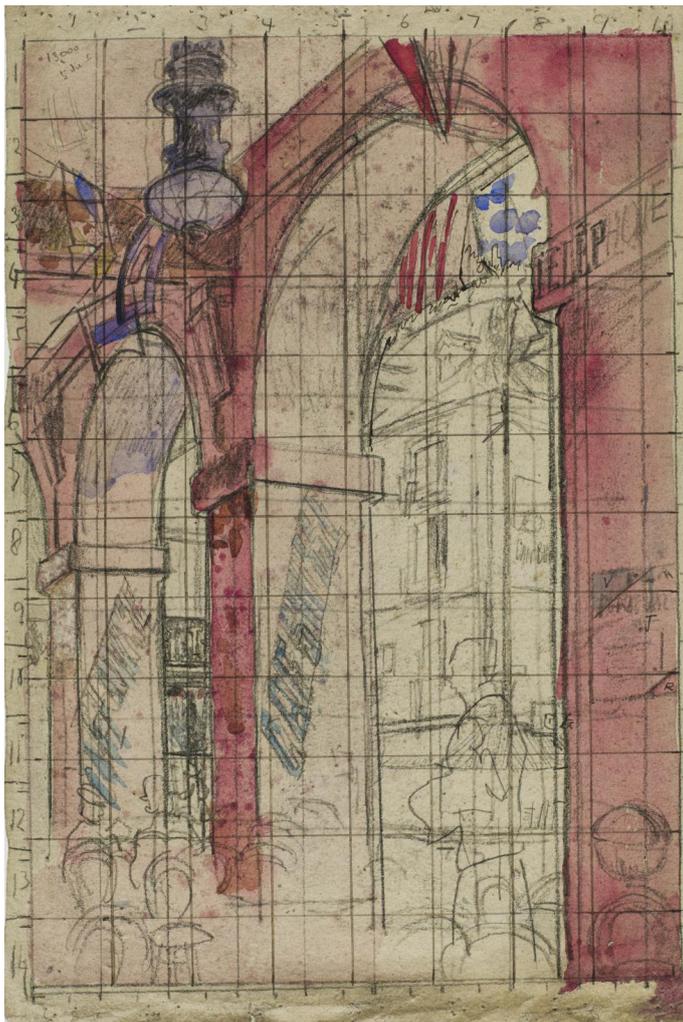


Fig 9 | Walter Sickert, *The Obelisk*, 1914, oil on canvas

Sickert would often annotate and square up with numbers for transfer, apply chalk on the reverse before transferring the cartoon to the canvas. In the Tate Collection, Sickert's drawing of *Café Suisse/Café des Arcades, Dieppe* is a fine example of this technique.



Left **Fig 10** | **Walter Sickert**, Drawing of *Café Suisse/Café des Arcades, Dieppe*, 1918, Annotated and squared up with numbers for transfer. The back is chalk rubbed for transfer.

Top Right **Fig 11** | **Walter Sickert**, Drawing of *Café Suisse/Café des Arcades, Dieppe*, 1918, chalk rubbed for transfer.

Bottom Right **Fig 12** | **Walter Sickert**, Drawing of *café bar, Dieppe or environs*, pencil and watercolour on cash book paper

Sickert believed when squaring drawings up for a painting, it was important that it should be mathematically exact because the whole process was dependent on the precise placing of the elements, which were captured in the preliminary drawings being true to a fraction because that was where the secret lay, in the precise relation of every mark to every other mark. This enabled Sickert to accurately 'pinpoint' tonal values, isolate accents and arrange elements in each painting. Sickert fully understood that by creating a dark and transparent sketch- notably on black or grey - light takes on a harsh brightness and employing light impasto of the ambiguous tones (purple, wine, blue, a range of greys, subdued oranges, broken whites Sickert's preferred hues) that bright luminosity could be achieved. His starting point was a number of detailed studies, often with additional notes on the paper followed by a series of more detailed drawings. What he discovered in making drawings and prints was carried over into his paintings.



Fig 13 | Walter Sickert,
Drawing of a beach scene with people
and tent, (Scheveningen, Holland), 1887,
ink and pencil on grey paper

Sickert was aware that the range from lighter tones to darker ones is harder to contrive in colour than in black and white, and through these preparatory sketches and drawings and black and white photographs identifying and isolating areas of colour and light was less problematic. Through these, he was able to control and manipulate the effects of light and shade in the final canvases. However, Sickert would often adapt, add or adjust drawings, this is evident in *Sally* (see [Fig 16](#)).



Fig 14 | Walter Sickert, Mrs Barrett, 1905, pastel on board

Sickert understood that working in pastels affirmed the apparent transformation that light could have on a subject and made a number of pastel pictures, both stand-alone works but also as supports to planned oil paintings, for example, his pastel drawing of Mrs Barrett was turned into an oil painting with the same title.

Although his subject matter was not defining his painting, nevertheless Sickert was drawn to the ordinary, to the natural, a prerequisite for European Modernism. Interiors of dingy working-class households were a favourite subject for Sickert. Between 1905 and 1909, Sickert painted a series of paintings that reflected his aesthetic and demonstrated his painterliness, pictures characterised by diverse mark-making and brushstrokes, colour chalky in the higher registers, yet warm in the darker areas. In his mark-making, Sickert avoided blending, instead, he painstakingly built up networks of energetic brushstrokes - areas of shadow - scar and slash surfaces. Sickert used mark-making symbolically - dour palette and roughly handled brushwork- emphasised the ordinariness of the subject matter.

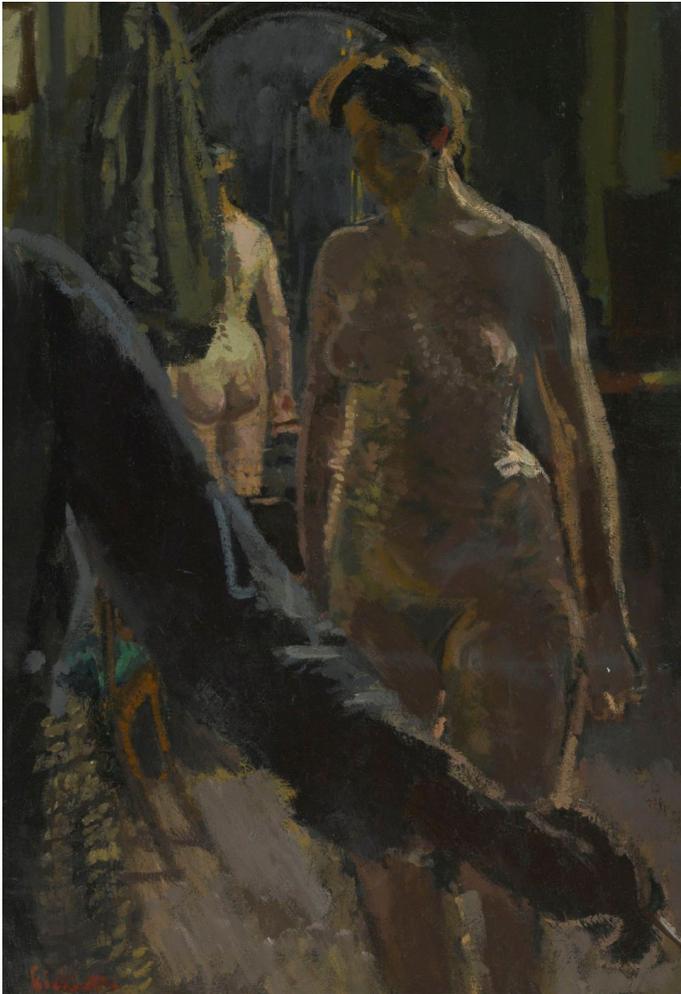


Fig 15 | Walter Sickert,
*The Studio: The painting
of a Nude*, 1906, oil on canvas

The Studio: The painting of a Nude is an excellent example of Sickert's painterliness and careful understanding and appreciation of European painting and Classicism and his aesthetic response to those time honoured traditions. Mirrors are often incorporated into Sickert's interiors, a metaphor for the self-reflective process and plasticity of painting. There is variation in the mark-making. Long slashes and curls of purple paint, one of Sickert's preferred hues, enliven the painter's sleeve. The same purple becomes a flat painted patch beneath this sleeve. The streaks of orange on the chair leg (difficult to see in reproductions) play off the purple.

La Hollandaise is one of Sickert's most accomplished and successful paintings from this series. Before laying down the first mark, Sickert went through the same procedure he did before painting: Sketches, drawings and setting up the props in his mobile studio. The iron stead bed was moved regularly and featured in numerous paintings. Note, in his preparatory drawing *Sally*, Sickert has added an extra sheet of drawing to the original.



Fig 16 | Walter Sickert,
Sally, 1906,
charcoal with stump and
graphite, touched with white
chalk on buff wove paper



Fig 17 | Walter Sickert,
La Hollandaise, 1906,
oil on canvas

La Hollandaise translates as *The Dutch Girl* and probably may refer to the nickname of a sex worker in a realist novel by the nineteenth-century French author, Honoré de Balzac, Sickert was well versed in European literature. The brush marks form a surface so rough that the image seems to fragment if you look at it closely.

Although the subject matter may be somewhat depressing, nevertheless they capture Sickert's aesthetic and moral position, *the plastic arts are gross arts, dealing joyously with gross material facts* and the rendering is sublime – note the left breast so elegantly and delicately painted, broad but controlled brushstrokes and livid patches of colour to emphasise the materiality of the painted surface of the torso. The implied light source to her left illuminates the nearest planes of her body and casts the right-hand side of her face and torso into deep shadow. Behind the figure, a large mirror captures the reflection of the model. The painting ought to be read as a companion piece to *Nuit d'été*; Sickert worked *en series*.



Fig 18 | Walter Sickert,
Nuit d'été, 1906,
oil on canvas

Mirrors are a valuable prop in paintings, a pictorial 'trick' frequently deployed by Sickert and his European contemporaries: Pierre Bonnard, Edgar Degas - mirrors expand the physical setting, creates visual depth and apporions narrative authenticity to the subject. In Pierre Bonnard's *Nude Against the Light*, the mirror to the left of the window reveals not only a reflection of the nude but also a chair that is situated beyond the confines of the room. The bath of water captures the reflection of the light emanating beyond the window frame.

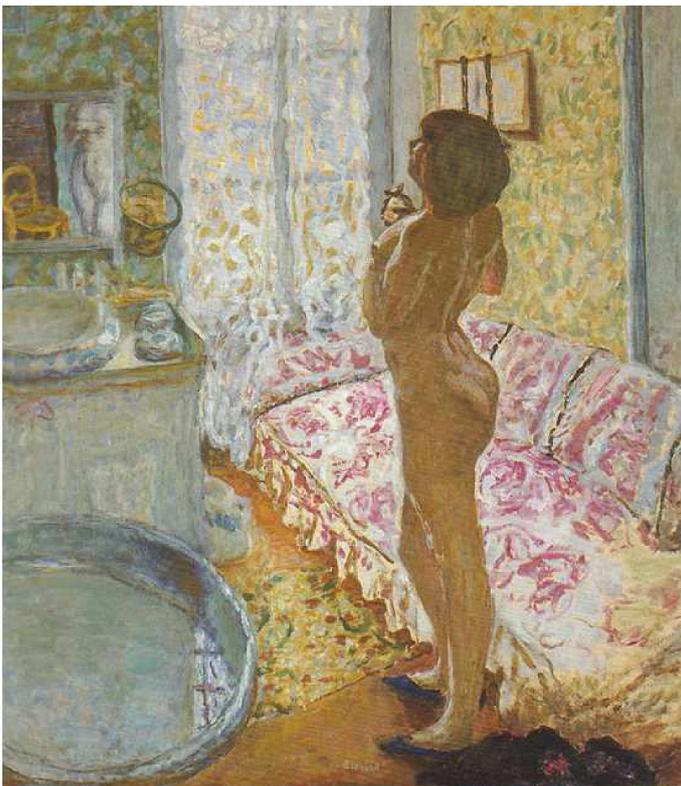


Fig 19 | Pierre Bonnard,
Nude Against the Light, 1908,
oil on canvas

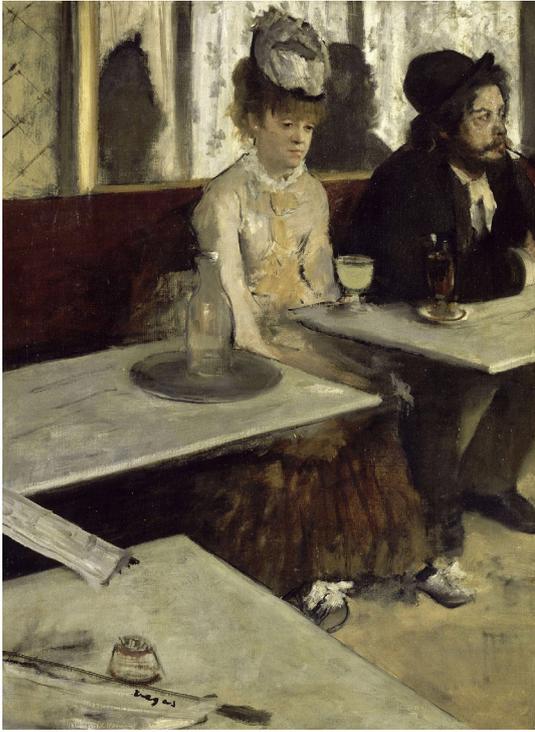


Fig 20 | Edgar Degas,
The Absinthe Drinker, oil on canvas

Fig 21 | Walter Sickert,
L'Armoire à Glace, 1924, oil on canvas.

Fig 22 | Walter Sickert,
Study for 'L'Armoire à glace', 1922,
Graphite, ink, watercolour and gouache
on paper

Fig 23 | Walter Sickert,
Study for 'L'Armoire à Glace', 1922,
Ink on paper



After 1918 Sickert's work became more colourful, but he continued to approach the creative process in the same way: sketches, drawing in mixed media, mirrors. *L'Armoire à Glace* is a typical example of his work from this period.

The Victoria Art Gallery in Bath usually has three paintings by Sickert on show, his portrait of Celia Brunel a small masterpiece, displaying many of Sickert's technical prowess.



Fig 24 | Walter Sickert,
Celia Brunel, Lady Noble, 1905,
oil on canvas

Summary and Conclusion

Not all artists have been appreciative of Sickert's oeuvre. Writing in the 1980s, David Hockney bemoaned Sickert's work claiming that it was low-toned, domestic painting, small in scale, very English and '*not to his purpose at that time*'. Hockney, a competent illustrator/image maker but limited in the nuances of the art of painting, frequently criticised and dismissed the work of others in order to elevate his work and sustain his commercial career; his observations need to be carefully considered and critically addressed. What were Hockney's 'paintings' *Mr and Mrs Clark and Percy* and *George Lawson and Wayne Sleep* if not paintings of domesticity? The painter's painter Frank Auerbach provides a more balanced, respectful assessment of Sickert's influence, acknowledging him 'be a great artist'.

September Art Challenge 2021

Friday 24 September 2021 | Zoom Get-together | 2pm | Free

We welcome you to share your art with other members of the society at the Zoom Get-together on Friday, 24 September. Please email your images (cropped and at least 1 MB and a maximum of 3 MB if possible) to **Carol Hayslip** by **Thursday 23 September** at the latest for us to screen share during the Zoom session, or, if you prefer, have it ready at hand on the day to show to the camera.

We exchange ideas on our art and give each other mutual support, so you don't need to have produced work to attend the Zoom; all are welcome.

Artworks need not be recent, and it's just fun to share and keep in touch.

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