

*Seated Figure*, a 1951 early charcoal by Frank Auerbach, is without doubt a work which can be seen to be associated with the London School. Like his contemporaries Lucien Freud and Leon Kossoff, Auerbach is known for his figurative paintings which opposed conceptualism, Pop Art and the avant-garde after the second World War. This work is from the artist's period at Central St Martins and the Borough Polytechnic. Auerbach - who still paints everyday and has done for 70 years - was a child of German Jews. He was brought to London on the Kindertransport as a child.

The basis of Auerbach's work is intimacy. He has cited Rembrandt, Constable and Picasso as inspirations and his process of reiterating portraits attests to his commitment to preserving a sitter's essence. This figure is likely to be a person modelling at St Martins or the Polytechnic which Auerbach attended as a young artist. Depicting the nude has long been integral to artistic training. However, by the 20th century, the notion of the artist as a sensitive and well-informed camera was outmoded.<sup>1</sup> With this in mind, glimmers of the attributes of Auerbach's prolific career are visible.

David Bomberg's influence is of note - especially as this drawing may well have been completed in one of his classes. Bomberg was an artist who became a lecturer at the Borough university in Southwark. His career is one of eclecticism and change. His masterpiece of flat, zagged shapes *The Mud Bath* (1914) is entirely different to his beautiful work *The Broken Aqueduct, Wadi Kelt, Near Jericho* (1926), despite both being oils on canvas. As a young artist his career appeared promising but the art world's confidence soon ebbed, and resigning to the status of teacher after a period without work only contributed to his 'pariah' status in the art world.

Bomberg's methods as a tutor occupy a curious position in the memory of those who knew or knew of him during his time at the Borough school. His classes appear to have engendered ridicule and fascination. Artist and critic Andrew Forge recalled Bomberg and the group that surrounded him as one which aroused 'great suspicion' and dismissal, but other former students described the experience as transformative.<sup>2</sup> Bomberg called for total dedication to art in return for his commitment to his students' artistic development. It has been suggested that there was an element of vicariousness in his involvement with his students, but Bomberg himself wrote that 'it is best to let the Artists find a method to suit themselves'.<sup>3</sup> He - much like Auerbach would in his painstaking alteration of his studies of people - sought to articulate the animated spirit of a person in inert materials.<sup>4</sup> This is a similar notion to Auerbach's endeavour to convey a sense of accumulated experience through the build up of paint or charcoal on a canvas, often for months at a time.

---

<sup>1</sup> STONARD, JOHN-PAUL. "Kenneth Clark's 'The Nude. A Study of Ideal Art', 1956." *The Burlington Magazine*, vol. 152, no. 1286, 2010, pp. 317–21. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27823159>. Accessed 1 Feb. 2024.

<sup>2</sup> Andrew Forge, *NLSC: Artists' Lives Interview*, 1995, British Library Sound Archive, C466/36/12 F4877, Side B.

<sup>3</sup> David Bomberg, *Syllabus: Series of Lectures on Drawing & Painting*, 22 May 1937, Bomberg Papers, Tate Archive, 878.4.31. Pt 2, p3.

<sup>4</sup> John O'Dwyer and Raymond Le Mage, *A Glossary of Art Terms*, London 1950, pp17-18.

Some of Bomberg's students followed his teaching with a 'cult-like fervour'.<sup>5</sup> Auerbach maintained his independence as a young artist by remaining apart from Bomberg's inner circles, the Borough Group and the Borough Bottega, and through his concurrent study at the Slade. Nonetheless, the impact of Bomberg in Auerbach's work is detectable. That Auerbach continued to create work in charcoal (a favoured medium for his classes) is no coincidence. Moreover, Auerbach described Bomberg as 'probably the most original, stubborn, radical intelligence that was to be found in art schools'.<sup>6</sup>

Anthony Hatwell - sculptor and former student of Bomberg - described his teacher as a 'kind of hated figure in the art schools' who was derided; stories were told of how students 'crunched back and forth over acres of charcoal' into Bomberg's classes, a reference to the large amount of material allegedly used by students under his tutelage.<sup>7</sup> Interestingly, during the mid century, Bomberg also made many images in charcoal. These works offer depictions of London and share the careful manipulation of smudging which Auerbach affords his *Seated Figure*.

The darkness of charcoal makes it less manageable a medium than graphite pencil yet each stroke and alteration of *Seated Figure* is meant. While there is not the thick coating of oil paint which would become Auerbach's trademark, the essential quality of working and reworking is apparent. This is a technique that the artist would refine for his 1950s charcoal heads series. This lineage is traceable; the re-creation and destruction of an Auerbach work is foretold in the build up of charcoal and its smudges in *Seated Figure*.

The subject seems to be underlit, casting one of his legs in darker shadow and one in light. The gaps between his marks animate the sketch, forming the contours of the subject's body. There is much tension in the figure's right foot, his toes scrunched and dark, while his left leg is undeveloped. Horizontal shading suggests chest hair, and his body is lithe. Nevertheless, the overall effect of the sketch is that of liveliness. An adroitly empty breath of charcoal free space lingers under the figure's chin and an angular but slight shadow of the model's profile remains to the left. It appears the figure's head could turn at any moment.

The series of charcoal heads which Auerbach would create during the 1950s are abstracted much further than *Seated Figure*. The artist's tumid *Head of EOW* (1956) is a more intimate depiction - a mind full of preoccupation manifest in the enlarged head of Stella West, a frequent model for Auerbach. However, the sombre tone of both works is apparent.

Auerbach is best known for his heavy impasto oil paintings of figures and depictions of London. While his charcoal drawings are often wrongly overshadowed by these more famous oil works, the intensity and obscurity of Auerbach's portrayals of his models (whom he worked with repeatedly) and of London lie in this sketch, too.

---

<sup>5</sup> Betsworth, Leon. "David Bomberg (1890–1957) and the Borough: A Different Class." *The British Art Journal*, vol. 17, no. 2, 2016, pp. 52–57. JSTOR, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/24913909>. Accessed 29 Jan. 2024.

<sup>6</sup> *Frank Auerbach*, exh cat., London 1978, p20.

<sup>7</sup> Quoted in Laurie Stewart, *The Borough Movement and 20th Century Art*, exh cat, London 1989, p4.

What emerges in this sketch is a view of Auerbach's artistic preoccupations as they were formed. The work's unmistakable merit lies in Auerbach's treatment of the model's form; his dexterous manipulation of both line and smudge to form shading, the figure's dark eyes, the signs of artistic re-creation, and destruction, position this work as a keen foretelling of Auerbach's rich career and an incredible image in its own right.

Immi Delbourgo