

Dinora - 1953 by David Bomberg

David Bomberg's 1953 oil on canvas *Dinora* is an outstanding work from the final period of the artist's career. At the time, Bomberg was also working as a teacher at the Borough Polytechnic. The work depicts Bomberg's step daughter and was acquired by musician David Bowie and shown in his London home.

This simple, mottled portrait generated through complex fusing of colours portrays the daughter of Bomberg's wife. An artist in her own right, Bomberg depicted Lilian Holt and their child as well as Holt's daughter, Dinora, from her previous marriage. Dinora Mendelson studied under Bomberg at the Borough Polytechnic between 1947 and 1953 and was a member of both groups which surrounded the artist - the Borough Group and the Borough Bottega.

Bomberg's idiosyncratic, non-academic teaching methods come as no surprise. The artist's career is marked by distinct epochs, distinct in his predilection for change. Bomberg is likely best known for his 1914 masterpiece *The Mud Bath* - a scene based on a Russian Vapour Baths in Brick Lane, near Bomberg's home in east London, reduced to stark geometric shapes and planes. Like *Dinora*, this is a work produced in oil - but the comparisons end here. His mechanised forms and the hard-edged colours of Vorticism - a name for a movement which Bomberg spearheaded (and yet a label he rejected) - gave way to naturalistic scenes of Palestinian landscapes which drew from El Greco's paintings of Toledo, before a longer period of impasto portraits and landscapes, and work in charcoal during the fifties.

Critical evaluation of Bomberg's work has often ignored this final stage in his career. Bomberg began teaching at the Borough school in 1947. Early success as a young artist had been stifled by the First World War in which Bomberg saw combat. The following two decades of the artist's life were marred by depression, financial difficulty and a failure to reach the critical acclaim which had seemed assured by his inventive early works. Some critics have viewed his teaching and painting as two oppositional ventures. Richard Cork, who has written extensively on Bomberg, described the thirties and forties as years of failure for the artist in which he found it 'impossible' to arouse widespread enthusiasm in his work. Starved of the admiration he craved, the artist spent long periods not painting, and 'only his wife's persistent belief in the value of his work tempted him to start again'.¹

Qualities of *Dinora* can be seen in his earlier *Self Portrait (David)* although this is a more sombre work. The subject appears in front of a pulsing background of muted colours which lap around his profile. It evokes the futility of and yet importance of asserting a sense of self in its intimacy and darkness. Painted in 1937 in oil, similarities to this work can be seen in both *The Artist's Wife and Baby* of the same year and *Dinora*. While using different colour palettes, both works are created through vigorous brushstrokes and have simple compositions. Through despondency, Bomberg's family was a source of comfort. Bomberg required Holt to pose in

¹ Paintings and Drawings by David Bomberg (1890–1957) and Lilian Holt, exh. cat., Reading Museum and Art Gallery 1971, pp. 4

silent stillness so nothing could interrupt his concentration.² Figures with socket-like eyes almost merge with their backgrounds.

Bomberg had always been an outsider. As a young artist he had championed the image of the artist as aspiring to authenticity in an inauthentic world.³ He defined an 'urban variant of the avant-garde' in his youth, but in his middle age this shifted. He came to represent a different type of outsider, a lonely figure, 'standing steadfast against critical neglect'.⁴⁵ The artist became increasingly cut off from art world discourse - isolated in his own preoccupations. The prior perception of the archetypal artistic outsider Bomberg had inhabited altered; by the time Bomberg began teaching, he was a lone master of his craft, standing steadfast against critical disregard. As such, the energy of the student community went some way to galvanise the artist, forming two tight knit groups which encircled Bomberg during his time as a teacher. This, coupled with his progressive teaching methods, led him to establish something of a Renaissance workshop in these groups, the Borough group and the Borough Bottega.⁶

The Borough group was set up by students and began with the notion of community fortifying individual integrity, a Quaker principle which mirrors Bomberg's aims as a teacher; both students and critics of Bomberg have described his unique 'off-curriculum' approach and his devotion to the principle of individual creative development.⁷ The Borough Bottega which the artist founded after leaving the Polytechnic in 1953 was short lived, and soon after Bomberg actualised his workshop-model of a community of practice centred around a communal studio space at the Villa Paz in Andalucia. These groups were efforts to create workshops to Bomberg's understanding of the Renaissance workshop. While these endeavours encouraged the student's creative liberation they also fulfilled Bomberg's desire to be a 'master' in his field, attempting to satisfy a desire to be remembered after years of critical disinterest.

By the fifties, Bomberg's work became more probing and more sensitive - a fearlessness borne of isolation - which *Dinora* exemplifies. There is very little detail in this work and it is placeless. The body and space are demarcated with a thick outline and yet they do not feel separate.

² <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/bomberg-lilian-t00318> accessed 12/02/24

³ Elizabeth Wilson, *Bohemians: The Glamorous Outcasts*, London 2003, p.2: 'Bohemia is the name for the attempt in nineteenth and twentieth century artist, writers, and intellectuals and radicals to create an alternative world without Western society'.

⁴ For more on Bomberg's influence over the image of the bohemian in his youth, see Anne Helmreich and Ysanne Holt, 'Marketing Bohemia: The Chenil Gallery in Chelsea, 1905–1926', *Oxford Art Journal*, vol.33, no.1, 2010, pp.45–61.

⁵ Kate Aspinall, 'Artist Versus Teacher: The Problem of David Bomberg's Pedagogical Legacy', *Tate Papers*, no.33, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/33/artist-versus-teacher-problem-david-bomberg-pedagogical-legacy>, accessed 12 February 2024.

⁶ Kate Aspinall, 'Artist Versus Teacher: The Problem of David Bomberg's Pedagogical Legacy', *Tate Papers*, no.33, 2020, <https://www.tate.org.uk/research/tate-papers/33/artist-versus-teacher-problem-david-bomberg-pedagogical-legacy>, accessed 12 February 2024.

⁷ 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.

Warm, earthen colours formed through pronounced brushstrokes move from lilac to brown, forming a pulsating image. Dappled brown shadow gives way to Dinora's shoulder and her face conveys very little. Dinora is genderless, still, looking outward and revealing nothing.

As the archetypal outsider, this timeless and striking work attests to Bomberg's flair for subtle expression. While his output is characterised by change, the strand which runs through the artist's entire career is his interest in individual expression. From his unorthodox teaching, to his record of the beauty he saw in Palestine and in his family, Bomberg is an artist whose place in history is secure.