But are Caillebotte's letters 'incomprehensible', as Iskin would have it? We know that Caillebotte's picture was painted from his apartment at 31, boulevard Haussmann.[5] Perhaps a francophone writer such as Huysmans or Mantz would not have immediately puzzled out what could have been added to 'NT-RBU' to make a comprehensible word. Many English speakers, however, would surely have happened upon 'Canterbury' fairly quickly, and consultation of the most obvious Paris street directory for 1880 reveals that there was a Hôtel Canterbury at 44 boulevard Haussmann, visible from Caillebotte's window.[6] He was not the only forward-looking artist to exploit the novel features of the cityscape immediately outside his own premises. Edouard Manet's *Rue Mosnier decorated with flags* (1878; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles), for example, painted from his studio in the rue de Saint-Pétersbourg, shows on a wall a large advertisement for the department store *La Belle Jardinière*.[7] The presence of text in painting is a complex and fascinating topic but on occasion its apparent intricacy can arguably derive from incomplete information. It may well be that Caillebotte chose to include his golden capitals for reasons beyond their fortuitous appearance in his purview, but one should acknowledge their phenomenal existence outside his window as an initial reason for their inclusion.

1 '*Au fond de la scène, par la croisée d'où s'épand le jour, l'œil aperçoit la maison d'en face, les grandes lettres d'or que l'industrie fait ramper sur les balustres des balcons*', J.K. Huysmans: *L'Art Moderne*, Paris 1883, p.108, cited in R. Berson: *The New Painting: Impressionism 1974–1886. Documentation Volume I. Reviews*, San Francisco 1996, p.286.
2 *Cinq majuscules, impertinentes malgré la distance, s'installent au centre de la toile et accaparent l'attention du spectateur, qui n'hesite pas, d'ailleurs, à reconnaître que, parmi les moyens de gâter son tableau, M. Caillebotte a choisi le plus assuré*', *Le Temps* (14th April 1880), cited in *ibid.*, p.297.
3 '*Ce n'est pas la moindre nouveauté de cette oeuvre que de faire une place importante aux lettres dorées d'une inscription que l'on aperçoit de l'autre côté de la rue*', A. Distel *et al.*: exh. cat. *Gustave Caillebotte 1848–1894*, Paris (Grand Palais) and Chicago (Art Institute) 1994–95, p.196.
4 R. Iskin: *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting*, Cambridge 2007, p.130.
5 K. Varnedoe: *Gustave Caillebotte*, New Haven and London 1987, p.126.
6 *Annuaire-almanach de commerce Didot-Bottin*, Paris 1880, p.1185.
7 J. Wilson-Bareau: *Manet, Monet, and the Gare Saint-Lazare*, New Haven and London 1998, p.134.

Sickert's coster girls: some American connections

by **LUKE FAREY**

WALTER SICKERT DEPICTED coster girls for much of his Camden Town period. These street vendors earned a meagre income wheeling 'loads of specked and decaying fruit around in the barrows all day'.[1] Many wore distinctive tar-coated straw hats, described by Sickert as an 'American sailor' hat and singled out by him as a peculiar and attractive source of Americana on the streets of London.[2] The transatlantic connotations of his coster paintings, drawings and prints have not hitherto been recognised. The discovery of American sources for two of Sickert's coster girl titles, *Little Sally Waters* and *Lou! Lou! I Love You*, described here for the first time, sheds new light on one aspect of the artist's interest in this important subject.

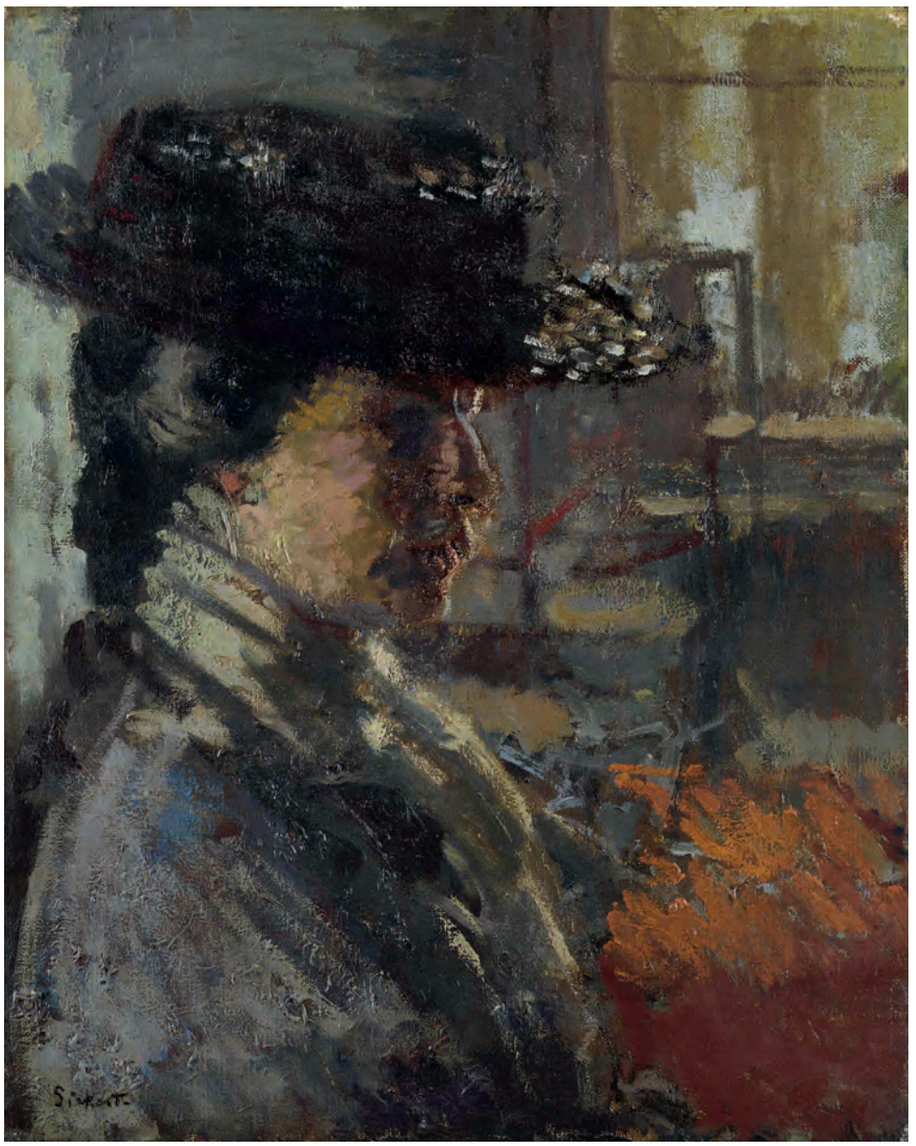
Sickert's attitude to the United States was ambivalent. In *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, Mr Erskine remarks that 'America never has been discovered [. . .] I myself would say it had merely been detected'.[3] The continuing discovery of the United States in *fin-de-siècle* Europe is apparent in both Sickert's writings and art, which express a mixture of curiosity, dislike and commercial shrewdness towards the country. He had been an assistant to the American-born artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler but in December 1896, after they had become estranged, he voiced a clichéd old-world snobbery: 'The American's desire for culture, laudable as it is, often leads him [. . .] to out-art the standard set up by the European classics'.[4] Although his Eurocentrism persisted, Sickert became more generous and more aware of America's influence, not least as an emerging art market. Mentioning 'the departure of great pictures to America' in 1910, he later wrote that 'we [need not] grudge America masterpieces of which she has more need than we have'.[5] Sickert's improving outlook on American culture in these years was informed by his friendship with the American expatriates Nan Hudson and Ethel Sands, to whom he was particularly close in the 1900s and 1910s.

12. *Louie* (or *Flower girl*), by Walter Sickert. 1911. Oil on canvas, 38.1 by 30.5 cm. (Private collection; courtesy Christie's; Bridgeman Images).

As with many Europeans who had never visited, North America could represent for Sickert a place of romance and discovery. Writing in 1914, he described a subject with potential as 'the painter's America, his new-found land'.[6] More critically, he was ever receptive to new idioms and in his published writings he noted novel American-English phrases including 'let-up', 'around', and 'association value'.[7]

In the late nineteenth century straw hats covered in tar (widely known as tarpaulin hats) were suggestive of American maritime culture.[8] Their dark colour distinguished them from uncovered sailor hats and boaters (not to be mistaken in turn for brimless sailor caps), which were ubiquitous from the 1860s and through the Edwardian period.[9] By contrast, tarpaulin hats were of limited popularity, in part owing to their growing association with working-class women and the street economy. A line in Joyce's *Ulysses* is telling in this regard: 'A frowsy whore with black straw sailor hat askew came glazily in the day along the quay'.[10] Likewise Eliza Doolittle, Bernard Shaw's downtrodden flower girl in *Pygmalion*, was frequently portrayed wearing a tarpaulin hat, following the first stage production in 1914.[11]

Soon after returning to London in 1906, Sickert seized on these 'American sailor' hats, which were a common appurtenance of



13. ***Le Corsage Violet*****, by Walter Sickert. 1907–08. Oil on canvas, 50.8 by 40.2 cm. (Private collection).**

14. ***Lou! Lou! I Love You*****, by Walter Sickert. 1911. Lithograph, 33.2 by 22 cm. (Tate Archive).**

London's female costermongers. Both male and female costers were a familiar sight on the streets, selling fruit, vegetables and flowers, but only 'coster girls' appear in art by Sickert, the Rothenstein brothers and William Nicholson. Explaining their appeal to Hudson in December 1907, Sickert referred to 'the sumptuous poverty of their class', which belied their everyday use of Sunday clothes and their 'extraordinary lives', lived at the mercy of violent men.[12] His peculiar interest in coster girls developed after Emily Dimmock's murder in September 1907, which engrossed him more generally in the topical vulnerability of London's working women. Although Dimmock herself was no coster, she had previously worked in the Luton hatting industry, which then chiefly manufactured straw hats.[13] If Sickert knew this, it may have encouraged him loosely to identify his coster subjects with the dead woman. In his hands, costers were apt to suggest a range of narratives and identities and Sickert overlaid and combined these with great freedom and energy.

No fewer than eleven paintings and seventeen drawings from Sickert's Camden Town period include female models wearing tarpaulin hats. By contrast, costers were rarely depicted in the work of his London-based contemporaries – Charles Ginner's *Piccadilly Circus* (1912; Tate) is exceptional in this respect.[14] Sickert evidently savoured the hat's pictorial possibilities, describing to Hudson its *trompe-l'œil* effect with 'a crown fitting the head inside and expanded outside to immense proportions'.[15] His first phase of coster subjects in 1907–08 emphasised the hat's already exaggerated size, composing his figures with the hat tilted forwards and the brim casting a shadow over the forehead and eyes. One oil study from this period shows the seated figure from a standing position and altogether hides the girl's eyes beneath the hat.[16] A comparable composition was used in *The New Home* (1907–08; private collection).[17] The play of light over coarsely woven straw also engaged Sickert's attention. In one recently discovered painting entitled *Le Corsage Violet* (Fig.13), the hat is tipped forwards to show the top side of the brim glimmering with broken touches of dimly reflected light.[18] Sickert's later coster pictures, made in 1911, tend to depict the hat in profile, the brim reduced to a flat, blade-like extension of the headpiece.

Beyond its pictorial possibilities, Sickert's titles reveal his interest in the tarpaulin hat's transatlantic connotations. A painting, known as *L'Américaine* since 1925 (1908; Tate), and an unidentified drawing, closely related to *Le Corsage Violet*, were both exhibited as *The American Sailor Hat*.[19] In May 1908, before it was exhibited, the drawing was made into a lithograph for *The Neolith* and titled *Little Sally Waters*.[20] Sally Waters has previously been identified as a sitter's name.[21] It is in fact the

eponymous figure in an American children's song: 'Little Sally Waters, / Sitting in the sun, / Crying and weeping, / For a young man, / Rise, Sally, rise, / Dry your weeping eyes, / Fly to the east, / Fly to the west, / Fly to the one you love best'.[22]

Continuing the American overtones of *Little Sally Waters*, in July 1911 a further coster drawing by Sickert was published in the *New Age* as 'Lou! Lou! I Love You' (Fig.14). The origins of this title have been obscure until now. It transpires that 'Lou' is the eponymous woman in *Louisiana Lou* (or *Lousiana Lou*), a song written by Leslie Stuart in 1894. Sickert's title quotes from the chorus: 'Lou, Lou, I love you; I love you, that's true; / Don't sigh, don't cry, I'll see you in the morning; / Dream, dream, dream of me and I'll dream of you, / My Louisiana, Louisiana Lou'.[23]

Louisiana Lou is a pastiche of American minstrel songs, written by a British composer for the London stage and first performed in 1895 by Ellaline Terriss as an additional number in the popular lyrical comedy *The Shop Girl*.[24] It won instant success in the United States and was widely published, performed and admired there, with audiences in both London and the United States mistaking it for an authentic American tune.[25] Sickert himself probably perceived *Louisiana Lou* as a genuinely American phenomenon. As one music historian has explained, 'by the early twentieth century, it had become quite common for performers to introduce into British musical comedies the latest hit songs from America'.[26]

Sickert frequented London's music halls and perhaps heard the song performed there. *Louisiana Lou* was premiered in 1895 but Terriss continued to perform it until her retirement in the 1930s and it was also performed at times by Vesta Tilley and Norma Whalley. Marjorie Lilly remembered Sickert attending the Bedford and later Collins' Music Halls 'night after night, until he knew all the turns by heart'. Back in the studio, 'he would attack the canvas, humming the latest ditty that he had heard at the halls'.[27] This is presumably how *Louisiana Lou* became connected in Sickert's mind with his coster girl pictures.

Theatrical songs provided Sickert with colourful identities to overlay his chosen subject. In a letter of 1907 he articulated his feeling for the dramatic quality of his costers. He had two coster girls sitting at the time and, referring to a well-known painting by Joshua Reynolds, he wrote, 'my progress is as triumphant and embarrassed as Garrick's between the two muses'.[28] The implication is that these figures could suggest at once tragedy and comedy. This echoed on-stage characterisations of the period, such as that of the 'coster comedienne', Kate Carney, which mixed humour and pathos.[29]

The *Louisiana Lou* lyrics also shed light on an unidentified painting titled *Louie*, exhibited in 1911 in the second Camden Town Group exhibition.[30] This characteristically obscure title appears to be a sing-song contraction using the first two syllables of 'Louisiana'. The connection between American titles and the costers' 'American sailor' hats confirms the identification of *Louie* as a coster girl subject. A review in *The Pall Mall Gazette* described *Louie* as depicting 'two East End ladies'.[31] It could be either the painting known as *Two Women* (1911; Harris Museum and Art Gallery, Preston) or a comparable, recently discovered work (Fig.12).[32] The latter, broadly executed painting has energetic, scrubbed-on brushstrokes of pink and purple. The faces are modelled with a net of broken touches, a patchwork loosely related to the decorative wallpaper behind. The two figures sit on a bed looking out at the viewer, one composed frontally and the other peering over the first figure's shoulder. This painting includes an iron-framed bedhead, whereas *Two Women* does not. (Another reviewer in 1911 confusingly identified *Louie* as 'a head'; if accurate, this description suggests altogether different candidates.)[33]

Hanging alongside *Louie* in the second Camden Town Group exhibition was *Mother and Daughter*.[34] This was one of two paintings that Sickert developed from the *Lou! Lou!* drawing reproduced in the *New Age* that summer. Both paintings depict two coster girls seated on an iron-framed bed in front of patterned wallpaper and both wearing tarpaulin hats. The version exhibited in 1911 has long been known, while the slightly larger version only emerged in 2015 (Fig.16).[35] This less resolved painting is also signed and demonstrates Sickert's elastic concept of 'finish'. Because an underlying drawing guaranteed visual information just sufficient to make the image coherent, Sickert could experiment with the work's painterly make-up. The undefined mask-like faces, exposed underlayers, and open-grained paint surface show that Sickert did not equate 'unresolved' with 'unfinished'.

15. *The hat-pin*, by Walter Sickert. 1907–08. Black and white chalk with transfer grid in red ink on paper, 33.5 by 26 cm. (Courtesy Duncan Miller Fine Arts).

The titling of Sickert's work is notoriously difficult and some confusion surrounds the *Lou! Lou!* works. Following the illustration in the *New Age*, Lillian Browse mistitled the smaller painting of *Mother and Daughter* as *Lou! Lou! I Love You*.[36] In her catalogue, Wendy Baron systematically preserves both original and subsequently attributed titles. Retaining Browse's error, therefore, she titled both versions of *Mother and Daughter* as *Mother and Daughter: Lou Lou I Love You*. The *Lou! Lou!* title was only ever used for the illustration in the *New Age*, however. Orthography is also problematic. Ruth Bromberg described the related drawing as both *Lou, Lou! I Love You!* and *Lou!, Lou! I Love You*.[37] The original drawing itself is inscribed 'Mother and Daughter', although this is a moot point: that title was probably added by Sickert only after the work was published as *Lou! Lou! I Love You*.

Sickert's interest in coster subjects was by no means limited to their American overtones. A fourth recently discovered coster work by Sickert (Fig.15) is a squared-up study for *Two Coster Girls* (1907–08; Government Art Collection, UK).[38] The drawing is inscribed 'The hat-pin', referring to the right-hand figure who is adjusting the decoration in her tarpaulin hat. This explains the self-same gesture used in the related painting, which received its present title only sometime after Sickert's death and should perhaps be re-titled *The hat-pin*. In both *The hat-pin* and *Le Corsage Violet*, Sickert's title seizes upon a pictorially insignificant item of decorative coster girl attire. Such details served to emphasise the figures' dressed-up, 'sham velvet' poverty.[39]

After *Lou! Lou! I Love You* and *Louie* in 1911, American allusions in Sickert's coster pictures ceased. He quickly cultivated other narratives and, in 1912–13, another two-figure coster girl cycle was entitled *A Passing Funeral*.[40] Although brief, Sickert's interest in the transatlantic

connotations of tarpaulin hats was significant. It suggests the range of his outlook, his restless search for new life in familiar subjects, his unfailingly receptive imagination and a period-specific appreciation of America as a place 'detected' but not yet 'discovered'.

I am grateful to Richard Shone and Wendy Baron for their encouragement and criticism; Robert and Matthew Travers for their kind support; Matthew Sturgis, Billy Rough and James Beechey for their helpful comments; and Danny Katz for his practical assistance.

16. *Mother and Daughter*, by Walter Sickert. 1911. Oil on canvas, 46.2 by 35.5 cm. (Private collection; courtesy Bonhams).

1 J. London: *The People of the Abyss*, London and New York 1903, p.238.
2 Letter from W.R. Sickert to Nan Hudson, undated [December 1907 – it is erroneously dated August–September 1911 by Tate], Tate Gallery Archive (hereafter TGA), 9125/5/36.
3 O. Wilde: *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, London and New York 1891, p.57.
4 W.R. Sickert: 'Transfer lithography', *Saturday Review* (26th December 1896), in A. Gruetzner Robins: *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art*, Oxford 2000, p.123.
5 W.R. Sickert: 'The Allied Artists' Association', *The New Age* (14th July 1910), in Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.258; and W.R. Sickert: 'The Futurist "Devil-among-the-tailors"', *English Review* (1912), in Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.304.
6 W.R. Sickert: 'A stone ginger', *The New Age* (19th March 1914), in Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.* (note 4), p.344.
7 Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.* (note 4), pp.318, 534 and 567.
8 See P.A. Gilje: *To Swear Like a Sailor: Maritime Culture in America, 1750–1850*, Cambridge 2016.
9 For the ubiquity of sailor hats, see A. Gernsheim: *Victorian and Edwardian Fashion: A Photographic Survey*, New York 1981, p.79; and M. Ginsburg: *The Hat: Trends and Traditions*, New York 1990, p.98. For a discussion of boaters depicted in Sickert's music-hall paintings, see B. Rough: 'The much-abused apostle of music-hall art: Sickert and the stage', in E. Chambers, ed.: exh. cat. *Walter Sickert*, London (Tate Britain) 2022, pp.80–83, at p.82.
10 J. Joyce: *Ulysses*, Paris 1922, p.278.
11 See, for example, an illustration in G. Bernard Shaw: *Pygmalion*, Harmondsworth 1916, p.16. Wendy Hiller and Audrey Hepburn wore tarpaulin hats as Eliza Doolittle in the 1938 and 1964 film adaptations of the play.
12 Document cited in note 2.
13 I am grateful to Rebecca Daniels for this information.
14 I am grateful to Matthew Sturgis for bringing to my attention Ginner's painting, in which a flower seller is wearing the coster girl's distinctive tarpaulin hat.
15 Document cited in note 2.
16 W. Baron: *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, London and New Haven 2006, p.369, no.350.2. Sale, Duke's, Dorchester, 'Art and Design Post 1880', 9th October 2020, lot 2.
17 Baron, *op. cit.* (note 16), pp.368–70, no.350.
18 Sale, Bonhams, London, 'Modern British and Irish Art', 20th November 2013, lot 54.
19 For the exhibition history of *L'Américaine*, see N. Moorby: '"L'Américaine" by Walter Richard Sickert' [March 2009], entry in H. Bonett, Y. Holt and J. Mundy, eds: *The Camden Town Group in Context*, Tate Research Publication, May 2012, available at https://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-lamericaine-r1139014, accessed 11th October 2021. For the drawing, see exh. cat. *Drawings by Walter Sickert*, London (Carfax Gallery), January 1911, no.32.
20 R. Bromberg: *Walter Sickert: Prints. A Catalogue Raisonné*, London and New Haven 2000, p.118, no.126.
21 Baron, *op. cit.* (note 16), p.370.
22 Quoted in W.W. Newell: *Games and Songs of American Children*, New York 1883, p.70.
23 For the full lyrics and music, see H.J.W. Dam and I. Caryll: *The Shop Girl: Musical Farce*, London 1895, pp.129–32.
24 *The Shop Girl* was performed at the Gaiety Theatre on the Strand and ran for 546 performances.
25 For an account of the song, its performance history and reception, see A. Lamb: *Leslie Stuart: The Man Who Composed Florodora*, London 2016.
26 A. Lamb: 'From pinafore to porter: United States–United Kingdom interactions in musical theater, 1879–1929', *American Music* 4, no.1 (1986), pp.34–49, at p.40.
27 M. Lilly: *Sickert: The Painter and His Circle*, London 1971, pp.48–49.
28 Letter from W.R. Sickert to Mrs Hugh Hammersley, undated [December 1907], Fondation Custodia, Collection Frits Lugt, Paris. Sickert is referring to Reynolds's painting *David Garrick between Tragedy and Comedy* (1760–61; private collection).
29 P. Gammond: *The Oxford Companion to Popular Music*, Oxford 1991, p.101.
30 Exh. cat. *The Second Exhibition of the Camden Town Group*, London (Carfax Gallery), December 1911, no.11.
31 Baron, *op. cit.* (note 16), p.380.
32 Sale, Christie's, London, 'Modern British and Irish Day Sale', 26th June 2014, lot 131 (bought in); Sale Christie's, London, 'Modern British and Irish Art', 26th November 2015, lot 127.
33 C. Marriott: 'Here and now', *Evening Standard and St James's Gazette* (6th December 1911), p.5.
34 Carfax Gallery, *op. cit.* (note 30), no.12.
35 The first version is catalogued in Baron, *op. cit.* (note 16), pp.380–81, no.368. For the recently discovered work see Sale, Christie's, South Kensington, 'Modern British and Irish Art', 17th March 2016, lot 27; then Sale, Bonhams, London, 'Modern British and Irish Art', 30th June 2021, lot 29.
36 L. Browse: *Sickert*, London 1960, p.76.
37 Bromberg, *op. cit.* (note 20), pp.32 and 213.
38 For the drawing see Sale, Sotheby's, London, 'Made in Britain', 18th September 2018, lot 86.
39 For Sickert's 'sham velvet' remark, see document cited in note 2.
40 See Baron *op. cit.* (note 16), p.379, nos.365 and 365.1–365.8. See also Bromberg, *op. cit.* (note 20), pp.176–80, nos.153 and 154.