

Art Review

Life's Hidden Dramas in the Art of Walter Sickert

Sickert didn't go in for glamour or flattery and the subjects of many of his best works are things seen off to the side, a bit inconsequential.

 Michael Glover 16 hours ago



Walter Sickert, "Ennui" (c. 1913-14, inscribed lower left "To Asselin/Sickert/1916"), oil on canvas (all images courtesy Piano Nobile, London)

LONDON — As W.H. Auden reminds us, at the end of his great 1938 poem “Musée des Beaux Arts,” of Pieter Bruegel the Elder’s painting “Landscape with the Fall of Icarus” (c. 1560), the fact that something momentous has just happened — a famous creature from Greek mythology called Icarus has burnt his wings by flying too close to the sun, and plunged to his death in the ocean — means nothing to the plowman on the hill, who walks idly by.

And we, the onlookers at this painting, may feel the same way, because the action — this disappearance of a small, kicking leg or two — happens a bit too near the bottom edge to bother us overmuch. It’s all so small and unremarkable in comparison with the puff-bellied sails of the ship nearby or the plowman’s brilliant red shirt (what a shirt that is!).

And this is exactly how I found myself feeling as I walked around a handsome gallery in a very fashionable district of north London, where the elegant stucco terraces were gleaming white in the light of the September sun.



Walter Sickert, "Ennui (The Medium Plate)" (1914/15), etching on laid paper with "Made F J Head & Co." watermark

I had turned up to see *Love, Death & Ennui*, a new show of prints, plus a few oil paintings on loan from here and there, by an oddball of an artist called Walter Richard Sickert. Sickert, who was part Danish and part German, and died in 1942, traveled a lot in Europe, but spent much of his life in England. He trained with Whistler.

Sickert went his own way, always. Like Bruegel’s Icarus, the subjects of many of his best works are things seen off to the side, a bit inconsequential. He didn’t go in for glamour or flattery; imagine, if you like, the polar opposite of John Singer Sargent, that saccharine suck-up to the rich. Sickert’s art, be it in print or painting, can be quite grubby or ugly or humdrum. In this show, the many prints (all from a single private collection) interact in very intriguing ways with the few finished oils on the walls. Sickert was a prolific and chaotic printmaker. He would work at the same subject over and over again. A print might occasion a painting. A painting may then send him bounding breathlessly back to a print of the initial subject, suggesting a different angle of view perhaps.

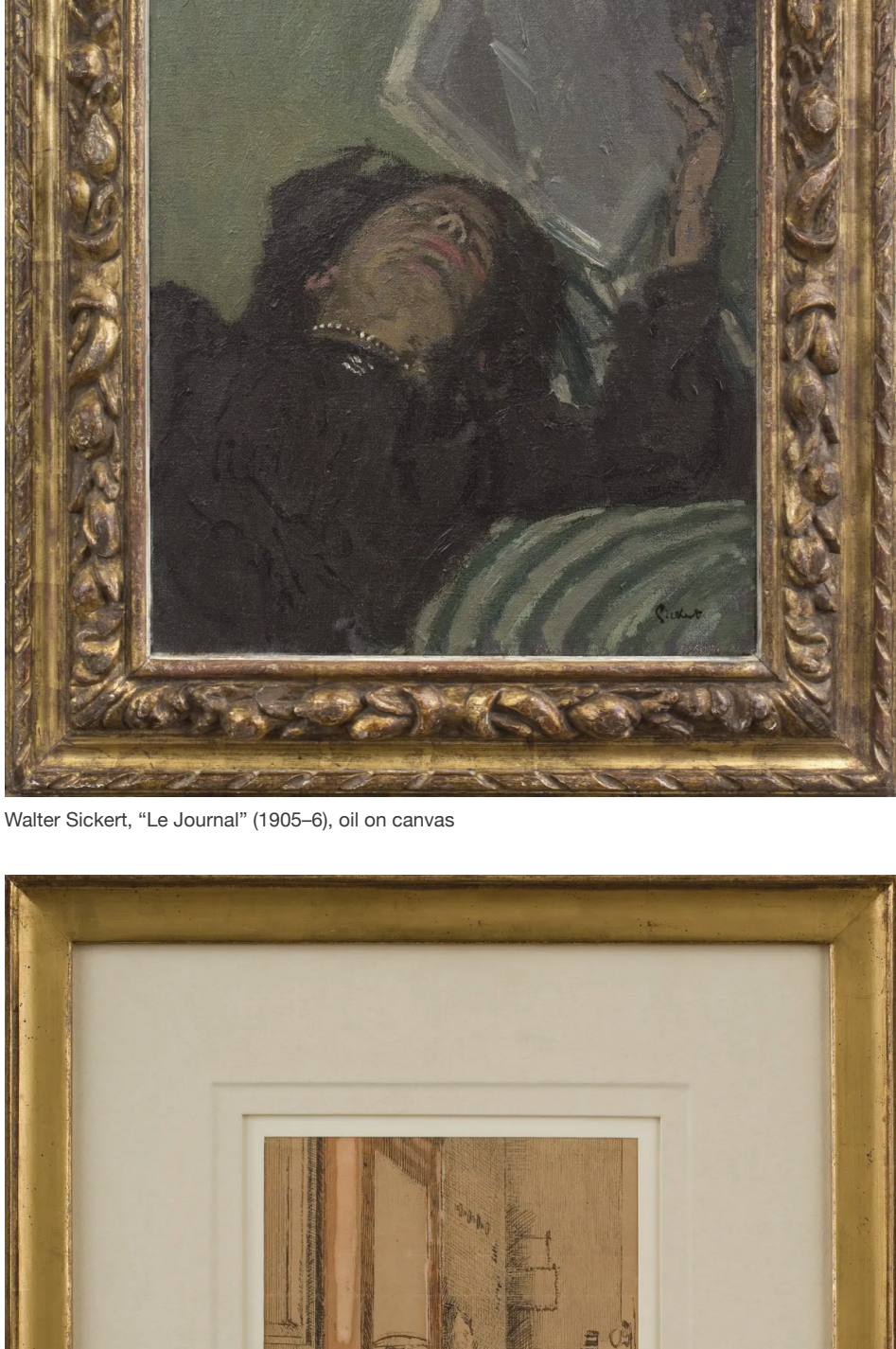


Walter Sickert, "La Rue Notre Dame, Dieppe" (1909) Etching and aquatint on laid paper, ninth state (of sixteen); unique proof

Everything in his world was ready to be re-made and nothing was ever quite done with for good. Take “Ennui” (c. 1913-14), for example, a small oil painting surrounded by umpteen prints — try-outs, afterthoughts, variants, sharply cropped angles of view, call them what you like. The painting is focused closely on an oldish man seated in a chair, puffing away at his pipe. He’s not looking at anything in particular, just staring into space. Is the painting’s title itself all part of the comedy of its making?

Ennui, or world-weariness, was terribly burdensome to the soul of a great poet like Baudelaire, who wrote extensively on the subject about half a century before this painting. Not so for Sickert’s figure who appears, perhaps, mildly bored. But what is that fragmentary detail of a woman standing behind him, facing away? How does she complicate the story? A whole world of decision-making is available to those who go on to look at all the prints on this wall that deal with the same fuggy, pipe-smokey, never-boring little world.

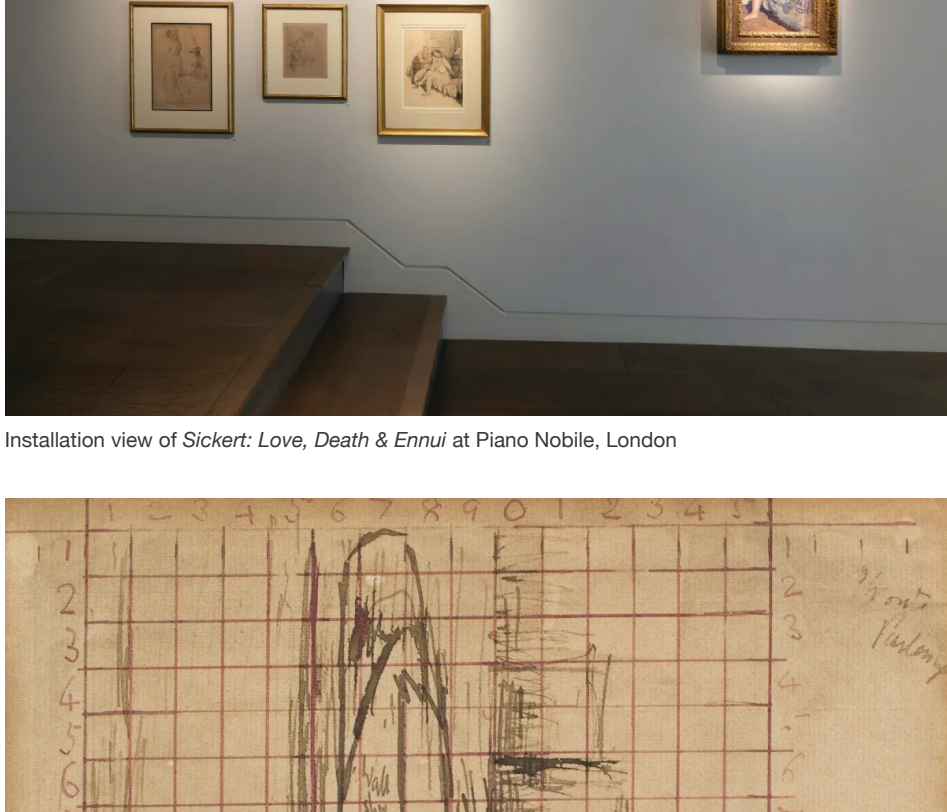
Another painting, “Le Journal” (1905-6), enables you to stare deep up the black void of a woman’s nostrils. Terrifying.



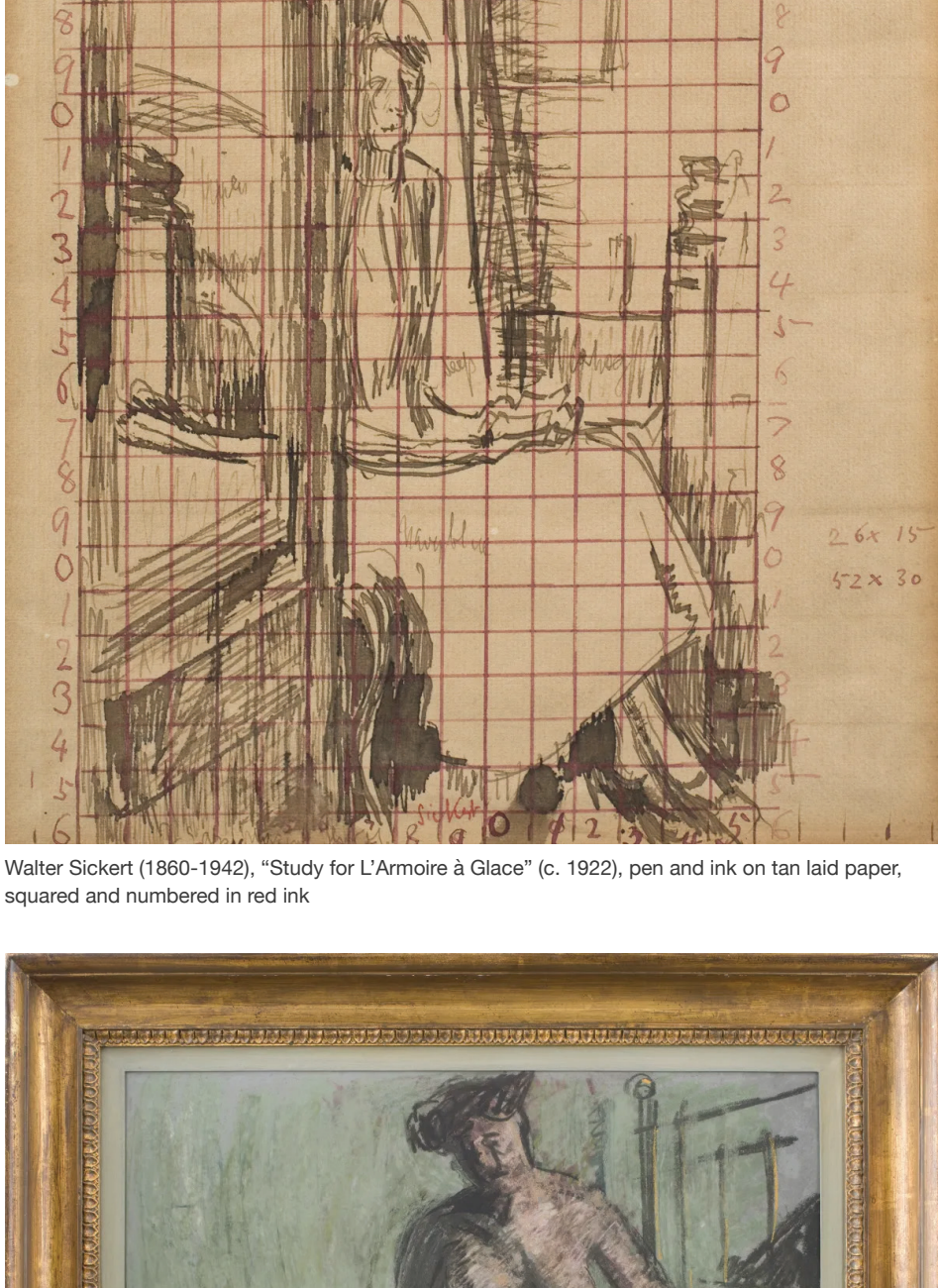
Walter Sickert, "Le Journal" (1905-6), oil on canvas



Walter Sickert, "L'Armoire à Glace" (c. 1922, inscribed and signed lower centre "to W. H. Stephenson in grateful sympathy Walter Sickert"), pencil, pen and ink, wash, and watercolor on tan paper



Installation view of Sickert: *Love, Death & Ennui* at Piano Nobile, London



Walter Sickert (1860-1942), "Study for L'Armoire à Glace" (c. 1922), pen and ink on tan laid paper, squared and numbered in red ink



Walter Sickert, "Réveil" (1905-6), inscribed verso 'Sickert' Pastel on board

Sickert: Love, Death & Ennui continues at Piano Nobile (129 Portland Road, London, England) through December 19. The exhibition was organized by the gallery.