

Sickert: Love, Death and Ennui**Piano Nobile, London W11**

until December 19th

reviewed by **Alexander Adams**

This display is of a single collection supplemented by museum loans and gallery stock. It is another of the gallery's exemplary exhibitions of museum quality. The hang, selection and catalogue (Kate Aspinall, pb., 160pp., £38) are superb. This exhibition is effectively a follow-up to the gallery's 2021 exhibition (Richard Shone and Wendy Baron, *Sickert: The Theatre of Life*, hb., 184pp., £65). Both catalogues are much superior to the recent Tate catalogue, of which readers may remember I was so critical.

The core of the exhibition is the collection of Herbert and Ann Lucas. They concentrated on acquiring multiple versions of key images, especially in drawn and printed form. Thus we have groups featuring well-known compositions of *The New Bedford*, *The Old Bedford*, *Jack Ashore*, *La Rue Notre Dame*, *Dieppe*. We get preliminary sketches, proofs of etchings (multiple states) and squared and altered proofs that served as designs for paintings in oils. We encounter Sickert's flat-studio on 22 rue Aguado in Dieppe in 1920-2, where the artist had models posed near a large dressing mirror, seen from the side through a doorway. Sickert (like Bonnard) learned from Degas the value of placing the motif in recessed space, with interior elements providing setting and acting as a distancing device. It allows us to inhabit the space with the subject, reduces immediacy and gives the feeling of being complicit by forcing us to adopt a voyeuristic perspective.

Printmakers will appreciate seeing the different states of prints, with the framing leaving visible notes from the artist, printer and archivists. A proof with cancellation marks gouged into the surface is only the most overt form of depredation, in this instance intentional. Time has battered some of the sheets, with acid aging the paper and ink fading. Sickert was an experimental etcher, playing with techniques and materials to make his prints richer. However, he apparently disapproved of the Impressionist approach of atmospheric inking, considering this too much of an intervention on the printer's part. His apprenticeship as a Whistlerian etcher of printed sketches – unfinished, airy, outlined forms – is apparent in a few street scenes from 1883-5.

Yet it is the later prints that stand out. In *Noctes Ambrosianae* (c. 1908), the faces and hands of the standing figures in the highest gallery are scattered like flowers among climbing plants around a trellis. The aquatint has imparted an impenetrable shadow that engulfs the bodies and limbs of the watchers. The dramatic lighting – especially when unexpectedly coming from below or directed in a shaft of the spotlight beam – brings out Sickert's skill for powerful contrast.

As a counterpoint, wonderfully exciting and inventive late print is the etching *Maple Street* (c. 1923: illustrated p. 30). In this muted nocturnal street scene Sickert builds depth through intricate density and direction of cross-hatching. The cobbled street seems to seethe like a roiling sea. The range of tones is more limited and the contrasts not starkly juxtaposed. The inventiveness and restraint is exquisite. Sickert can get very broad – especially in old age – and it is necessary to be reminded of his enormous ability to control and discriminate at a minute scale, even at this relatively late stage in his career. It seems the delicacy of his master Whistler lasted longer than one might have supposed. *Maple Street* should be as well known among artists as Hopper's *Night Shadows* (1921), a compositionally bolder and simpler image. Both have merit but Sickert's is not as celebrated among the discerning as it should be.

The fierce artificiality – ruthless, canny, unarguable – is present in *That Old-Fashioned Mother of Mine* (c. 1928), which shows a singer on stage in a spotlight. The face of the singer is so bright that barely a feature is indicated; the shading of the stage and curtain is done in undeviating parallel ruled lines. It is replete with the assertive anti-naturalism, anti-salon abruptness that Degas pioneered. Yet in Sickert there are no natural accents. He makes his image as stark and over-exposed as the newspaper photograph that inspired it. He makes no concession to beaux arts: no illusionism, no softening, no move to humanly favour facial features and expression of the singer. It is an audacious, bravura, ferocious performance, one that can leave the printmaker and graphic artist of today awed by its intensity.

A visit to this exhibition is absolutely essential for all printmakers. An hour's visit is an apprenticeship in the capacity of printmaking to provide as much drama and ingenuity as any other medium and a masterclass in generating and refining memorable images, which is the core of what fine art is.