

## MODERN FORM: FROM THE RCA TO THE BROOK GREEN SCHOOL

As a student in London in the early 1920s, Betts attended the Royal College of Art. There, he formed part of a talented and ambitious group of young artists. They included Henry Moore (1898 – 1986), Barbara Hepworth (1903 – 1975), Edward Bawden (1903 – 1989) and Barnett Freedman (1901 – 1958).

Betts and his cohort spent considerable time drawing the nude model from life. The aim was to develop a “sense of design, and form”. Yet approaches to drawing at the College were becoming more diverse.

Leon Underwood (1890 – 1975) took a particularly experimental approach to teaching drawing. He wanted students to work quickly to express volume and movement. In 1923, he resigned from the College over a disagreement about teaching methods. Betts joined a select group of students who continued to attend Underwood’s classes. These took place at the Brook Green School of Drawing based in Underwood’s Hammersmith studio.



Henry Moore, *Anthony Betts at the R.C.A.*, pencil and chalk, 1924. Reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation. photo: Nigel Moore.

In this sketch from the Royal College, Moore captures his schoolmate Betts sitting in an expression of intense, inward concentration. A simplified outline of the same figure, upside down, gives a nod to the experimental forms of the sculpture Moore was already exhibiting. Yet this is still a realistic study. With areas of shade and graduating tone used to build volume, it displays a more traditional approach to life drawing compared to much of Moore’s other work around the same period.

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Leon Underwood, *Icelandic Girl*, ink, pencil, bodycolour, 1923. British Museum: 1996,0928.6. © Estate of Leon Underwood. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Underwood travelled to Iceland in July 1923 after he resigned from teaching at the Royal College. A charming example of his drawing practice from this period, *Icelandic Girl* uses a vibrant combination of different media. Areas of solid, vivid colour are highlighted by strong, sparing contours in black ink. The study demonstrates Underwood's explorative approach to capturing his sitters in one short sitting with the greatest possible economy.

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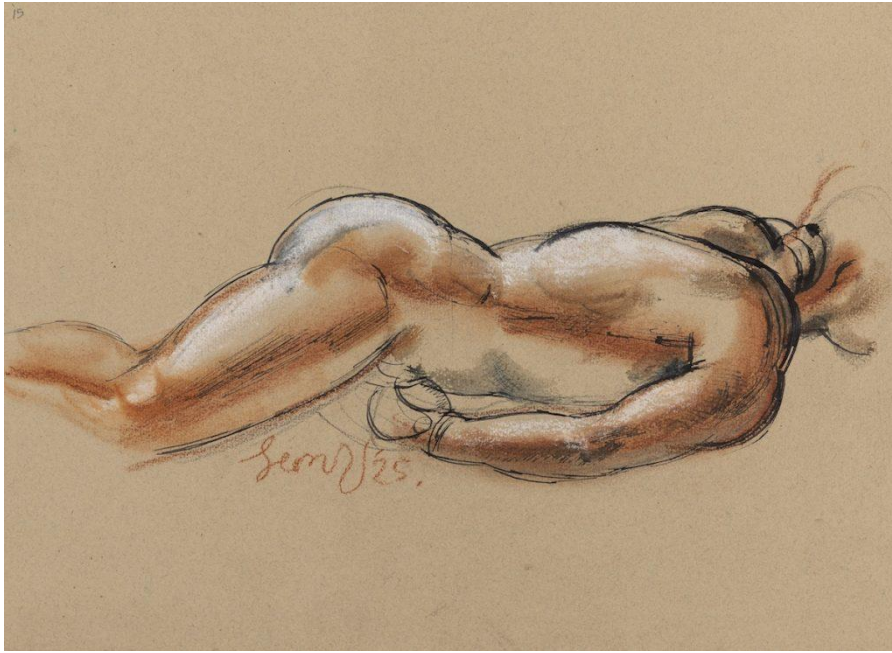


Leon Underwood, *Standing Nude*, conté crayon with white heightening, 1925. Private Collection. © Estate of Leon Underwood.

Here, Underwood expresses the model's form and motion by repeating, and drawing within, the body's outline. His mark making is fluid and key sections such as the arms leave a visible record of their movement through space. White heightening applied to the front of the body adds structure and strength to the figure. Underwood is not known to have frequented the prestigious Parisian art school, L'Académie Julian, but its name appears on the drawing in ink.

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Leon Underwood, *Study for 'Swimmers'*, ink and conté crayon with white heightening, 1925. Private Collection. © Estate of Leon Underwood

The inflated curves of this swimming figure, captured as if mid-stroke in the water, are accented with ink and white heightening applied over red conté crayon. The drawing is one of several of

Underwood's preparatory studies for an unlocated, and possibly never executed, sculpture— though swimming was a theme he would return to in later decades. The drawing shows his experimental use of graphic media to render the figure in solid, sculptural terms.

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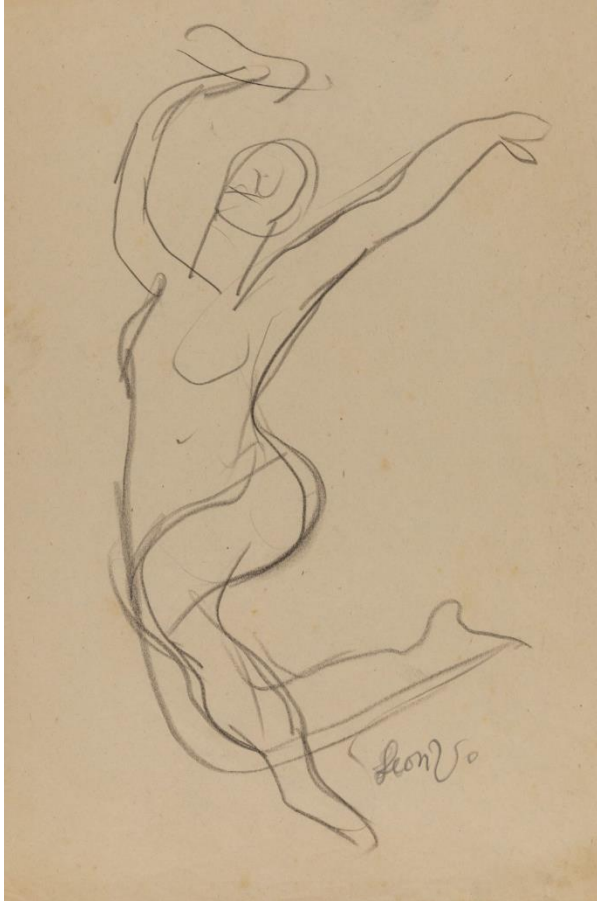


Leon Underwood, *Study for 'The Swimmers'*, conté crayon with white heightening, 1925. Nigel and Samantha O'Gorman Collection. © Estate of Leon Underwood.

“Leon didn't start with any contour at all. If you had to draw a bottom, you start to make a model of a sphere, push the sphere

about, then you come your contour in the end.” These were the words that Brook Green student Blair Hughes-Stanton (1902-1981) used to reflect on Underwood's drawing practice. They provide insightful commentary for the approach taken in this study, in which Underwood investigates the curved musculature of the swimmer's back and lower body.

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Leon Underwood, *Leaping figure*, conté crayon, c.1930s. Private Collection. © Estate of Leon Underwood

This quick sketch of a leaping model demonstrates the evolution of Underwood's life drawing practice. It belongs to a series of experimental, linear sketches of dancing figures. Underwood was in pursuit of a sense of "pure plastic rhythm" and began to place an increasing emphasis on movement across his graphic and sculptural work. Such drawings exploring the body in motion were developed into the liquid, sinuous forms of bronze sculpture in the late 1930s.

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James Anthony Betts, *Reclining Nude*, bodycolour. British Museum: 1927,0212.80. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Royal College students at the Brook Green School had to give Underwood their best drawings as part payment for their instruction. He destroyed the majority. This study by Betts was

deemed good enough to donate to the British Museum in 1927. It demonstrates the fundamentals of Underwood's teaching – students were taught to avoid relying on contour line and tonal shading. Betts' short curved brushstrokes in solid bodycolour express movement and give a soft, weighted quality to the model's flesh.

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Henry Moore, *Reclining Nude*, pencil, gouache and wash. British Museum: 1969,0315.23. Reproduced by permission of the Henry Moore Foundation. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

It was under Underwood's tutelage at the Royal College and Brook Green School that Moore began to experiment with new techniques for representing the human figure. This drawing dates towards the end of his student period. The spherical form of its torso and thighs show the emphasis Underwood placed on exploring the geometric forms within the body's outline.

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Blair Hughes-Stanton, *Standing Female Nude*, chalk, c.1924. British Museum: 1940,0817.1. © Estate of Blair Hughes-Stanton. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Hughes-Stanton joined the Brook Green School in 1921. He went on to become a major figure in the 20<sup>th</sup> century wood engraving revival, which was a medium experimented with informally at Brook Green (life drawing was the only subject officially taught). Underwood kept this drawing and donated it to the British Museum in 1940. It shows the strong influence of Underwood's collection of African sculpture, housed in his studio, on his students' work.

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James Anthony Betts, *Devastation After War*, watercolour, bodycolour and pencil, 1922, UAC/10854. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts.

The Rome Prize enabled students to travel and study at the British School at Rome. This design (which was never submitted) is an idea for a mural on the theme of “Devastation after War”. Women across the generations gaze out of the picture evoking meditation on the missing men. The Rome Prize encouraged students to learn from Italian Renaissance art. A

nod to the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and in particular the work of Leonardo Da Vinci (1452-1519), is apparent in the long, elegant face and costume of the central mother and child.

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James Anthony Betts, *Mourning Women*, wood-engraving, 1928, UAC/10772. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts.

Betts worked on the Midland Railway (in a protected occupation) during the First World War, so he witnessed first-hand the effect on women left at

home. Their grief is the subject of this print from the Brook Green School. Drawing was the only subject officially taught, but dedicated tutor and printmaker Underwood experimented with wood-engraving alongside his students. It introduced new methods of graphic mark making (termed “new stitches”). Many Brook Green alumni became recognised for developing the art.

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The Royal College of Art Student Magazine, (Vol.2 December 1923. No.7). The Royal College of Art Archive. © Estate of John Thomas Young Gilroy.

Betts was an active presence in the Student Common Room at the Royal College, where he made a name for himself through his contributions to the Student Magazine. He acted as the Art Editor under Douglas Percy Bliss (1900–1984) for this edition. Here, he is caricatured by John Thomas Young Gilroy (1898–1985). Standing astride the rim of a broad-brimmed black hat (which would remain one of the defining features of his dress for decades to come), Betts points his finger into the air and forcefully reminds his fellow students to submit their drawings for the magazine.

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James Anthony Betts, *Illustration to Milton's Paradise Lost*, wood-engraving, 1938. Private Collection. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts.

Betts never developed a practice in wood-engraving after leaving the Brook Green School. However, his facility in the medium is evidenced here. He was among several artists chosen to illustrate a new series of Penguin Illustrated Classics, for which he produced a suite of wood-engravings for Milton's *Paradise Lost*. The series was later abandoned. Series art editor, and celebrated wood-engraver, Robert Gibbings (1889-1958) had recommended Betts for the project after joining the Reading School of Art as a tutor in 1936.

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