

READING SCHOOL OF ART (1933 – 1963): WALTER SICKERT AND THE CAMDEN TOWN GROUP

When he arrived in Reading, Betts wanted the University's art course to match the level of a London art school. Among the first new staff he hired was Walter Bayes (1869 – 1956), a founder member of the Camden Town Group. This short-lived society of British artists reflected modern urban life in their work.

Walter Sickert (1860 – 1942) was their most influential member. By 1933, he was an experienced teacher, writer, and celebrity with strong views on art. He became a personal friend of Betts. Over the next 25 years, Sickert remained a major influence on Betts' teaching and collecting at Reading.

Sickert taught artists to draw quickly to prevent over-worked images, and not to rub out mistakes. The nude was one of his most important and influential subjects. He was also fascinated by documenting popular urban scenes such as interiors and performers in music halls.



Walter Bayes, *Kitty on a Bed*, conté crayon, UAC/10574. © Estate of Walter Bayes.

Sunken in the centre of a large bed, the model for this drawing is Bayes' wife, Kitty. Multi-directional lines, scribbles and swirls dominate the page. Encased slumbering in a pillow, Kitty's head resides in an oasis of calm amidst the domestic furnishings and decoration. Notes of yellow, blue and green on the back wall, and red on the toes of Kitty's shoes, are introduced over the dominant black to allude to the plush, colourful interior in which she resides.

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Walter Bayes, *French Garden*, ink and watercolour, UAC/10574. © Estate of Walter Bayes.

The diamond structure of the adjacent garden trellises in this garden scene must have appealed to Bayes' keen interest in perspective and architectural detail. As this drawing shows, he regularly drew and painted scenes from his travels. However – unlike other members of the Camden

Town group – Bayes believed that students should not be limited to drawing from life. He championed learning the rules of perspective so they could represent “anything of which we know the dimensions and structural principles”.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *The Little Bed*, pencil and chalk, 1902, UAC/10520.

Sickert sought to re-invent the way in which artists represented the female body. He advocated for “truthful” images that showed the model in their everyday environment. One of Sickert's earliest nude studies, *The Little Bed* employs a secret ‘keyhole’ viewpoint and uses a hard iron bedstead as a foil for the soft curves of the female body. Standing at the head of the figure, scarcely visible, is another nude female torso cut off at the breasts and hips.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *Practice*, pencil and chalk, c.1909, UAC/10538.

Far from searching for the perfect human form, Sickert preferred ordinary models with regular, misshapen bodies. He also looked for ways to avoid arranging them like classical sculptures. Here, the model adopts an awkward balletic stance – her leg raised on the bedstead as she reaches forward and touches her knee with her chin. Multiple outlines of the quickly-sketched figure are visible, showing how Sickert changed and refined the composition as he worked.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *Marie Seated on a Bed*, pencil, chalk and white heightening on grey paper, c.1911-1912, UAC/10536.

The model here is identified as Marie Hayes, who also worked part-time as Sickert's housekeeper. She posed, naked and clothed, with "Hubby" – a former seaman and Sickert's odd-job man – who is always clothed like the male model in this drawing. This contrast, and Marie's direct gaze, makes us acutely aware of her nakedness. As she twists on the bed, the exaggerated swell of her breasts and stomach are revealed to the viewer.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *Woman Lying on a Couch (Study for Ennui)*, chalk and ink, c.1912, UAC/10524.

Sickert challenged the spectator's expectations of art by focusing attention on the psychological tensions of everyday life. He explored the theme of suffocating boredom or "Ennui" in a series of paintings and drawings set in the corner of this room. Here, a woman lounges on a couch, but in later compositions male and female models are introduced in different configurations. Rapidly drawn in chalk, Sickert returned to the drawing to pick out key details in ink.

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Charles Keene, *Soldier Talking to an Officer in the Orderly Room*, ink, UAC/10555.

Punch magazine illustrator, Keene, was admired by contemporaries for his gently-satirised images of modern life. He drew constantly, including on the backs of envelopes, and developed a bold linear style that translated easily into wood engravings. In 1925, Walter Sickert suggested "it would be difficult to even find a candidate to set against Charles Keene" for greatest English artist of the 19th century. The two artists shared an affinity for everyday subjects, back views, and drama contained within interior spaces.

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Charles Keene, *Number One*, chalk and heightening on paper prepared with a white ground, 1888, UAC/10557.

This design was published in [Punch](#) magazine on 11 February 1888. From an inscription affixed to the sheet, it appears to be one of the designs on which Keene collaborated with his friend Joseph Crawhall (1821-1896). Crawhall proposed ideas and amusing captions for Keene. In this case, the bridegroom checks that his new wife is comfortable and asks to swap places when she confirms she is!

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Charles Keene, *Robert, at Cook's Little Swarry*, ink and white heightening, 1886, UAC/10575.

Keene took a particular interest in the life of working-class people. This design illustrated an article written from the perspective of the man-servant Robert and published in [Punch](#) magazine on 30 October 1886. The accompanying text is written in a colloquial style mimicking Robert's speech. He described receiving an unexpected invitation to a "little swarry" hosted by Cook of "Portland Plaice" whilst "the fammerly's out of town". Keene shows them dancing before supper.

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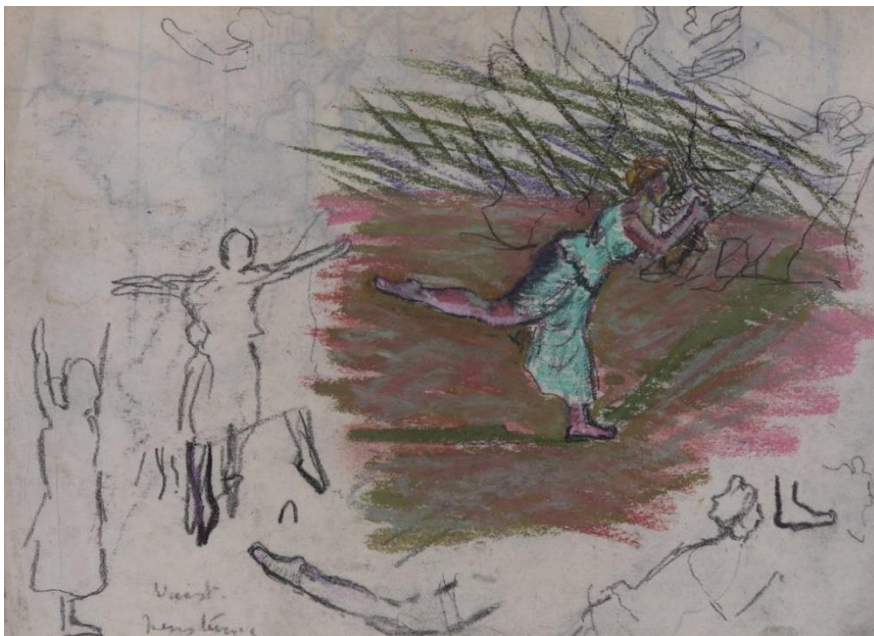


Spencer Frederick Gore,
Ballet at the Alhambra,
pastel, UAC/10566.

Gore was the first President of the Camden Town Group. He was inspired by frequent visits to London's music halls – especially the Alhambra Theatre of Varieties in Leicester Square. This vibrant pastel sketch illustrates Gore's fascination with the colour and

movement of the stage. Bright coloured dashes illuminate to the surface of the dancer's costumes under the bright lights. The sweeping curve across the page references the edge of the theatre box from which Gore observed the performance.

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Spencer Frederick Gore,
Dancing Figures, pastel,
UAC/10547.

“If you are going [to the theatre] only one evening at a time, draw as quickly as you can and leave. Or draw only the head or hands or legs with the bit of scenery it comes against. It is very difficult to get very much out of a whole figure in one night” – These words

by Gore are reflected in the disjointed bodies and floating heads, legs and feet on this page. He would often return to the same theatre performance, and seat, several times to complete a drawing. His sketchbooks were used as source material for his paintings.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *The Three Drummers (The Sisters X)*, pencil, c.1890, UAC/10532.

Children were a staple feature of Victorian music-halls, which Sickert captures in this vibrant pencil study of three young girls performing with drums. The figures are quickly noted and decrease in completeness and detail from left to right across the page. Sickert was interested in exploring the obscuring effects of stage lighting on contour and form. The drawing is a preparatory study for the oil painting *The Three Drummers* (c.1890).

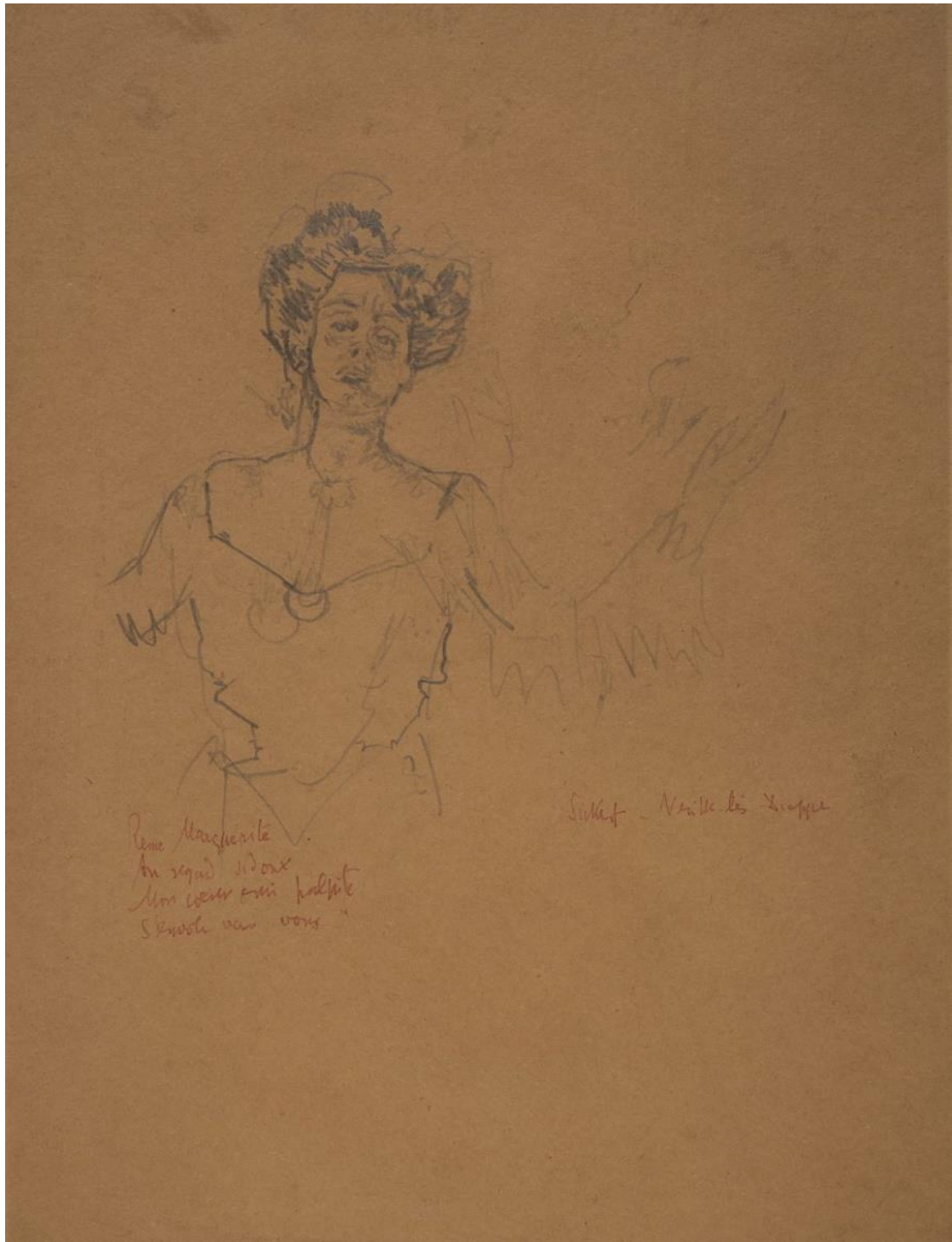
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Walter Richard Sickert, *The New Oxford Music Hall (The New Bedford)*, pencil, c.1907-1908, UAC/10522.

Here, Sickert focuses on the crowds who gathered in the front stalls at music hall performances. They wear an impressive array of hats with curved shapes and decorative flourishes that mirror the architectural details on the wall behind. Despite the inscription in Sickert's hand identifying the subject as the "New Oxford" theatre, the architecture more closely matches The New Bedford. The study likely belongs to a group of drawings Sickert made at the theatre around 1908.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *Café Chanteuse (Woman singing)*, pencil, c.1904, UAC/10531.

Sickert was a permanent resident in Dieppe, Normandy in the period 1898-1905. The French café concert was similar to the English music hall of the same period – with performances of popular songs and selections of novelty acts. Here, Sickert captures a female performer mid-song, open-mouthed and arms outstretched. Her words are provided in the inscription below: “Queen Marguerite/ with gentle glance/ my heart beats/ flies towards you” (in English translation).

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Walter Richard Sickert, *The Middlesex*, pencil, c.1888-1889, UAC/10521.

The pose of this performer, and angle from which she is viewed, is similar to one of Sickert's most famous music hall paintings [Little Dot Hetherington at the Old Bedford Theatre](#) (1888-1889). Sickert frequently followed entertainers from hall to hall as they performed on different bills. He may have followed Dot from the Bedford to the Middlesex to watch her sing "The Boy I Love is Up in the Gallery". This drawing very likely served as a compositional study for the painting.

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Walter Richard Sickert, *Vernets (Study for 'Au Caboulot au Bout du Quai')*, pencil, ink and wash, c.1920. Reading Museum: 1942.9.1

Vernets was a cabaret café on the Quai Henri IV in Dieppe. This drawing is from one of Sickert's final stays in the town following the end of the First World War. He depicts a backstage view of a female performer, who has been drawn twice. The ghostly outline of a second figure, behind the first, leans backwards in a more exaggerated fashion. The redrawn figure is closer to the performer's position and pose in the finished painting, [Au Caboulot au Bout du Quai](#) (c.1920).

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