

ULTRA-MODERN: SHEFFIELD COLLEGE OF ARTS AND CRAFTS

After finishing his studies at the Royal College of Art, Betts joined the teaching staff at the Sheffield College of Arts and Crafts in 1926. He also began exhibiting his work, focusing on drawing. The critical response was mixed. Described as an “ultra-modernist”, his nudes were likened to figures cut out of blocks of wood. Recalling Leon Underwood’s instruction in solidity and form, Betts defended his work as true creative art and the nude as “the basis of all good drawing”.

As an emerging artist in Sheffield, Betts sought to represent contemporary life among the working-class. He regularly invited locals in from the streets to draw them. He was criticized for “exclud[ing] beauty from his work” and doing his utmost “to bring out the ugly side of art”. His son Paul, born in 1929, is the model for Baby Betts.



James Anthony Betts, *Mother and child*, watercolour, charcoal, ink and white heightening, c.1928, UAC/10851. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts

Betts experiments with the traditional figurative pose of the Madonna and Child in this large-scale study. He uses a monochrome palette and the models have fixed, haunted expressions. The drawing’s sculptural quality shows the continuing influence of Leon Underwood’s (1890-1975) teaching in “form”. Emphasis is placed on the figures’ internal area – layers of different media are used to create a sense of weight and solidity.

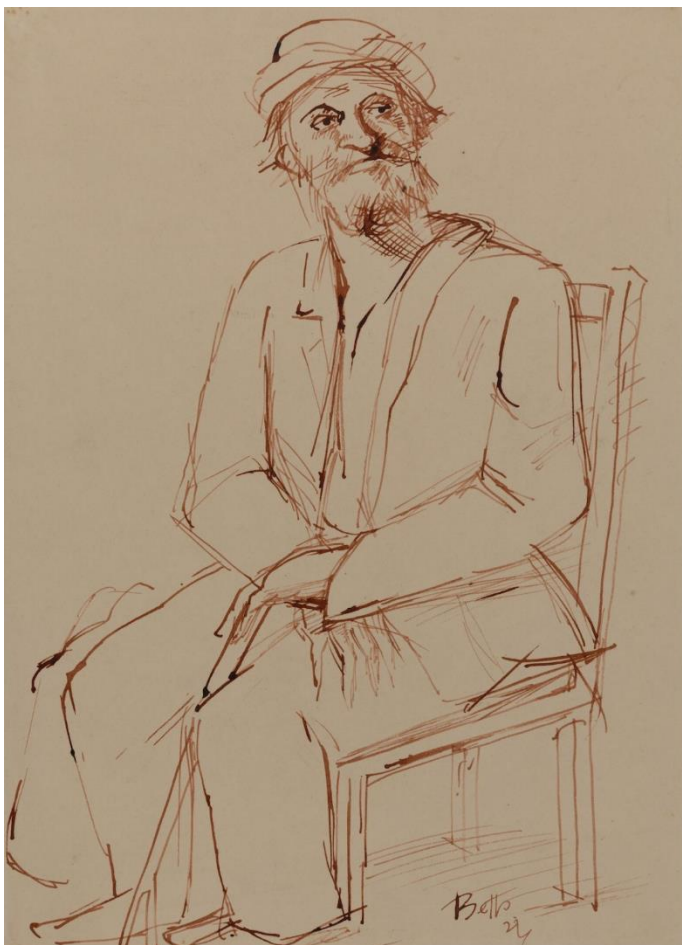
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James Anthony Betts, *Baby Betts*, pastel, c.1930. Reading Museum: 1981.17.1. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts

In this sensitive half-length portrait of his young son, Paul – born in 1929 – Betts builds up the rounded shapes of the head and body using sparing areas of soft pastel. He relies on the blank page to complete the composition.

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James Anthony Betts, *Man Sitting on a Bar Stool*, ink, 1927. Reading Museum: 1981.15.1. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts

In Sheffield, Betts regularly invited locals from the streets into his studio to draw them. Rapidly sketched in short pen strokes, the subject of this study is identified on the back as “Mike O’Halloran Esq (Tramp)”. Betts' ambition was to show contemporary life among the working-class of Sheffield. However, the “ultra-modern” compositions he exhibited were criticised for bearing no relation to reality.

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James Anthony Betts, *Demonstration Drawing*, pencil, 1930, UAC/10794. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts

This study gives an insight into the drawing exercises Betts used with his students in Sheffield. By drawing the “negative space” around the objects, he brings attention to the positioning and proportions of the items within the space. This practice encourages working from direct observation, rather than memory, as the eye is forced to observe and follow unfamiliar shapes.

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James Anthony Betts, *Study for the head of a soldier*, pencil, c.1929, UAC/10852. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts

Head of a Soldier was deemed like a “male robot” when it was exhibited at Sheffield’s Mappin Gallery in 1929. Another comment was that Betts “favours a convention of rectangular forms, which he handles with unmistakable power”. He uses sharp, sparing contour lines and precise crosshatching to delineate areas of shade. The unmarked paper, dominating the composition, provides light and contrast.

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James Anthony Betts, *Standing female nude*, watercolour, bodycolour, ink and charcoal, c.1928, UAC/10853. © Estate of J. Anthony Betts

Betts uses a variety of media, applied in layers, and a range of mark-making techniques in this imposing nude study. Loose strokes of charcoal on the body contrast with intricate crosshatching in pink and black on the head and neck. The fine web of precise lines around the face extends into the background – giving the figure an otherworldly appearance.

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