

THE WALSALL ART GALLERY AND THE BARBER INSTITUTE

“Have you heard about the three Steins? –

“Ep, Gert and Ein:

“Ep’s sculptures are all junk

“Gert’s books are all bunk

“And no-one understands Ein.”

Though there have been supporters of the first of the above propositions in our life-time, for me Walsall Art Gallery’s beautifully presented display shows just how much went into Jacob Epstein’s art and how it developed during his long modelling, carving and painting career. Yes, like Moore, he was a great all-rounder!

Epstein’s link to Walsall was through his mistress, muse and, later, wife, Kathleen Garman, who came from a well-to-do family in the area and who inherited the great treasure trove of his sculptures, paintings and owned art works after his death. To these have been added later acquisitions and works by Kathleen’s American heiress friend, Sally Ryan (a sculptor and one-time pupil of Epstein), and paintings – vivid and wildly colourful – by Sally’s brother, Theo.

We enjoyed an excellent introduction, both academic and gossipy, to the Gallery’s holdings by a member of staff as we sat among the Epstein portrait busts, after which we roamed among the eye-opening collection of paintings (Monets, Matisses, Corot, Braque, and Lucien Freud’s portrait of his first wife, Kitty, who was Kathleen and Jacob’s eldest daughter); drawings (van Gogh, Dürer, Epsteins galore, and two rare studies of Samuel Palmer by George Richmond); and Rembrandt’s great art-form, the etching (Rembrandt, Palmer and an Augustus John portrayal of Epstein).

Enthralling!

I should point out that the Epstein story has its outrageous aspects. Married to Mary, he appears to have stalked the beautiful Kathleen, introduced himself to her at a restaurant, chatted her up, and, in the words of our assistant curator, “the affair started that night”. An easy chisel, I suppose! Subsequently, and even more remarkably, with the affair taken root, Mary Epstein invited her rival round for tea, whereupon the hostess suddenly produced a gun and shot Kathleen! Fortunately, the wound was not fatal and the matter was hushed up. However, it was a “near miss” for the girl who, after Mary’s death, was destined to become the “new Mrs” – and this exciting gallery’s prime benefactor!

The whole permanent exhibition, then, offers a fascinating dip of the toe into the bohemian world of early 20th century British art, with some good European input as well. Admission is free and the gallery is on the way to Walsall FC’s ground; it would be great if “footie” fans took to dropping in for half an hour on a Saturday afternoon on their way to the match. *Nessun dorma* blaring out from the Gallery’s entrance might just do the trick!

The University of Birmingham’s own collection, at the Barber Institute, represents a major benefaction to the university and city by a local tycoon and his wife. Fortunately, nowadays it does not keep to the original restriction of “nothing after 1900”! Compared to the Walsall Gallery, the Barber makes a more earnest attempt to be comprehensive in its gathering of early religious and European mainstream paintings but one can see that lack of big money must always have been a big drawback in trying to make captures in the international art market. However, Turner’s *Sun rising through vapour* is excellent, as are two Wrights of Derby, even if his dramatic *Vesuvius in Eruption* offers quite an implausible gap in the otherwise over-enveloping red, cloudy sky to offer rectangular framing for his pure-white full moon. I suppose the client simply insisted he would have his moon. The varied artists represented include Maes, Jan Steen, Rubens, Murillo, van Dyck, Cuyp, Claude, Whistler (a typical *Symphony in White*) and Henry Tonks (*Girl holding an apple*). I was particularly delighted to see a work each by the two 19th century Norwegians, J C Dahl and his Anglo-Norwegian pupil, Thomas Fearnley. Dahl, having imbibed Dutch ideas of landscape painting, is regarded as the father of Norwegian painting and the small work here (recently acquired) is a study of Dresden by moonlight of the sort he might earlier have painted alongside his late mentor and Dresden friend, Caspar David Friedrich. Magical! If play in the Test in nearby Edgbaston is rained off, then this gallery, also free, is the place to go!

On our free afternoon, Joan and I went to Birmingham’s own City Art Gallery and Museum. I witnessed Ford Maddox Brown’s *Work* (with an accompanying 1850s posed photograph of Thomas Carlyle, in lieu of the polemical historian actually posing for the painter – funny, I didn’t know such tricks came in so early!) Joan, having heard the “news on the Rialto”, joined the queue with the rest of Birmingham to catch their big scoop of the hour – the Staffordshire Hoard. The surprise for her was that the pieces are quite small and are not personal jewellery but parts of weapons. It is also surprising that a find made in July should have made it to exhibition by September – that’s positively “Stop Press” for Britain! – and will not be going to London at all, at least not for public show. All in all, a great coup for Brum – and one man and his metal detector!

Thanks to Rosemary, this was an enriching weekend, musically, artistically and, not least, architecturally.

Patrick Snaith