

FINANCIAL TIMES

Leon Kossoff: Drawn In By the Old Masters

By Jackie Wullschlager

October 11, 2014

The walk through the National Gallery that I am taking with Leon Kossoff, on a bright autumn afternoon in advance of Frieze Masters, where his Drawing Paintings will be on the booths of Anneli Juda and Mitchell-Innes & Nash, retraces steps the artist first trod more than 75 years ago. In 1936, Kossoff found his way to Trafalgar Square from his home in Hackney, where his father was a Jewish baker. Aged 10, growing up in an entirely non-visual household, he “had never seen a painting before”, and was initially alienated by the Renaissance religious pictures – “they scared me”. Then he encountered “A Woman Bathing in a Stream”, Rembrandt’s sexy depiction of his lover Hendrickje Stoffels. “I remember feeling that I could learn to draw from this painting.”

Confronted by a great Rembrandt, he says, “What else is there to do but draw? My whole world opened up with the Rembrandts and Ruisdaels in the Mond Room. When I met Frank [Auerbach], we used to go together. His drawings were marvellous and bold, I learnt from him to be bolder. Then I got too bold and for a while I wasn’t allowed to draw here because I made too much mess on the floor.”

Later, Kossoff joined those privileged few allowed to roam the building outside opening hours. He laments that in old age he can draw for only two hours a day – “though I worry all the time when I’m not drawing”. Formerly, coming by Tube from his Willesden home, he would arrive at the gallery by 7am, and “you know, coming out on to Trafalgar Square at 9.30 in the morning, I felt I was the most fortunate person in the world to have been in here drawing”.

En route in the taxi today, he frets about being too frail to face crowds but, on sight of the portico entrance, this small, wiry man of 87 is out of the car and up the stairs to the galleries at a pace that nearly defeats me. “The first thing we’ll go and see is the Rubens,” he declares, striding towards “The Judgement of Paris”.

He created his own pink-hued, swirling charcoal/pastel composition from this crystalline painting: almost filmic, his is a contemporary take on how Rubens compresses time, rotating successive views of a single figure for his three gleaming nudes. “Isn’t it obvious they’re all the same woman?” Kossoff muses, observing the painting from every angle. “I’ll come back and draw it!” He makes numerous versions of a drawing, for “a lot depends on how many times I’ve had a go. There are huge piles of rejects at home.” A drypoint from Degas’ “La Coiffure”, for example, looks hard, spare, instantaneous, the rapid incisions equivalent to the yanking comb pulling hair across the picture, but it resulted from years studying the National Gallery painting.

Many artists train by drawing from Old Masters; Kossoff, unusually, never stopped. His drawings and prints recording personal responses to much-loved paintings are as fresh, vivacious, richly scrutinised, emotionally high key, as his works observed from models or London motifs. They are Kossoffs before they are compositions inspired by Rubens or Rembrandt or Degas, but they also distil something essential, distinctive, from each source.

“I’m not a born draughtsman,” Kossoff says. Nevertheless, “at 12 I knew I wanted to paint.” After National Service, at Borough Polytechnic “walking into David Bomberg’s class was like coming home. He gave me

MITCHELL-INNES & NASH

confidence. I took him some things I'd done and he said in his sarcastic way, 'Ooh, I see you want to be a painter. Well, the first 20 years are the worst'. If he were here now, I'd tell him the first 50 years are the worst. Shall we go on?"

We have Room 19 to ourselves. It is dedicated to Poussin, whose serene classicism is as different from Kossoff's turbulent expressionism as painting can get. "I'd been looking at Poussin for years before he had any real meaning for me," Kossoff admits. "It was to do with something going on in my own life that I came to 'Cephalus and Aurora', and grew into Poussin in middle age. The emotion is internal and controlled but it's there."

"Cephalus and Aurora" is "a painting about love". I find Kossoff's figures more moving than Poussin's. That, Kossoff says sharply, "can only be because 'Cephalus' is not in such good condition" as other pictures in this room.

These include "Landscape with a Man killed by a Snake", Poussin's great work about awakening to tragedy. "One of the most beautiful paintings in the world," he says. "Isn't it marvellous? And there's not even a bench to sit on in front of it!" A painterly etching after this work maintains the original's logic, geometry, even concision, but agitated lines – alarm, desperation, as victim and serpent coil together – and sensuous, grainy background, abbreviated to rough skies, shadowy foliage, are pure Kossoff. Tragedy – drawings after Cézanne's "Christ in Limbo", Goya's "The Madhouse", Titian's "Flaying of Marsyas" – courses through the Frieze show. Kossoff perceives "beauty out of despair" in classical painting, though acknowledges no such achievement in his own. But he admits he often works from "inner despair" and feels "rage, anger" when painting: "You have to go through it."

We continue – "everywhere you look there are lovely pictures" – past Rembrandt's luminous "Ecce Homo" ("it makes me cry"), Frans Hals ("hard to draw, my drawings after him were terrible"), to monumental Veroneses. "It's all about drawing, it goes up and down", Kossoff gestures before the sumptuous "The Family of Darius before Alexander"; his own version is a frenzied pastel. He was also "lucky enough to make a print from 'The Adoration of the Kings'. It's been cleaned now, so there's more space. Everything relates, even the angels flying down. It's all about light and distance. Why aren't more paintings now about light and distance? Poussin and Veronese are artists where drawing is tremendously important – and light. Like Matisse."

During the recent concurrent Matisse and Veronese shows in London, "it was like a beam of light going across the river from Tate Modern to the National Gallery. It all links up. I always wonder what Rubens said to Velázquez when they met in Madrid. Oh I've talked too much. It's very private, this relationship with paintings, how they get inside your mind."

No artist alive is in such enthralling, immediate contact with the past as Kossoff in these works. "When you are drawing a painting you see and experience it quite differently, your mind wakes up. They are only done for myself, certainly not for exhibition. To show them in this fair about Old Masters, it's a bit cheeky. Here I am, over 85, still not knowing the right way."

Then he looks down to Trafalgar Square's mass of buildings and people: "It all becomes beautiful, doesn't it?"