



Portrait of Leon Kossoff

Frank Auerbach

Not on display**Title/Description:** Portrait of Leon Kossoff**Artist/Maker:** Frank Auerbach**Born:** 1957**Object Type:** Drawing**Materials:** Chalk, Charcoal, Paper**Measurements:** Unframed: (h. 655 x w. 520 x d. 1 mm) Framed: (h. 850 x w. 645 x d. 30 mm)**Accession Number:** 38**Historic Period:** 20th century**Production Place:** Germany**Credit Line:** Donated by Robert and Lisa Sainsbury, 1973

This early drawing of fellow artist and friend Leon Kossoff was acquired from the Beaux Arts Gallery in 1958. [1] It is one of a group of paintings and drawings made by Auerbach, where Kossoff is the subject. Auerbach would spend weeks and even months on each drawing. He always worked from life and placed great demands on his sitter as well as himself.

Each session could end with the harrowing experience of Auerbach partially erasing the image, leaving only a ghost image on the paper. At the next session he would start again working from the ghost-image. The paper could be worn and damaged in the process. This could continue again and again until Auerbach felt he was satisfied or at least could go no further. The drawing bares evidence of its making, where the erasures and reworkings are bound up in the finished work. The successive reworkings give the charcoal a pronounced velvety texture. Initially, only Kossoff and Auerbach's companion Stella West (E.O.W) were prepared to undertake such a lengthy period of sitting for him. Between 1956 to 1960, Auerbach made a remarkable group of large drawings of each of them, alongside a number of paintings. By 1962, Auerbach had completed nearly 25 monumental portrait heads in charcoal.

Auerbach's drawing practice is an essential daily activity. In his almost monastic approach, he resembles that of Alberto Giacometti. In drawing, there is a pursuit of a particular form of realism emerging from a profound intensity of studio practice. The drawings themselves they appear to be formed out of burnt embers or ash. The parallel with Giacometti is also true in the constant reworking and how drawings often reveal the fact of their making. The relentless pursuit of capturing appearance on a knife edge for both artists.

The influential critic David Sylvester welcomed Auerbach's first exhibition at the Beaux Arts Gallery

with much enthusiasm. In a review Sylvester wrote that:

'Auerbach [...] has given us, at the age of twenty-four, what seems to me the most exciting and impressive first one-man show by an English painter since Francis Bacon in 1949.' [2]

Bacon was fascinated by Auerbach's paintings and their extraordinary physical presence. After seeing his show at the Hanover Gallery he arranged to meet him, so taken with the younger artist. They developed a close friendship meeting regularly in the pubs and bars of Soho, Auerbach stating,

'I suppose I actually spoke about painting more with Francis Bacon than anyone else'. [3]

Frank Auerbach was born in Berlin in 1931 and came to England in 1939. Sent by his parents when he was just eight years old, he escaped under the Kindertransport scheme. In 1943 Auerbach's parents were murdered in Auschwitz concentration camp. In 1948 he attended David Bomberg's evening drawing classes at the Borough Polytechnic Institute. Bomberg was an impressionable teacher on the young artist and significant early influence.

He studied at St Martins School of Art, where he met Leon Kossoff, who was soon also attending Bomberg's classes. London-born Kossoff came from a family of émigrés and the two artists went on to study at the Royal College of Arts. [4] Frank Auerbach emerged amongst the new generation of painters who built their reputations amidst the embers of war-torn London during the 1950s. Auerbach's first solo exhibition at Helen Lessore's Beaux Arts Gallery was in January 1956. Remarkably he had only left the Royal College in the summer of 1955. Lessore was impressed by his diploma exhibition that she included him in the summer show that year before his solo exhibition launched his career. Auerbach and Kossoff had become close friends after meeting at St Martin's School of Art in 1948. In 1956, Kossoff also joined Lessore's gallery.

Later both artists were associated with the 'School of London', a term originally coined by Kitaj in 1976. It re-emerged in the 1980s in an article in *Art International* in 1987. A British Council exhibition in Oslo of the same year also used the term and finally by Alastair Hicks in his book called, *The School of London*. [5] As well as Frank Auerbach, painters associated with the School of London included Michael Andrews, Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, David Hockney, Howard Hodgkin, R.B. Kitaj, and Leon Kossoff.

Calvin Winner, February 2023

[1] Auerbach's first solo exhibition at Helen Lessore's Beaux Arts Gallery was in January 1956. His second show was in 1959, so presumably this drawing, dated 1957, was acquired from gallery stock.

[2] *Alberto Giacometti: A Line Through Time*, Sainsbury Centre, 2016, p. 76

[3] *Auerbach's London*, Martin Gayford, in *Apollo*, October 2009, p.61

[4] The Sainsbury Centre also contains a painting by David Bomberg, *Self-Portrait*, 1930 acquired in 1960 (no. 437)

[5] *The School of London: The Resurgence of contemporary painting*, Alastair Hicks, 1989

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

Born in Berlin, Auerbach came to London in 1947. Encouraged by David Bomberg, he studied art at St Martin's and the Royal College. He later recalled how, around 1952, '...suddenly I found myself, and started knowing clearly what a painting of mine was and when it was finished' (Lampert, 1978:21). In the same interview he characterised his work as '[making] a thing again and again, by using earth colours and black and white (I still work this way but can now sometimes afford other colours)' (*ibid.*: 14).

Portrait of Leon Kossoff is one of many such images of his artist friend, in both drawn and painted form. Compared to the paintings of the same subject, which are heavily encrusted (they were regarded as 'indigestible' at the time), this drawing is a model of clarity. Incisive slashing charcoal lines, and equally bold strokes of the eraser, constitute a likeness that, while presenting the sitter as introspective, is also full of light, movement and energy - all characteristics that have become of paramount importance in Auerbach's more recent painting. The sitter himself summed up Auerbach's work: 'Out of darkness, drawn from unknown areas of the self, the landscapes, the heads and the nudes remain with us, gleaming in the mind - a gleam of warmth and life' (*ibid.*: 9).

Entry taken from Robert and Lisa Sainsbury Collection 3 volume catalogue, edited by Steven Hooper (Yale University Press, 1997).

TO-BE-REPLACED-WITH-A-GAP

As with Rembrandt, Auerbach is a master draughtsman because his subject masters him. That is to say, his subject dictates every mark he makes and he is thereby a channel of the truth. Many artists appear to consider themselves above their subject matter, and it shows, but the greats are always humble. That is how they touch something profound, deeply inside us. During the physical contact of whatever drawing implement is in play on whatever surface, a true artist is always on a knife-edge.

Auerbach has described his drawings as battlefields. Indeed, a piece of charcoal, in his hands, becomes a lance, not to kill, but to forge his subject into life, almost from *behind* the surface. During the process the paper has become scarred by battle as the human presence of Leon Kossoff emerges. He is before us, in a moment of contemplation, however long that moment has taken to achieve. The portrait is intimate yet grand, Kossoff is vulnerable yet strong. He has been forged with love.

The Kossoff drawing is complemented by Auerbach's 1964 painting of Gerda Boehm. This time the human being is forged out of oil paint, as a deep furrow is gouged out of the earth. After many sittings the final tour de force is unquestionably achieved. In this urgent and sensual work, the paint becomes Gerda Boehm and her presence made palpable for all time.

Maggi Hambling, artist

Exhibitions

'Seeing Each Other: Portraits of Artists', Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, 17/5/2025 - 2/11/2025

Further Reading

All Too Human: Bacon, Freud and a Century of Painting Life, Elena Crippa (ed.), Tate Publishing, 2018

Frank Auerbach, Tate Publishing, 2015

Frank Auerbach: Paintings and Drawings, Royal Academy of Arts, 2001

Provenance

Acquired by the Sainsbury Family in 1958. Donated to the Sainsbury Centre, University of East Anglia in 1973 as part of the original gift.
