

Walter Sickert and the Language of Art¹

‘Transplanted into British Soil’: Sickert’s National Identities

Several years ago, I began a lecture about Walter Sickert that I gave at the Tate Gallery, before it was renamed Tate Britain, by telling the following story, about Sickert and Osbert Sitwell, when as Captain of the King’s Guard Sitwell invited Sickert to dine together with a group of young officers. All was going well until Sickert suddenly announced: ‘And no one could be more English than I am – born in Munich, of pure Danish descent.’² It is a good story about Sickert’s origins, told at a moment (October 1918) when anyone with what might have been construed as a German-sounding name would have felt uncomfortably placed in Britain. It is still a good story to tell in a lecture; it breaks the ice and dispels any doubts about whether Sickert counts as a British artist with that odd-sounding name. As someone with a German name, of mixed German, Irish and Scottish heritage but born in

- 1 I am grateful to Grace Brockington, Alan Crookham and Barnaby Wright for help with this article.
- 2 Osbert Sitwell, *Noble Essences, or Courteous Revelations: Being a Book of Characters and the Fifth and Last Volume of Left Hand, and Right Hand! An Autobiography* (London: Macmillan, 1950), 199. Sitwell puts a nationalistic gloss on the incident: ‘Yet nobody *was* more English than Sickert, either as man or painter. And it may well be that his northern blood afforded him just the requisite impetus to understand especially well this country and its ways’ (202). David Peters Corbett, *Walter Sickert* (London: Tate Publishing, 2001), 7, also cites Sitwell’s story although he comes to a different conclusion about its significance, arguing that Sickert’s material was ‘at least by his own mythopoetic standards, accurate enough’. An audio-recording of my lecture is held in the Hyman-Kreitman Research Centre, Tate Britain.

Canada, who has lived in Britain since 1972, I am aware of the problems that Sickert's name presents.

Sickert was not telling the whole truth to those young officers of the King's Guard. He was hardly of pure Danish descent. His father was born in Holstein, his mother was Anglo-Irish, and he himself only became a naturalised British citizen after moving to London from Munich where he lived for the first eight years of his life. He also had long-standing associations with France. He lived there between 1898 and 1905; like many of his circle he summered in Dieppe; and even after he returned to England, he was in the habit of making short trips to see Paris exhibitions. Sickert was a polyglot who exhibited extensively abroad. His personal biography suggests a fluid set of artistic and national identities that appears to challenge any essentialist positioning of his work. I suspect that the tongue-in-cheek comments that Sickert made about his nationality reflect a deep ambivalence about his origins. Place Sitwell's story against one told by Clive Bell who remembered dining with Sickert at the Café Royal during the Great War, when Sickert burst into 'a torrent of German jokes and German songs'.³ But in May 1916, writing in *The Burlington Magazine*, that bastion of aesthetic opinion, Sickert denounced the British popular press for calling 'the Germans Huns' because he said the Germans deserved 'the odium of their [...] proven deeds', and 'by transferring our scoldings to the Huns the word "German" is like to ride off scot-free'.⁴

There has been a long-standing campaign to eliminate any German taint from the character of the greatest 'English' artist of the twentieth century, which Sickert encouraged in a 1922 biographical account of his grandfather and father.⁵ He stressed their Danish origins, and his father's close association with England from the time of his marriage in 1859 until

3 Clive Bell, *Old Friends* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1956), 17.

4 Walter Sickert, 'Forain', *Burlington Magazine* (May 1916), in Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 410.

5 For example, see Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), 16, who in his analysis of Sickert's breeding refers to 'this flint of Denmark and this steel of England'. On the other hand, Wendy Baron,

he died a naturalised citizen in 1885, without making direct reference to the years that his father lived in Munich.⁶ Yet Sickert's German connections would have had a different resonance before the war.⁷ German was one of his early tongues, and he willingly inserted German words and phrases into his published art criticism (whereas between summer 1914 and 1918 a German word appears only twice in his writing).⁸ He was also on the General Committee of an exhibition of contemporary German art which

Sickert (London: Phaidon, 1973), 2, states in her critical study of Sickert's art that 'Sickert was not English, he was European.'

- 6 Walter Sickert, 'Johann Jürgen Sickert (1803–1864) and Oswald Adalbert Sickert (1828–1885)', Goupil Gallery, June 1922, in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 435. Sickert mentioned that his father made woodcut illustrations for the Munich paper *Die Fliegende Blätter* but did not say that the family lived in Munich. However, writing the Goupil Gallery preface stirred his childhood memories of living in Munich about which he wrote eloquently in an article on German illustrators published in October 1922. See Walter Sickert, 'Diez, Busch and Oberländer', *Burlington Magazine* (October 1922), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 448–53.
- 7 This chapter therefore contributes, perhaps unexpectedly, to the theme of Anglo-German relations at the *fin de siècle* which runs through this book. See Matthew Potter's analysis of Germanism among Cambridge Art Historians; Petra Rau's discussion of cultural affinities between the two countries, focusing on the novelists E.M. Forster and Ford Madox Ford; Hannes Schweiger's account of George Bernard Shaw as Anglo-German mediator, which compares attitudes to his work before and during the First World War; and Grace Brockington's discussion about the reception of contemporary German art in London before the First World War, which mentions Sickert and Whistler.
- 8 See Walter Sickert, 'Monthly Chronicle: Roger Fry', *Burlington Magazine* (December 1915), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 397: 'If only the tiresome younger generation in the attic above, Neo-this and Post-that, Parallelopipedists and Fissiparists, and what not, would not keep moving those heavy ideas of theirs incessantly about, making what our enemy calls a *höllischen Spektakel* [hellish spectacle], and threatening the security of the ceiling above!'; and Walter Sickert, 'Degas', *Burlington Magazine* (November 1917), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 416.

took place at Prince's Gallery, Knightsbridge, in 1906.⁹ Sickert's most recent biographer gives us a delightful picture of his fairytale Munich childhood, but tells us that he never thought of himself as German¹⁰ without considering the lasting significance of childhood experience that comes into play in unexpected ways.¹¹ Why then did Sickert visit Munich on his honeymoon in 1885 if not to bring together the memory of childhood play with the reality of his new adult life?

The myth of Sickert's 'Danish-English' origins, as the artist John Piper referred to them at the time of the 1941 Sickert retrospective at the National Gallery,¹² was reinforced by the critic Jan Gordon writing in the *Observer*:

He is indeed himself one of those fertile seeds that flourish more luxuriantly for being transplanted into British soil. For I cannot be convinced that Sickert would have bloomed so bountifully had he returned to his parental Denmark or potted himself in his spiritual garden, Paris.¹³

There were obvious reasons for shoring up a notion of Sickert's Englishness in 1941, but is he best described as an English artist? Long before he moved to France, Sickert was accused of tainting his art with French influence, and his fascination with France continued to worry his critics.¹⁴ There

9 For a discussion of the 1906 exhibition, see Grace Brockington, "Above the Battlefield": Art for Art's Sake and Pacifism in the First World War' (DPhil thesis, Oxford, 2003), 180–85.

10 See Matthew Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life* (London: HarperCollins, 2005), 30–31.

11 I am thinking in psychoanalytic terms; cf. D.W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality* (London: Tavistock Publications, 1971). I see Sickert's fantasy life as a central part of his being.

12 John Piper, 'Sickert: at the National Gallery', *Spectator* (29 August 1941), National Gallery of London Archive, HF 1941/4.

13 Jan Gordon, 'Art and Artists', *Observer* (31 August 1941), National Gallery of London Archive, HF 1941/4.

14 For example, see Anon., 'The New English Art Club', *Globe*, 9 April 1888: 'The prevailing mannerisms and affectations of some of the French Impressionists are faithfully reproduced in Mr Walter Sickert's large picture, *Gatti's Hungerford Palace*

is something touchingly protective about Gordon's view that if Sickert had lived in Paris then 'he might have become almost forcedly one of a crowd not altogether favourable to the whimsical trend of his personal development'.¹⁵ The fact is that Sickert was an ardent Francophile who used French extensively in his art criticism and frequently wrote about French art. He worked and exhibited in Paris on numerous occasions, was courted by the French critics, acquired French collectors, and knew not only Degas with whom he was on close terms from 1885, but a host of other French artists including Bonnard and Vuillard. Then again, there is little point in overlaying an outworn modernist paradigm that privileges French art on Sickert's career. Both Englishness and Frenchness are narrow and excluding categories that take no account of Sickert's German origins, nor of an intense but short-lived fascination with Italy.¹⁶ We could argue that Sickert lived in exile, first as a child in England, then in France during the formative years of his early middle age.

Sickert's career as a cosmopolitan artist is more complex than critics acknowledge. His friendship with Degas has privileged modernist readings of his career while Whistler, his first mentor, is dismissed as an impoverished mongrel of modern art who had little lasting influence.¹⁷ In fact, Whistler

of *Varieties*'; and S [Marion Spielmann], 'The New English Art Club', *Echo*, 15 April 1889: 'New English is a queer title – especially for a body of men who cluster round an American master, and practise the methods and imitate the fashions of France.' Spielmann is referring to Sickert and some of the other followers of Whistler who took over the New English Art Club exhibitions in 1888.

15 Gordon, 'Art and Artists'.

16 Sickert lived and worked in Venice for the first part of 1901 and between September 1903 and summer 1904.

17 See Julius Meier-Graefe, *Modern Art: Being a Contribution to a New System of Aesthetics* (London and New York: William Heinemann and G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1908) 2: 199 where he observes that it was solely through his cosmopolitanism that Whistler 'became the figure whose originality has given rise to positive myths in London and Paris [...] but it is open to question whether in the future he will find or keep a place in the hearts of any one people, or the world at large.' The same year, Sickert played down Whistler's importance in 'The New Life of Whistler', *Fortnightly Review* (December 1908), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 178–88.

gave Sickert his first taste of internationalism by including him in his cosmopolitan group of followers, introducing him to the Belgium-based *Les Vingt*,¹⁸ and making him privy to his plans to include non-British artists, such as Monet, in exhibitions at the Royal Society of British Artists where Whistler served as President (1886–88).

As part of a campaign against the prejudice about his American origins that surfaced during the Whistler vs. Ruskin trial (1878) and continued to haunt him (see note 17), Whistler chose followers including the Munich-born Sickert, the Australian Mortimer Menpes, the French artist Theodore Roussel, and the Canadian-born Elizabeth Armstrong, whose un-British origins were a notable aspect of their identity.¹⁹ Together they were a group of colonials and exiles whose collective identity anticipated the demography of the succession of artistic communities which Sickert joined: in Dieppe, where he mixed with a host of American, Australian, Canadian, British, French and Norwegian artists; in Venice, where his friendships within the international community of artists who gathered there are still to be explored; and in Paris, where he mixed in an Anglophone group of artists and writers while keeping company with Degas and a number of other French artists. Few other 'modern' British artists moved as freely within these cosmopolitan networks. My point here is not to detail all of the members of Sickert's international circle (this will be the subject of a longer study), but to commend its breadth.

In this essay I shall argue that Sickert was an internationalist, by which I mean someone who lived and worked in, and drew inspiration from,

18 *Les Vingt* was one of the first internationalist exhibitions, started by Octav Maus in 1883. As Anne Leonard notes elsewhere in this book (20 fn), Whistler's own relations with *Les Vingt* were not easy: in 1886 he was blackballed for membership because of his American nationality. See also Leonard's discussion of *Les Vingt*'s militant avant-gardism, its policy of inviting foreign exhibitors, and its ambivalent relations with British artists.

19 For further discussion of Whistler's cosmopolitan group, see my *A Fragile Modernism: Whistler and his Impressionist Followers* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2007), chapter 2. See also chapter 12 of this book, where Brockington explores his cosmopolitanism in relation to the International Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers, which he founded in 1898.

more than one culture. There are important issues of national and cultural identity to explore here. But I do not propose to focus on Sickert's own shifting self-ascription, or indeed the ones others chose for him, important as I believe they are to his identity, but to look at some of the larger issues. As I have suggested, the intense debates about Sickert's Englishness and un-Englishness reflect a general uneasiness amongst British critics when seeing Sickert in French company which plagued him throughout his career. Their comments have more to do with contested ideas about nation and nationhood and are an inappropriate reading of this internationalist artist.²⁰

‘La principale fête cosmopolite de Paris’: International Exhibiting at the Salons

These cosmopolitan groups were both a product of and participated in the burgeoning international exhibition circuit of the late nineteenth century to which Sickert belonged. In 1887 he exhibited at Les Vingt, and in 1889 he was represented in the British section of the Paris Exposition Universelle. After moving to France in 1898, he sent work to the French section of Munich's annual Glaspalast, and later that year again exhibited, again in the French section, at the Venice Biennale. He would have tried out the international exhibition scene in London, but he had fallen out with Whistler, who refused to include him in the *International Society of Painters, Sculptors and Gravers* (formed 1898), the exhibition brainstorm

20 Cf. Tore Rem's discussion in chapter 8 of this book about the ways in which writers are constructed as national figures: Shakespeare pre-eminently, but more equivocally Ibsen, who was attacked by some British critic as a 'Norwegian raven' (8), celebrated by others as the 'Shakespeare of the North' (11 fn), and eventually absorbed into the canon of English literature.

of his late middle-age which brought together a huge international crew of artists.²¹

By 1903, Sickert was well ensconced in the Paris art world, where between 1900 and 1909 he was represented in at least fifteen Paris exhibitions including two ‘alternative’ Salons: the Salon des Indépendants (established 1884), which had an open exhibition policy;²² and the Salon d’automne (established 1903), which had a more traditional structure,²³ but which nonetheless quickly gained a reputation as a showcase for original avant-garde practice.²⁴ Artists were listed in alphabetical order in the Salon d’automne catalogue, but hung thematically. The hanging committee, which was elected annually, would use the opportunity to promote a new tendency, famously so in 1905 when Matisse and his associates were hung together in Salle VII and jokingly labelled the ‘Fauves’ by the leftist critic

- 21 John Lavery, a founding member of the International Society, later claimed that he had recommended Sickert for membership, but that Whistler had rejected the idea: “‘What,’ he said, making as though to take something from his breast pocket, ‘my Walter, whom I put down for a minute and who ran off. Oh no, not Walter.’” John Lavery, *The Life of a Painter* (London: Cassell & Co., 1940), 108. After Whistler’s death, Sickert accepted an invitation to show at the International Society. For Whistler and the International, see also Philip Athill, ‘The International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers’, *Burlington Magazine* 127, no. 982 (January 1985), 21–29; and Margaret Macdonald, ‘Whistler for President!’, in *James McNeill Whistler*, ed. Richard Dorment and Margaret Macdonald (London: Tate Publishing, 1995), 49–55.
- 22 Christopher Green, *Art in France 1900–1940* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) 15.
- 23 Roger Benjamin, ‘Ingres chez Fauves’, in *Fingering Ingres*, ed. Adrian Rifkin and Susan Siegfried (Oxford: Blackwell, 2001), 96, points out that the Salon d’automne ‘valued the trappings of officialdom: it had a jury, a board of patrons, grades of membership, efficient organization and excellent publicity.’ He refers to the twenty-three retrospectives that the Salon d’automne organised in the first five years of its existence. However, I am suggesting that it can be applied to the institution’s hanging practices as a whole.
- 24 Robert Boardingham, ‘Cézanne and the 1904 Salon d’Automne: “Un chef d’une école nouvelle”’, *Apollo*, 142 (1995), 37, makes this point about the function of the Salon d’automne. He points out that ‘dealers, artists, critics and government officials’ had interests in the society.

Louis Vauxcelles. Vauxcelles's reviews for the daily paper *Gil Blas*, which took readers through the vast exhibition space of the Grand Palais, room by room, are one of the few lasting accounts of the arrangements and groupings in these exhibitions.²⁵ He was also a perceptive supporter of Sickert, and invariably singled him out when writing about the Indépendants and the Salon d'automne.

Sickert's associations with the Salon d'automne need further study, and for the purposes of this essay, I am concentrating on his reputation there. For example, what was his connection with *L'Académie de la Palette*, the teaching school at 18 rue du Val-de-Grace run by Jacques Emile-Blanche, which aimed to promote 'conciliation entre la liberté et le respect de la tradition'?²⁶ A prospectus lists Sickert's name together with several Salon d'automne luminaries including George Desvallières, one of the founder members, amongst a list of painters, critics, musicians and collectors that replicates the expansive make-up of the Salon d'automne committee.²⁷ This combination of tradition and innovation would have appealed to Sickert who was suspicious of any radical break with past art, as were many other artists at the Salon d'automne, including Matisse.

The history of French painting in the early twentieth century can be presented as a fairly seamless narrative, with Matisse and the Fauves as one early chapter in this triumphal story.²⁸ In fact, a large cosmopolitan mix of artists congregated in Paris, to which the Salons played host. Or as Maurice

25 Benjamin, 'Ingres chez Fauves', 95, makes this point about the importance of Vauxcelles's reviews as a source of information.

26 Walter Sickert, 'All We Like Sheep', *Art News* (14 April 1910), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 216.

27 The notice appeared in *L'Occident*, no. 62 (January 1907), 44. The full list of names who gave *La Palette* its support was as follows: 'MM. Paul Adam, Aman-Jean, Aynard, M. Barrès, Bénédite, Blanche, Cheret, Cottet, Debussy, M. Denis, Delmonas, Desvallières, Erlanger, Forain, Guérin, Homolle, d'Indy, P. Louys, R. Ménard, Mme la Comtesse de Noailles, MM. Rodin, Sickert, Simon, et Ullmann'.

28 Alastair Wright, *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2004) challenges this assumption by examining the messiness of Matisse's early career, however, his study retains a Franco-centric position.

Ary LeBlond (the pseudonym of Georges Athenas and Aimé Merlot) wrote in 1909, they were 'la principal fête cosmopolite de Paris.'²⁹ Sickert's placement at the Salon d'automne and the Salon des Indépendants tells us about the company he was keeping in Paris. From 1903, he was invariably put together with Nicholas Alexandrovitch Tharkoff (1871–1930) at the Salon des Indépendants, until 1909 when his close association with the former Nabi artists was acknowledged, and he was brought together with Vuillard, Denis, Bonnard, Roussel, Valloton and Marquet. When Sickert first showed at the Salon d'automne in 1905, his eight exhibits were put together with Tharkoff's in Room XVII. The following year, his reputation was better known, and his ten exhibits kept company with Georges Rouault and Emile Bernard in Room XVI. In 1907, after a controversial one man show at Bernheim Jeune which Vauxcelles reviewed, his self-portrait, *L'Homme au Chapeau Melon* (*Self Portrait. Juvenile Lead*, Southampton Art Gallery) and a female nude, *Petit Matin*, were shown alongside Albert Marquet and Charles Guérin in Salle XV.³⁰

In 1908, the year Sickert was elected a Sociétaire of the Salon d'automne, his three exhibits appeared in Salle XVI together with a mini-retrospective of thirty works by Matisse, and one by Vallotton.³¹ That year Matisse served on the hanging committee and Henri Lebasque was president, while the Canadian artist James Morrice (whom Sickert first met in Dieppe in the 1890s) and Albert Marquet served as vice-presidents. The Fauve artists Derain, Friesz, Manguin, Matisse and Vlaminck were exhibited in separate rooms, alongside stylistically dissimilar works.³² Arranging works by con-

29 Marius Ary LeBlond, *Peintres de Races* (Brussels: Librairie Nationale d'Art et d'Histoire, G. Van Oest et Cie., 1909), xv.

30 For the identification of Sickert's 1907 Salon d'automne exhibits see Wendy Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press), 2006, cats 330 and 336. *Petit Matin* is untraced.

31 Matisse sent eleven paintings, thirteen sculptures and six drawings. In 1909, when Sickert showed at the Salon d'automne for the last time, he appeared with Guérin.

32 Louis Vauxcelles, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Gil Blas*, 30 September 1908, 2, cited by Roger Benjamin, 'Fauves in the Landscape of Criticism: Metaphor and Scandal at the Salon', in Judi Freeman, *Fauve Landscape* (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 1990), 263.

trast was a common Salon d'automne practice, as the catalogue advised: 'chaque oeuvre ou groupe d'oeuvres affirme son caractère particulier et s'oppose vivement, et parfois violemment, aux oeuvres les plus voisines.'³³ We can assume that Matisse wanted to contrast the sombre tonalities of Sickert's exhibits (two portraits and one painting of the nude) with his own display of highly coloured pictures, including the glowing all-over colour of *Harmony in Red* (1908).

Gaining the attention of the French critics if you were a non-French artist was not easy. Charles Morice (1861–1919), the symbolist critic and supporter of Gauguin, was typical in the way he took no notice of Sickert and most of the other non-French exhibitors in his lengthy reviews for the literary journal *Mercure de France*, although he made an exception for any friend of Gauguin, praising 'la belle manifestation collective' of works by Roderic O'Connor, who had known Gauguin in Brittany.³⁴ Morice softened his attitude to foreigners in subsequent years and Sickert's name, mis-spelt as Sickurt, appears in his 'bouquet de noms précieux', a mixed bag of nationalities, but this was hardly helpful criticism.³⁵

Just where did Sickert stand in the vast pantheon of rightist and leftist French politics? He supported the unpleasant anti-Dreyfusard views of Degas, explaining to the artist William Rothenstein, who was of Jewish ancestry, that he supposed 'no honest person has any doubt left about the guilt of the gentleman whom the English press still persist in calling Captain Dreyfus', before concluding that 'the poor devil is such a shit that I cannot believe he is a Jew!'³⁶ Around the same time, Sickert confided to

33 Catalogue introduction for the *Salon d'automne 1908* (Paris, 1908), 41. ['Each work or group of works asserts its own particular character and contrasts sharply, even violently, with adjacent works.']

34 Charles Morice, 'Le Salon d'Automne', *Mercure de France* 5, no. 58 (1905), 377.

35 Charles Morice, 'La sixième Exposition du Salon d'Automne', *Mercure de France* 5, no. 76 (1908), 163.

36 Walter Sickert, letter to Sir William Rothenstein, undated, Rothenstein papers, bMS Eng 1367 (37) Houghton Library, Harvard University. The letter was sent from Dieppe shortly after Degas visited Sickert in Neuville where they discussed the Dreyfus case in detail. Cf. Neil Stewart's discussion in chapter 5 of this book about

Jacques Emile Blanche that he intended to be 'naturalised', explaining that 'they say I will not have any military service & I will not exhibit in English sections or German or Schelesingholsten. I am a French painter.'³⁷ Sickert did not fulfil his ambition to be a naturalised Frenchman, but even after he returned to England, it appears that he preferred to be known as René Sickert at the Salon d'automne.³⁸ The growing nationalism may have fuelled his ambition to be accepted in France, but we need to know more about the effect of these sentiments on the wider group of non-French artists who lived and worked in the country. By 1905 when he was living in London again, Sickert was still keeping one foot in France, summering and working in Dieppe, living and working in Paris in autumn 1906, and taking a studio in Montparnasse in January 1907. At the same time, he wanted to bring the milieu of the Paris art world to London which, as Barnaby Wright argues, was undergoing a moment of greater professionalism.³⁹ Sickert savoured the *Indépendants* for bringing together an eclectic range of modernist art,⁴⁰ so he welcomed the opportunity to join the *Allied Artists' Association Ltd*, whose exhibitions were the first of a wave that took place in London between 1908 and 1914, making the capital a showcase for a vast range of independent art.⁴¹

the discomfiting compatibility between internationalism, right-wing politics and anti-semitism.

- 37 ALS, Walter Sickert to Jacques Emile Blanche, n.d., Blanche Papers, Institut de France, 7055 X/168. The letter was sent from the Maison Villain, Neuville, Dieppe, where Sickert lived between August 1899 and Spring 1902.
- 38 His name appears this way in the list of exhibitors in the 1908 catalogue.
- 39 Barnaby Wright, 'Modern Art and the Professionalisation of Culture: The Development of Modern Painting at the Beginning of the Twentieth Century' (PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, London, 2004).
- 40 For example, see Walter Sickert, 'The Allied Artists' Association', *Art News* (24 March 1910), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 207–8, where he points out that some of 'the most interesting reputations', including Bonnard, Vuillard, Denis, Valotton, Guérin, Luce, Laprade and Signac, were made at the *Indépendants*.
- 41 See my *Modern Art in Britain 1910–1914*, exh. cat. (London: Merrell Holberton, 1997).

Frank Rutter, the *Sunday Times* art critic and author of *Revolution in Art* (1910), created this new association of artists (it held its first exhibition in July 1908) after being told that he could count on support from foreign artists if they could be guaranteed a place in its annual exhibitions.⁴² One of the founding principles of the Association was its ‘international aim.’⁴³ Rutter envisaged it as the London equivalent to the Paris society, and while it did not encompass the same breadth and mix of artists as its Paris counterpart, Kandinsky and Brancusi were two notable members.⁴⁴ For its first exhibition, the Paris-based Polish artist Jan de Holeywinski organised a Russian Arts and Crafts section consisting of 175 exhibits, which may have encouraged Kandinsky to send work the following year. Rutter had met de Holeywinski in Paris in the winter of 1907–8 when the latter, at the bequest of Princess Maria Tenisheva, was organising an exhibition of Russian Arts and Crafts in London.⁴⁵ ‘Our respective aims had so much in common’, remembers Rutter, ‘that we decided to join forces, and endeavour to introduce into the London ‘independents’ a feature of the Paris Autumn Salon, namely a special section each year showing the art of another country.’⁴⁶

42 Frank Rutter, *Since I was Twenty-Five* (London: Constable & Co., 1927), 180. Rutter relates that it was while staying in Paris in summer 1907 with the Franco-Russian sculptor Naoum Aronson, that he was encouraged to form the London equivalent of the *Société des Indépendants*.

43 Rutter, *Since I was Twenty-Five*, 185. Rutter explained that it was decided to register the new society as the ‘Allied Artists’ Association Ltd’ because the title 1) ‘suggested a co-operative concern’ 2) ‘indicated an international aim’ 3) ‘pointed to a society containing, not only painters and sculptors, but graveurs, craftworkers and all other art-workers as well.’

44 Kandinsky exhibited at the Allied Artists’ Association each year between 1909 and 1914, excepting 1912, while Brancusi sent three sculptures in 1913. For a list of their exhibits see my *Modern Art in Britain*, 192.

45 Cf. Rosalind P. Blakesley’s discussion elsewhere in this book about the Russian reception of the Arts and Crafts Movement, particularly Tenisheva and the craft colony which she established in the 1890s at her estate Talashkino.

46 Rutter, *Since I was Twenty-Five*, 182.

Always said to be a London equivalent to the Salon des Indépendants, in fact the Allied Artists' Association created its own 'rules' of anarchy. Neither did it fulfil the same function as the Salon d'automne, as Sickert knew when, around 1907, he explained his hopes for a 'salon d'automne milieu' in London.⁴⁷ Rutter remembered that Lucien Pissarro, who had been one of the first members of the *Indépendants*, gave him 'much practical advice and assistance'.⁴⁸ Sickert also gave it his full support and was determined to see a London showcase for art with the same free exhibition policy as the two alternative Paris Salons. He applauded the Allied Artists' no-jury system of admission to its annual exhibition which allowed any artist to be a shareholder after paying a small subscription fee, and to show five works.⁴⁹ The no-jury system freed it from 'all artistic tyranny',⁵⁰ a hanging committee was elected in alphabetical rotation,⁵¹ and the wall space in the vast Albert Hall (the Association's exhibition premises) was allocated by ballot so that the best artists did not receive deferential treatment.⁵² Sickert's most impassioned plea for the impartiality of the Allied Artists' Association's exhibitions was published in the *Art News*, the Association's official newspaper.⁵³ A jury-free exhibition necessarily involved a 'large percentage of absolute rubbish', but this was not too big a price to pay for artistic liberty.⁵⁴ The Association, he hoped, would precipitate a revolution against the social pretensions, false decorum and petty rivalries that he associated with the London art world, bringing the fresh, stormy air of European art to England:

47 ALS, Sickert to Nan Hudson, n.d., cited in Sturgis, *Walter Sickert: A Life*, 378.

48 Rutter, *Since I was Twenty-Five*, 181.

49 The number was reduced to three after its first show when over 3061 works were shown.

50 Sickert, 'The Allied Artists' Association', 207.

51 Artists with names ending in A and B were on the hanging committee in 1908.

52 This information comes from P.G. Konody, 'The London Salon', *Observer*, 13 July 1913, 5.

53 Sickert, 'The Allied Artists' Association'.

54 *Ibid.*, 208.

A hurricane has swept Europe, and the tail of it is already wiping our eye. The Channel is no longer a bar. True patriotism forbids us to palter with reality. The women and children, and the members of existing societies, must be put in places of safety, and victualled. The youth of the country is being called to arms.⁵⁵

‘Par taches, par planes et par volumes’: Sickert’s Cosmopolitan Touch

Conversant in five languages (German, French, Italian, Greek and Latin), Sickert happily used foreign words when speaking and writing English. He also thought in terms of a ‘language of art’, as defined in a 1910 article of that title.⁵⁶ Sickert makes an impassioned plea against a literary element in painting, and suggests a close relationship between subject and treatment so that ‘the real subject’ of a work of art is its pictorial means, or what he calls ‘plastic facts’ (264). With characteristic contrariness, he doubted whether women could appreciate his brand of visuality (‘I have noticed that the language of art has a meaning for men, and very little for women’, 265), and suggested that it was something that men acquired only through long and thorough study. ‘There are persons born with a natural gift for reading this language, persons to whom it speaks clearly, intelligently, and profoundly’ (265). I want to compare this élitist, chauvinist definition to another statement that Sickert made a few years later, in August 1915. This time, he imagines his audience of European leaders to be uninformed Philistines. Troubled by the events of the war, he posited the following witty solution for peace:

There is only one way to make peace. All you have to do is take the Tsar, Kaiser Wilhelm, the King of England, the President of France, the King of Italy, and the

55 Sickert, ‘All We Like Sheep’.

56 Walter Sickert, ‘The Language of Art’, *New Age* (28 July 1910), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 264–67.

other kings of the warring countries. Put them in front of a bad picture. All of them will agree that they love it. They will embrace and peace will be made.⁵⁷

The crux of what Sickert is saying is that the unspoken language of art could break down national differences. He is making an important point about the power of the visual to bring together a diverse multiracial and multilingual group – even when it is a group of visually uninformed magnates of power. This is an appealing concept. Sickert's own art was 'tainted' by foreign influences, just as his prose was 'polluted' by un-English words. It could be argued that his painting, like his habit of inserting phrases in several European languages (living and dead) into his writing, reflects his commitment to a common European culture.⁵⁸

In suggesting that Sickert's painting, and by this I mean the c.1905–7 nudes, can be placed in an international context,⁵⁹ I am arguing against the grain of recent Sickert studies which have investigated the English context of some of Sickert's best-known pictures – the early music-hall scenes and a later group of female nudes known as the Camden Town Murder pictures.⁶⁰ I am guilty of placing Sickert's music-hall pictures in the context of their time and, *mea culpa*, I ignored their inherent pictorialism when I

57 Walter Sickert, 'An Early Landscape by William Maris', *Burlington Magazine* (August 1915), in Robins, *Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 388–89. Sickert attributes the solution to Théodore Duret, whom he quotes in French.

58 Cf. Andrzej Szczerski's discussion elsewhere in this book about the function of the Arts and Crafts Movement as a visual language shared among the emerging nations of Central Europe. Szczerski compares the Arts and Crafts to Esperanto and the Garden City movement which developed around the same time, arguing that 'the vernacular could therefore act as the equivalent to linguistic Esperanto, providing a common language for the new century' (20–25).

59 See Anna Gruetzner Robins and Richard Thomson, eds, *Degas, Sickert and Toulouse-Lautrec: London and Paris, 1870–1910*, exh. cat. (London: Tate Publishing, 2005).

60 Lisa Tickner's investigation of the relationship between the Camden Town Murder paintings and the reporting of the event in the press in *Modern Life and Modern Subjects* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2000) sets a unsurpassed model of excellence. See also her essay in *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes*, ed. Barnaby Wright (London: The Courtauld Gallery in Association with Paul Holberton Publishing London, 2007), 45–55.

first explored this social history.⁶¹ I would not do that now. I think that the paintings Sickert learned to make in Paris are racy modern pictures with a pictorial substance that is lacking in the music-hall pictures. By Paris pictures, I am not talking about that old chestnut *L’Affaire de Camden Town*: an unpleasant painting, by which I do not mean the gruesome murder which gave it its title. I mean its unpleasant visuality. Vauxcelles was left more or less speechless when he saw it (or another version) at the Salon d’automne in 1909.⁶²

The handful of female nudes that Sickert painted c.1906: *Reclining Nude – Mornington Crescent* (The Courtauld Gallery, London) (plate 1), *Nude on a Bed* (The Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth) (plate 2) and *Nuit d’Été*,⁶³ which were recently displayed in Barnaby Wright’s beautifully orchestrated *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (Courtauld Gallery of Art, 2008), makes my point.⁶⁴ The geographic point of origin for these nudes was the Mornington Crescent studio in north London’s Camden Town area where, with staggering energy, Sickert painted recumbent female models sprawled across a single iron bedstead. But make no mistake: the exuberance of the handling places them in Paris exhibitions where he carried out his ‘painting appreciation course’, which as he said in ‘The Language of Art’ was

a matter of long preparation [...] that [...] comes as a cumulative revelation, prepared by long underground processes [...] by repetitions unconsciously received [...] that seem, as they unroll themselves, most uneventful and most insignificant.⁶⁵

Sickert concluded this long explanation of what can only be construed to be his own artistic education, although he does not say so, by pointing

61 See my ‘Sickert “Painter-in-Ordinary” to the Music Hall’, in *Sickert: The Paintings*, ed. Wendy Baron and Richard Shone (London: Yale University Press in association with the Royal Academy of Arts, 1992), 13–24.

62 Louis Vauxcelles, ‘Le Salon d’Automne’, 2.

63 For further information see Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 248, 250, 253.

64 Wright, *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes*.

65 Sickert, ‘The Language of Art’, 265–66.

out that the understanding of art could never be ‘a coup de foudre’ (266). He was right.

It is easy to see how Sickert could form his ideas about an international language of painting in the heady environment of his Paris years. The range and quality of French painting that he saw in France and that fed his pictorial memory bank has barely been considered. When we think of Degas’s vast and varied collection, not to mention Blanche’s choice impressionist pictures, the Paris auction houses, the dealer’s galleries and the kaleidoscopic splendour of those alternative Salon exhibitions, we are talking about a pretty impressive list. We can situate Sickert’s cacophony of broken marks and strokes of paint, his touches and splodges of colour, within a body of French painting by Pissarro, Cézanne, Bonnard, Vuillard, Signac (who was an important Sickert collector) and even Matisse. Sickert’s pictorial programme is laid out in the Paris pictures. It mixes different nuances of touch that bring together several narratives about the originality and progressiveness of French painting. It is a painting of mimicry and multiplicity that resulted in a kind of visual mottling, or pictorial camouflage, that fits these disparate marks from different kinds of painting together. Sickert is hardly alone in adopting this mixed bag of contemporary French styles and techniques. Matisse was pretty good at it, or at least around 1905 when he was still finding his feet.⁶⁶

What Sickert learned from these painters was that touch could be independent of the thing seen and have equal weight in a picture’s overall pictorialness. I am talking about the diagonal streaks of violet-red that break up the grey ground, and the broken patches of colour on the bed cover of *Reclining Nude – Mornington Crescent*, also the sudden eruption of large curving strokes of whitish colour that stand in for some sort of pillow, accented with ochre, behind the head of the reclining female nude, and outline her undulating form before bursting into a crescendo of bold marks that encircle her foot without any legible purpose. Those painted patches of colour on the bedcover could be Sickert looking at Cézanne or they could be Sickert looking at Matisse’s memory of Cézanne. My point

66 For a groundbreaking discussion see Wright, *Matisse and the Subject of Modernism*.

is that it is an example of the way touch wins an independence from the thing represented.

The model in *Reclining Nude – Mornington Crescent* takes her place in a long line of new wave odalisques beginning with Manet's *Olympia* (1863).⁶⁷ The flattened torso of the distended form of *Nude on a Bed*, with its elongated right arm and leg and oddly placed breasts, defies all notions of anatomical correctness, but it pays more than a nod to the stupendous array of paintings and drawings of the nude in the Ingres retrospective at the 1905 Salon d'automne.⁶⁸ The female nude dissolves into a mass of long strokes of paint that form a pool of pale colour against the lively texture of the rose pink of the bedspread. As Vauxcelles commented when reviewing Sickert's solo show at Bernheim Jeune in 1907: 'il procède par taches, par planes et par volumes. Et son dessin est construit en synthétiques abrégés'.⁶⁹ I am suggesting that Vauxcelles singled Sickert out – and it should be observed that he chose to write about a handful of painters in each room – because his pictures had a painterly quality that seemed to transcend national boundaries.

It hardly needs emphasising that by 1908, Matisse's inventive use of contrasting and complementary hues of bright colour, independent of any reference to local colour or natural light, had challenged the function of colour in painting.⁷⁰ Sickert was no Matisse, but he made superb use of a tonal range of colour, as Vauxcelles observed when writing about the nude, possibly *Mornington Crescent Nude* (Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge), that Sickert sent to the 1908 Salon d'automne:

67 For an informed discussion of Sickert's nudes within this tradition see Barnaby Wright, 'Naked Realism: An Introduction to Walter Sickert's Camden Town Nudes', in Wright, *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes*, 13–28.

68 For a discussion of the Ingres retrospective see Benjamin, 'Ingres chez Fauves', 98–116.

69 Louis Vauxcelles, 'Exposition Walter Sickert, à Felix Fénéon', *Gil Blas*, 12 January 1907, 2.

70 Matisse did not have an easy time with French critics. For a selection of critical commentary on his Salon d'automne exhibits, see Jack Flam, ed., *Matisse: A Retrospective* (New York: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1988), 43–103.

Le poids du corps de la fille endormie est rendu avec un sentiment étonnant du volume. M. Sickert sait mieux que quelconque de l'heure actuelle qui sur une esquisse sombre et transparente, et notamment sur le noir, les tons clairs prennent un éclat violent et que les empâtements légers de tons ambiguës (mauves, vineux, bleus [sic], vin de grises, oranges sourds, blanc rompus, réchaffés ourefroidis), chantent avec délicatesse.⁷¹

The violet/green colour mixed with bone black that Whistler introduced into his 1880s landscape panels was the starting point for the green/violet tonalities of Sickert's palette. Sickert explained in a letter, written to William Rothenstein in autumn 1906, that his palette was based on four tones in the green/ violet range (one green and three violet). 'Take one absorbent canvas white' and 'prepare 4 tones,' he instructed, before giving Rothenstein the following recipe of 'one of ochre & Prussian blue & white' for the greenish tone and '3 gradations of ultramarine indian Red & white mixed' for the three gradations of violet. Sickert instructed Rothenstein to 'work from nature with 4 brushes till your whole picture is prepared. Let it dry & paint'. Then to avoid confusion, he added a diagram of four circles, one inscribed green and the other three violet, shaded light to dark.⁷² This is an important letter which Wendy Baron incorrectly transcribed, thus confusing its crucial significance for Sickert's experimental palette which Vauxcelles was the first to recognise.⁷³ Sickert appears to have used a version of this 'recipe' for *Reclining Nude – Mornington Crescent* with

71 Louis Vauxcelles, 'le Salon d'automne', 3. ['The weight of the body of the sleeping whore is rendered with an amazing feeling for volume. Sickert knows better than anyone at the present time that with a dark and transparent sketch, and notably on black, light tones take on a harsh brightness and the light impasto of the ambiguous tones (purple, wine, blue, varied greys, subdued oranges, broken whites, warm or cool) sing with delicacy'].

72 Walter Sickert, letter to Sir William Rothenstein, undated, Rothenstein papers, bMS Eng 1367 (35) Houghton Library, Harvard University.

73 Baron, *Sickert*, 95 transcribes the letter as 'Three gradations of ultramarine, Indian ink and white mixed', suggesting that this makes a 'warm greyish cyclamen'. In fact, there is no mistaking that Sickert wrote '3 gradations of ultramarine indian Red & white mixed'. Blue and red, of course, makes violet while ultramarine and white makes shades of blue.

its 'combination of 'bright, chromatic colours tempered with bone black', including French ultramarine, Indian red, yellow ochre and possibly Prussian blue.⁷⁴ This reductive range of colour and an indifference to local colour (the red blind of *Reclining Nude, Mornington Crescent* illustrates my point) shows Sickert to be an experimental colourist whose efforts have been largely unappreciated.⁷⁵

Vauxcelles, and several other French critics, associated this range of green/violet tonalities and the accents of rose, ochre, grey and dull white that keyed up these sombre harmonies with the dirt and cold of a London winter and its muddy Thames. While Vauxcelles recognised that Sickert's pictures could easily be placed in the Paris pool, he seems to be looking for a more tangible sign of Sickert's difference by making this connection between colour and landscape. However, we cannot take the pictures Sickert showed in Paris as representing his long and varied career. He thrived on change. As David Sylvester commented: 'Sickert, however un-English he was in his habit of looking straight at the visual facts and in his easy mastery of picture-making problems, was thoroughly English in his lack of single-mindedness.'⁷⁶ What we can say, however, is that Sickert's national identity (or identities) should be seen as a floating signifier, a holding space for diverse and conflicting expressions of Englishness and 'un-Englishness'. His case complicates our understanding of Anglo-European cultural relations at the *fin de siècle*. It also raises questions about national identity and art that have a continuing resonance for the significant number of 'un-English' artists living in contemporary Britain's globally connected, multi-racial society.

74 This information comes from Kate Stonor, 'Walter Richard Sickert, *Reclining Nude, Mornington Crescent*, cat. no. P.1982.LB.403', *Courtauld Institute Galleries Conservation Record*. I am grateful to Barnaby Wright for giving me access to this unpublished report.

75 My thanks to Barnaby Wright for discussing the colour experiments in *Mornington Crescent – Reclining Nude* with me.

76 David Sylvester, *About Modern Art: Critical Essays 1948–97* (revised edition, London: Pimlico, 1997), 152–53.

Walter Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 410. 5 For example, see Robert Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London: Faber and Faber, 1941), 16, who in his analysis of Sickert's breeding refers to "this flint of Denmark and this steel of England". On the other hand, Wendy Baron, *Walter Sickert and the Language of Art*, 29. A discussion about the reception of contemporary German art in London before the First World War, which mentions Sickert and Whistler.