



MODERN MADE: Modern & Post-War Art, Design & Studio Ceramics (618)

Fri, 23rd Oct 2020, Live Online | Viewing in Mall Galleries, London

Viewing Times:

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Viewing until 12noon today, The Mall Galleries, London

Lot 19

Estimate: £20000 - £30000 + Fees

§ **William Ratcliffe (British 1870-1955) The Red Curtain, circa 1916**

signed (lower right), oil on canvas

48.5cm x 49cm (19in x 19.3in)

Exhibited:

The Goupil Gallery, London, *The London Group*, 1916, no.114.

See R. Allwood, *William Ratcliffe: paintings, prints and drawings*, North Hertfordshire, 2011.

The intimate domestic space and atmosphere in *The Red Curtain* instantly places this work amongst the Camden Town Group and their distinctive palette. As the critic Frank Rutter noted:

'tainted with the disease of purplitis. Messrs. Spencer Gore, Robert Bevan, William Ratcliffe, and many others of this group of artists, who attach themselves with real passion to the pictorial interpretation of their own daily surroundings and of modern life, all look up on the world with purple spectacles.'

(Frank Rutter, *The Observer*, 14 July 1912, p.9.)

Born near King's Lynn, Ratcliffe grew up in Manchester where his father worked in the Mills. After leaving school Ratcliffe attended Manchester School of Art, partly studying under Walter Crane and by 1901 he was working as a wallpaper designer. The family moved to the new Garden City of Letchworth by 1906, perhaps tempted by the social idealism that was a central tenet of this new society and an emphasis on cooperative working. In 1908, the artist Harold Gilman (1876-1919) and his family moved to Letchworth as a neighbour of the Ratcliffe's and soon after Gilman became a mentor to Ratcliffe. By 1910, Gilman had introduced Ratcliffe to the members of the Fitzroy Street Group, and persuaded him to abandon his career as a pattern designer at the Wallpaper Manufacturers Combine, propelling him to a professional artist. When the Fitzroy Street Group had been succeeded by the Camden Town Group, Ratcliffe was nominated by Gilman and ended up exhibiting in all three Camden Town exhibitions.

In *The Red Curtain* the heavy impasto handling of paint and compositional form of the interior particularly show the influence of Gilman, who alongside Charles Ginner had been investigating the use of thickly applied paint and a pronounced impasto throughout their Camden Town works. The curtains, wall hanging, and patterned rugs also hark

back to his time as a wallpaper designer. The result in *The Red Curtain* is a harmony of colours, touches of green, next to pinks, purples and blues heightening the cool tone of the interior, with strokes of orange adding warmth. As a whole it produces a work clearly indebted to the Post-Impressionist movement that was sweeping through the British avant-garde art scene at this particular moment in time.

Ratcliffe was constantly on the move, living an itinerant existence and altering his lodgings almost on a yearly basis, periodically staying with family and friends, which makes pinning down the exact location of most of his domestic works difficult. However, in this work there are close compositional similarities to *The Artist's Room, Letchworth* in The Tate Gallery collection, with similar furnishings, curtains, wall hangings, rugs and art & crafts furniture, and a day bed running underneath the hanging which suggest that the present work shows the sitting room where Ratcliffe stayed at 102 Wilbury Road in Letchworth Garden City, the home of Stanley and Signe Parker. This could in fact be a more finished example of the Tate Gallery's work, although taken from a different angle.

102 Wilbury Road was designed in the arts and crafts tradition for the Parker family in 1908, by Stanley Parker's brother Barry Parker (1867-1947) and his partner Raymond Unwin (1863-1940), who were the quintessential arts & crafts architects of Letchworth, and Wilbury Road is considered a major and complete example of their best work in the Arts & Crafts idiom. The arts and crafts elements of the interior are clearly evident in *The Sitting Room*, including a Clissett ladderback armchair, an oak circular table (a similar model table can also be found in *Cottage Interior*, circa 1914, also identified in a photograph of the Interior of the Parker's home, circa 1909), and overall the scene depicted reflects a relaxed and simple life that many of the occupants of the Garden City aspired to.

Like Ratcliffe, Stanley Parker had also studied at the Manchester School of Art, and it was possible that they became friends at this point. Ratcliffe is noted as staying with the Parkers at Wilbury Road at least twice, between 1930-2 and 1946-54, but the fragmentary nature of Ratcliffe's life and the particular colour palette make it possible that *The Sitting Room* was painted on an earlier stay. It is remarkable and a reflection on Ratcliffe's talents as an artist, that although he was perpetually on the move without a home of his own, he manages to create a warmth and intimacy in *The Sitting Room*, and an authentic depiction of a domestic space that also positions him as a significant painter in the Camden Town grouping. As N. D. Deuchar noted in the artist's obituary '...his subjects were quiet and perhaps almost tame, but he had such exactitude and care in handling the shapes of building and apparatus, as well as great skill in laying his colour, that he was marked out as a true artist.' (N.D.Deuchar, *The Citizen*, 21 January 1955)