Camden Town artists - but *Not* the Camden Town Group

Much has been written of the ‘Camden Town Group’. The Tate Gallery has a special online collection of commissioned articles and digital ephemera. Further valuable books (both 2007) include Barnaby Wright (ed) *The Camden Town Nudes* and John Yeates *NW1: The Camden Town artists – a social history*.

This article considers the origin of the label ‘Camden Town Group’ and explores stronger claims for Camden Town artists.

The ‘Camden Town Group’ was a small club of sixteen artists around the leadership of Walter Sickert established in 1911 and lasting for less than two years. The secretary, Spencer Gore, though twenty years his younger, was a good friend of Sickert, and they both – for a time – lived and worked in Mornington Crescent, in Bedford New Town, with views looking towards, St Andrew’s Church. Sickert shows the spire of the church in a picture of 1907, and Gore shows also the Camden Theatre and the recently-opened Mornington Crescent Underground station.

Walter Sickert, Girl at a Window, Little Rachel 1907, © Tate T06447
Spencer Gore, Mornington Crescent (towards Camden Theatre) 1911, British Council Collection
Booth’s 1898 map shows Mornington Crescent within the parish of S Matthew in ‘Bedford New Town’ (In Booth’s classification of social position, the deeper red indicated the second highest ranking, with only gold - such as the Nash Terraces in Regent’s Park - higher.)

Three propositions about the ‘Camden Town Group’.

- **Title** – the name deliberately promoted Sickert’s interests
- **Misogyny** – associating female nude painting with prostitution and murder
- **Place** – few members had an interest in Camden Town

*Promoting Sickert*

Sickert’s family had come to England in 1868 and he had gone to King’s College School (although he was expelled). He started out as an actor and retained strong theatricality in his life, taking up the theme of painting music-hall as Parisian artists also were.

Neither his early career as a painter, nor his marriage to the daughter of Richard Cobden, former Member of Parliament (whose statue was at the southern end of Camden Town High Street) were successful. He divorced his wife in 1898 and spent several years working in Dieppe, in France, and also in Venice.

In 1906 he returned to London and set about re-establishing himself, now as a senior among younger artists with the status of being close to impressionist French painting – and also selling his art in Paris.
The New English Art Club had been founded in 1885 in opposition to the Royal Academy but was itself declining to accept younger artists. Sickert and several other younger artists rented a studio for ‘open house’ showings at 19 Fitzroy Street (it is now demolished) from 1907. The group also went on, in the next year, to form the Allied Artists Association showing a large number of artists at the Albert Hall.

 Memoire - 1

The result of these numerous conversations was an intimate meeting over a dinner at Gatti’s, and that evening the decision, after a lengthy discussion, was arrived at to form a new society. Gilman was jubilant and as we had indulged in a good dinner with abundance of wine to wash it down (this was 1911) Sickert, striding out of the restaurant ahead of us, turned and waved his arm exclaiming “We have just made history”. Discussions continued at No. 19, Fitzroy Street, where a group of painters, formed some years previously by Walter Sickert, held Saturday afternoon “at homes”. A second, slightly larger meeting took place at the Criterion, and here the new society could be said to have been safely launched with the names finally decided of several artists to be invited. This [end of p.129] resulted in a full meeting held at yet a third restaurant, this time in Golden Square, where Walter Sickert himself was responsible for the christening of this new venture as “The Camden Town Group”. Spencer Gore was elected President and J. B. Manson Secretary.


 Memoire - 2

That year there had been a particularly well-advertised murder in Camden Town, and I think it was Sickert, who already had some connection with that district, who suggested that the new society should be called “The Camden Town Group.” To keep up the association Sickert contributed to the first exhibition two genre subjects, entitled “The Camden Town Murder,” one of which was afterwards exhibited as “Father Comes Home,” and ultimately sold, I understand, as “The Germans in Belgium.” Otherwise, to the inquiry, “Why Camden Town?” the correct reply was “Because some of the members live at Hampstead, and others at Hammersmith and Chelsea.”


The name ‘Camden Town Group’ was chosen because of its association with the Camden Town Murder – which had strong shock and publicity value. Sickert attached a label to pictures, and a group of painters, to promote marketing and sales.
Sickert found a willing gallery, the Carhill (where his brother worked), and three group exhibitions were put on in 1911 and 1912. Although historically significant, they were not financially successful in comparison with single-artist show with the label of 'Camden Town Murders'.

*Misogynistic*

Germaine Greer (*The Obstacle Course, 1979*) damned Sickert as 'the archetypal teacher-lover, who exploited his female students to the limit'. He was notably polyamorous. The Camden Town Group was said to have been created with men only (as London’s clubs still were) to deny Sickert bringing in his women friends.

Sickert, in London, predominantly painted indoors, seeking rooms of inner London terrace houses, posing his models in narrative settings. Gore preferred to paint the natural world out-of-doors, often urban landscapes. (He fatally caught pneumonia in 1914, age 42, after painting in a rainstorm.)

In both Dieppe and Venice, 1902-1904, Sickert had painted nudes inside ordinary rooms. He placed his models lying on a metal-framed bed, using strong perspective – he talked of a 'keyhole' vision. And in some pictures he used two figures – one clothed, one naked.

Sickert, as others, considered the 'salon' approach to painting the human form, such as at the Slade School, to be sterile. 'Move the model from the salon to the house, and the bedroom', he urged. In his London paintings, he framed the figures within smallish rooms.

Walter Sickert, *Nude on an iron bedstead*, 1905 (Wright, 2007, Fig 14)
Walter Sickert, *Conversations, 1903-1904* (Wright, 2007, Fig 13)
There was a murder in Camden Town in the later half of 1907. A woman of 23 was found by her common-law partner in their bedroom with her throat slit, at No 29 St Paul’s Road (now Agar Grove) on the east side of Camden Town. With an eminent defence lawyer, the accused man was found not guilty. The trial reports filled the newspapers.

Sickert had been painting nudes on plain beds, and two figures, clothed/unclothed for four years. He now gave the title *l’Affaire Camden Town* to a nude painting shown in Paris in 1909. And he entitled two canvases *The Camden Town Murder* 1 and 2 for the inaugural show of the Camden Town Group. Sickert’s titles were not fixed – he changed them to suit the audience. He had earlier titled these two, ‘What shall we do about the rent?’, a common music hall refrain.
The paintings were criticised by conservative society for having a nude woman and a man fully clothed. Nevertheless, there was no sign of murder; nor, indeed, is prostitution directly evident in the pictures, in comparison with the murder story. It comes into mind only through the title.

The house of the murder in St Paul’s Road, Camden Town was a well-built terrace house. Sickert, in contrast, sought out more seedy interiors than the real setting. His pupil-come-assistant Marjorie Lilly accompanied him on his searches: ‘... we rapped on endless doors, dived under greasy curtains in narrow halls, climbed rickety stairs to third floor backs ... At last, however, he came upon his treasure trove. A crooked room at the top of a crooked house in Warren Street ...’
**Place**

There is only a tenuous link between Sickert and Camden Town: he rented 81 Camden Road (unfortunately demolished, now Housing Association) in 1917, and also held a brief lease in Whitcher Place, the mews behind. (No-one else in the group of 16 artists had a Camden Town address.) Sickert had many studios in London and elsewhere. His earlier attachment was to Fitzroy Street, near Bloomsbury. An important proportion of his life spent in Dieppe. He moved to Mornington Crescent in 1907 and Gore moved there in 1911.

Neither Sickert nor Gore painted the fabric of Camden Town itself, except for the distant southern end of the High Street where it met Mornington Crescent.

Gore painted from Sickert’s windows across the railway line to Euston, and from the School for Etching that Sickert set up back across Hampstead Road.

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Sunset Rowlandson House

Spencer Gore 1878–1914 Nearing Euston Station 1911

The only ‘Camden Town Group’ painting of Camden Town itself is by Robert Bevan, showing Kentish Town Road with canal and railway bridges. None of the other younger impressionist artists painted Camden Town
Richard Bevan, who especially painted horses, set up a short-lived Cumberland Market group (the market in Regents Park Village, linked to the canal, was still the main hay market). But other movements were stronger. Bloomsbury critics Roger Fry and Clive Bell curated an exhibition of new French painting, defining ‘post-impressionism’, while other artists developed the school of Vorticists. In 1916, these newer artists created the London Group – a name proposed by Jacob Epstein (the group continues to this day).

By contrast, there is a painting by Frank Gilman which is titled Mornington Crescent and yet is (possibly) Camden Town. It doesn’t look like Mornington Crescent because it shows the backs of terraced houses rather than their fronts, and there is a large yellow brick industrial building to one side. This could instead be a view from Georgiana Street – although there is little explanation why Gilman might have taken this positioning for his painting. Moreover, the industrial windows are not the exact same ...

Two bridges c 1912
Frank Gilman 'Mornington Crescent'

Possible view from Lyme Street / Georgiana Street
Camden Town before, during and after the few months of the ‘Camden Town Group’, was a real home for artists – to live and to practise among a wider range of artisans – see separate article ‘Camden Town Artists’.

Inner London ‘urban realism’ continued with William Coldstream’s Euston Road School in the 1930s, the neorealists John Bratby and Jack Smith of the 1950s, and thereafter Lucian Freud, Francis Bacon and Frank Auerbach – the latter working from Mornington Crescent.

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3 Sylvia Gosse, who took on running of the art school, left a drawing of students in the garden in 1912, (BM) 1983,0521.29.