

East End Series (Protest at Whitechapel Road and Commercial Street) By John Allin



Overview of the Print

'East End Series (Protest at Whitechapel Road and Commercial Street)', 1975
Lithograph

This work was created in 1975 in the East End of London. As part of the East London Series, Allin has depicted the Anti-Fascist rally, now known as the 'Battle of Cable Street', which took place in East London in 1936. The rally was against the **British Union of Fascists (BUF)**, known as the **Blackshirts**, led by **Oswald Mosley**. During this time, Britain was facing very serious economic problems. Mosley's fascist party held the anti-Semitic view that the Jews were cause of the country's problems. The Blackshirts were scheduled to march through the East End streets that were inhabited by many Jewish families. The anti-fascists gathered to protest against Mosley's march.

The scene, at Gardiners' Corner, shows thousands of protestors, waving banners worded with slogans such as 'They Shall Not Pass', 'East End Unite', and 'No Nazis Here'. Uniformed policemen, some on horseback, were employed to allow Mosley's march to pass through. However anti-fascists blocked the route by **barricading** the streets with rows of domestic furniture and the police were attacked with eggs, fruit and the contents of people's chamber pots. The painting shows how thousands of people including local Jewish, communist, socialist, anarchist, and Irish groups, united as one in the battle against Fascism.

The print was made in 1975, at a time when many Jewish people had left, or were leaving the East End to reside in the suburbs of London. It was painted nearly 40 years after the protest and so is a **retrospective** work, based on childhood memories. The image provides an account of many different people in the East End joining forces, fighting together to protest against the same cause.

Allin's print serves as a reminder of a time past; when a thriving Jewish community, rich in culture and tradition, resided in East London.

Looking Closely

Form and Composition

The foreground of the painting shows the crowds of protestors with individual scenes of action taking place, such as the struggle between the policeman and the protestor in the middle of the foreground and to the right hand side, and the protestor being led away to the left hand side. The artist has used perspective to show the advancing communists who are marching in to join the protest. A vanishing point has been used to portray a sense of scale and drama. We cannot see where the march ends, which could imply that there are many more people on their way. Furthermore, by filling the entire space with small scenes of action, the artist portrays the large scale of the event.

Materials and Techniques

The work is a lithograph print. This is a method of printing which uses a metal plate with a smooth surface. An image is etched onto the material on the plate, which is then covered in ink and transferred to paper by pressing it down like a stamp. The artist can then make multiple prints of the same image.

Contents and Ideas

The work has a strong sense of community and togetherness. It depicts thousands of people protesting together. There is a sense of movement and action in the painting, from the movement of the protestors, to the splattered egg on the left hand pavement and the lone figure standing on the roof, also on the left hand side, surveying the scene. However, while there is a strong sense of togetherness, the artist also portrays the importance of individual action contributing to the greater whole, by drawing our attention to the individual struggles of 'characters' in the art work, such as the man climbing the lamp post in the centre of the image.

About the Artist

John Allin (1943 – 1991) was born in East London, home at the time to a large and thriving Jewish community. He joined the Merchant Navy, and after his subscription to the National Service he worked in a park planting trees, then as a swimming pool attendant and finally as a long distance lorry driver.

Allin was later convicted for minor theft and served a six month prison sentence. It was during this time that he began to paint. On discovering his talent he devoted himself to painting. In 1969 he had his first exhibition at the Portal Gallery, and in 1979 he was the first British artist to win the international *Prix Suisse Du Peinture Naïve* award. Allin made his mark within what is today considered as the Folk/Outsider Art movement in Britain.

Why is this work important?

The print was made in 1975, at a time when many of the East End Jews had left or were leaving to live in the suburbs of London. Allin's *East End Series* prints serve as an eternal reminder of a time past; a time when a large and close Jewish community resided in East London, sharing culture and tradition. The work also shows how many different communities, such as the Jews, the Irish dockers and the communists were united in a common cause. To some extent the works can be seen as a form of documentary of a time past. However, they are also representations by one artist, made retrospectively 40 years later, so could not be used as 'evidence' in the same way that perhaps a photograph could be used.

Terms Explained

Fascist - *an advocate or follower of fascism: an authoritarian and nationalistic right-wing system of government and social organization.*

Fascist governments have one leader (a dictator) who controls the country and its people through terror and censorship. A fascist follows this dictator to the extreme and is often very racist and nationalistic (putting country before everything, including family).

Blackshirts - *a member of a Fascist organization, in particular the SS*

Oswald Mosley - *6th Baronet (1896–1980), English Fascist leader; full name Oswald Ernald Mosley. Successively a Conservative, Independent, and Labour MP, he founded the British Union of Fascists, also known as the Blackshirts, in 1932. The party was effectively destroyed by the Public Order Act of 1936. In 1948 Mosley founded the right-wing Union Movement.*

Barricading - *block or defend with a barricade: an improvised barrier erected across a street or other thoroughfare to prevent or delay the movement of opposing forces.*

Retrospective - *looking back on or dealing with past events or situations.*
OR an exhibition or compilation showing the development of an artist's work over a period of time.