



Overview of the Painting

This picture was created on the eve of the First World War. It depicts a Rabbi (Head of the Community, Minister of the Synagogue and a Learned Man and Teacher) and Rabbitzen (the Rabbi's wife). The picture shows a very simple way of life. We would not know that the man is a Rabbi unless we read the title of the work. There is no religious setting depicted nor any religious clothing or artefacts. However, it is drawn in a style, which draws on techniques (such as Cubism) of the Modernist artists of the time. This reveals a tension between the subject and content of the picture, which is 'traditional' and simple, but it is drawn in a modern style. This can be seen to represent what is happening in the world at the time, the simpler and more traditional ways of life are being threatened and changed by the modern world and the coming war, as well as the development of technology, industry and machinery.

The couple can be seen as representative of Jewish people throughout history; their large eyes could allude to past Jewish persecution and suffering. However this apparent vulnerability contrasts with the fact that the figures appear robust. They have large strong hands, which could be compared to the hands of peasants who have had to struggle and work hard in their lives. Furthermore, the figures have their arms locked into each other like a chain that cannot break. The figures are strong and boldly drawn. They look resilient, as though they can withstand anything.

The woman (the Rabbitzen) is central to the picture. This can be seen to represent the importance of the Mother within Judaism. However, we also know that Gertler's mother was of great importance to him. This may explain why the Rabbitzen is shown in the first place (Rabbitzens were not usually depicted in art works) but also why she is central in the composition of the picture.

The picture is made by drawing over a grid, which you can see in the background. This was a very common technique for artists who were studying at the time at the Slade School of Art. It also indicates that Gertler may have been planning to turn the work into a large painting at some point,

though there is no evidence that he did. The grid helps artists to enlarge their pictures at a later date.

Looking Closely

Contents and ideas

In Gertler's picture, the room is sparsely decorated. The only furniture visible is a bare wooden kitchen table with shelves of plates on a dresser behind. The shelves, which have been depicted using a Cubist technique, look as though they have been decorated with home-made paper cut-outs.

The couple are dressed simply. They sit bolt upright and stare out of the picture. Their expressions are ambiguous – they could be ones of wariness, stoicism, resignation or even defiance. They have linked arms to emphasise their togetherness. Notice how their shoulders, arms and joined hands make ovals, rather like the links of a chain. Gertler has exaggerated the size of their hands, perhaps to suggest a life of hard physical work. This couple do not have much to eat – a loaf of bread and a cup of tea, perhaps all they can afford.

Form and Composition

The couple fill most the picture, emphasising their presence and giving a sense that the room is small and cramped. The kitchen table tips forward, bringing the loaf, teapot and cup closer into view, as if inviting you to join in.

The shapes of the couple's heads and bodies are rounded. These contrast with the sharp zigzags of the cupboard behind. Notice how the bun of the woman's hair echoes the shape of the cottage loaf and the teapot lid echoes the shape of the man's hat. Both figures and objects have outlines. Both are shaded to suggest light and shadows.

As a viewer you are positioned on the other side of the table from the couple, so that you feel as if you are in the room.

Materials and Techniques

Gertler created his picture in pencil and watercolour. This was probably a preparatory drawing for a painting. Look closely and you will see the grid of squares that the artist used to help him position everything in his composition. This was a common technique used by Artists at the Slade School of Art. The drawing and grid would have helped him to enlarge the drawing into a bigger painting at a later date.

About the Artist

Gertler was born on December 9, 1891, the youngest son of poor Jewish immigrants from Austria (his parents later registered as Polish during the First World War to avoid being labelled 'enemy aliens') who settled in the East End of London. In 1908, he was among the first Jewish, working-class students of his generation, to enrol at the Slade College of Art, where he later won a scholarship.

He and other Jewish East End artists, who followed him to the Slade, including David Bomberg, Bernard Meninsky and Isaac Rosenberg, became known as 'the Whitechapel Boys'. He carried out his most experimental work in the years 1913-19, including his anti-war masterpiece, *Merry-go-Round* (1916, Tate). In 1920 he was struck with tuberculosis and had to spend long periods in a sanatorium. He suffered from money worries and depression.

Throughout the 1920s, he concentrated on painting still lifes and nudes, enjoying his most successful commercial period. In the 1930s, he found it hard to sell his work and was forced to teach part-time. On June 23 1939, depressed by his ill-health, a badly-received exhibition, lack of sales and fear of imminent war, he took his own life.

Why is this work important?

This picture was made on the eve of the First World War, in the area of Spitalfields, where Gertler was living. Spitalfields, is in the East End of London, where many Jewish people were living at the time.

Gertler became inspired as child by the pavement artists who used to work in the area where he lived and his earliest pictures were made on the street outside his home.

In the early years Gertler was inspired by the life of his family and the Jewish community around him and was captivated by the colours of the meat, fish, fruit and vegetables sold. Apples are often found in his work and it is suggested that this inspiration came from what he saw as a child.

It is suggested that this picture shows the influence of artist Paul Cézanne , as the objects such as the cup, teapot, table and dresser are all drawn from a variety of different viewpoints (or perspectives), a technique used by Cézanne.

This picture demonstrates the realities of the tough life of the new immigrant communities in the East End, as well as a way of life that was swept away by both world wars.

Terms Explained

Rabbi (A Teacher of the Torah– the Jewish Holy Book and Minister of the Synagogue)

Rabbitzen– Wife of a Rabbi

Modernism—The name given to a movement across Western culture (including art and literature) which occurred around the end of the 19th century and early 20th century. Traditional art forms and techniques were seen as outdated in light of the new developments in science and technology and the past was rejected in favour of ‘the new’. New techniques for creating ‘modern art’ were explored with more emphasis on materials and processes.