



Solomon J Solomon R.A. (1880-1972) The Breakfast Table, 1921 Oil on Canvas 69 x 50.5cm

Overview of the Painting

This is a picture of Solomon's family. The woman sitting in the chair opposite us is his wife. The woman sitting in the chair in the foreground of the painting is his daughter.

Solomon's house looks very grand. There is lavish furniture in the room, with rich colours and oil paintings with ornate frames on the wall. One of the paintings on the wall in the background is a painting of his daughter and the painting on the wall above the fireplace is his wife.

Solomon was a successful artist and was only the second Jewish person to become a Royal Academician.

Solomon made lots of portraits of people in order to earn a living and was even asked to make portraits of members of the Royal Family. He also created large scale canvasses of scenes from mythology and bible stories. However, 'The Breakfast Table' is a more personal and intimate painting as it depicts his family.

In this picture, there is no evidence that the family are Jewish, though we know that they are, because we know about Solomon's family history.

This painting was made just 6 years before Solomon's death in 1927. He would have been around 67 years old and would have already lived through the First World War.

Terms Explained

Looking Closely.....

Holocaust Education through the Ben Uri Art Collection @ London Grid for Learning
www.benuriholocaust.lgfl.net

Contents and Ideas

'The Breakfast Table' shows a well-furnished dining room with a fireplace and armchairs. The walls are lined with paintings, some of which were painted by Solomon; there are ornaments, silver candlesticks and a clock on the mantelpiece. The table is covered with a crisp, white cloth. There is a bowl of fruit on the table and a place setting with china and silver.

The couple seem relaxed. They sit quietly reading their morning papers. The woman is, in fact, the wife of the artist, and often posed for him. There is a portrait of her above the mantelpiece. The artist's daughter sits in the chair opposite his wife.

The fruit bowl is laden with oranges and bananas, both luxuries at the time this picture was painted.

There is also a picture of the artist's daughter seen on the wall. This painting titled, 'The Field: The Artist's Daughter on a Pony' is also in the Ben Uri collection.

Form and Composition

You can see a wide view of the room, including a back wall and fireplace and a chandelier hanging from the ceiling. You are positioned across the room from the seated woman, with a view of the whole room.

The figures are far smaller and are not the main focus of the picture.

Both the table and fireplace are cut off, suggesting that there is much more to the room than can be seen here.

There is a great deal of colour and pattern (particularly on the chairs and cushions) with lots of touches of gold and silver

Neither the wall light nor the chandelier is lit, but there are glints of sunlight reflected on the picture frames, the candlesticks, the back of the chair and the crockery.

The plain white tablecloth stands out in contrast to the chintz furniture.

Materials and Techniques

'The Breakfast Table' was painted in oils. Oil paint has the ability to give the illusion of texture, shine, temperature and solidity of the objects the artist depicts.

In Solomon's picture expensive objects, such as the gilt picture frames, the silver candlesticks, the silver tableware, the shiny teapot, the chandelier, all glint and shine. Solomon has created this effect by adding highlights with lighter colours over dark – picking

out areas with small accents of white paint where the light would normally fall upon the object.

He has also added a rich red colour to the walls and painted the plumpness of the chairs and cushions to make the room feel warm, cosy and inviting.

About the Artist

Solomon J. Solomon

Solomon J Solomon was born in London on September 16, 1860. He studied art at Heatherley's Art School, the Royal Academy Schools and the Ecole des Beaux Arts in Paris. He showed his first painting at the Royal Academy in 1881 and continued showing there for forty years, becoming the second Jewish Royal Academician. Solomon specialised in painting people, both portraits and dramatic historical or biblical scenes.

He became one of Britain's most successful portrait painters. His commissions included leading professional men, including politicians.

In 1897, he married and had three children. Solomon's wife and children often posed as his models and he painted numerous informal pictures of his own family life and 'wedding portraits' of his relatives. His wife helped lay out colours for him and washed his brushes.

During World War I, he designed camouflage for tanks and aeroplanes. He sculpted dummy heads to attract fire, so that snipers could be found. He also developed hollow, metal and bark-covered Observational Post Trees, where lookouts could hide along the front line. After the war, he continued painting portraits right up until his death on 27 July 1927.

Why is this work important?

Solomon J Solomon was a very important part of the London community in which he lived.

He was, what was considered, the 'height' of Victorian/Edwardian respectability and well known for his historical and biblical works and for his society portraiture. His annual contributions to the Royal Academy Exhibition were hung in what came to be known as Solomon's corner.

Whilst Solomon was a proud and practising Jew, he rarely painted works with overtly Jewish themes, though he did make portraits of some of the leading Jewish figures of the day.

He was the founder of the Jewish cultural and philanthropic organisation the Maccabeans, from which the Jewish Educational Aid Society (JEAS) grew.

The JEAS was set up to provide funding for talented Jewish young people to enter into secondary and higher education, particularly in the areas of art, literature and science. The

JEAS offered loans to young people that had to be paid back once their studies were complete. Many Jewish artists used these funds to further their studies, such as Mark Gertler.

From 1924 to 1926, Solomon was the President of the Ben Uri Art Society.

This picture shows what life was like for wealthier Jewish families in England post WWI.

Other works by Solomon J Solomon



The Field: The Artist's Daughter on a Pony, oil on canvas, undated



Reclining Woman, oil on canvas, c.1895



Portrait of Gertrude Solomon (the artist's niece), oil on canvas, undated



Mischa Elman Playing the Violin, oil on canvas, 1911

Activities and Points for Discussion

What does this painting tell us about the lives of Jewish people at the start of the 1900's?

What might the Mother and Daughter be reading about in their newspapers in 1921?

What would you ask the family if you were sitting in the room with them?

How might your response to the pictures change if the artist had swapped materials, perhaps if he has just used pencil?