



Carl Andre on matters of taste

Why Kossoff
loves London
Art and the
beautiful game



Plus
Rewriting the
history of
British art



Al Alvarez on the painting he's shared a house with for 30 years

Living with a Kossoff

The first painting by Leon Kossoff I ever saw belonged to George Melly. This was in the early 1960s, when Melly and his wife were living on the edge of Hampstead Heath, near the Bull and Bush.

It was a small house, full of pictures, and the Kossoff was hanging on the same wall as Magritte's 'Le Viol', which Melly also owned at that time. It was a strange juxtaposition.

'Le Viol' is a startling image of sexual obsession, a woman's torso transformed into her face – breasts for eyes, navel for nostrils, *mons veneris* for mouth – but in terms of painting it is curiously neutral. The torso-face is surrounded by a helmet of stiff hair that looks as if it had been badly sprayed, and the background is featureless – a sandy desert and a deepening blue sky. It is violent, it is shocking, but it is all image.

The Kossoff, in comparison, was all paint and, although it was a portrait, you needed to study it patiently before the figure emerged from the impasto. Yet when you finally got it, the impact it made was just as powerful as the Magritte's. Even back then, 'Le Viol' was a famous icon, and I was astonished to see it hanging on a friend's wall, but it was the Kossoff that fascinated me.

I love paintings and have been buying whatever I could afford since I was at school. But writers don't often have money to spare, so most of my pictures have been bought cheap. (The first, a Scottie Wilson, cost me 30 shillings in 1948. In the same year, and for the same price, I acquired a Picasso etching – authentic but unsigned, alas.) Around the time I saw Melly's Kossoff, however, I had a windfall: my grandfather died and left his collection of paintings to his three grandsons. Most of them were late-Victorian variations on Egyptian harem themes; they were not my style but I wanted to commemorate the old boy. So I sold my share at Christie's, pocketed the proceeds and went looking for a Kossoff. I found one eventually at Helen Lessore's wonderful Beaux Arts Gallery. That was in 1964 and the picture has been in my life ever since.

I mean that quite literally and not just because it is a large and powerful work. It also seems, like the rest of my family, to have grown and changed over the years. Kossoff paints slowly, so slowly that his pictures seem to be accreted, layer by layer, like a geological formation, and in the course of this painstaking process a good deal of his own



uneasy presence gets deposited on the canvas. The impasto in my painting is deep in places and, although Kossoff had finished the work in 1959, the paint was still soft when I bought it five years later. It took another ten years to harden completely. So it became a living presence in the household, a presence that was somehow in flux, slowly emerging from the sculpted mass of pigment and changing imperceptibly while it hung on the wall.

The picture is of a seated figure. The head is in the top left corner, the torso twists diagonally down towards the right, the thighs twist back again, filling the bottom of the frame. The colours are mostly muddy browns and russets, and the immediate effect is brooding and anguished. The eyes roll back, the open mouth is downturned, the body is contorted and tense. Yet all this happens at a painterly remove. Despite the picture's size, the composition is compressed and orderly.

Kossoff's genius lies in the way he makes

the pigments themselves expressive.

The seated figure and ravaged face are dim presences and all the emotion is carried by the paint – mounds and ridges of it, built up, worked over, scooped out. Kossoff doesn't apply colours as the image requires – blue up here, red there, yellow below – he layers them on, then works away at the surface until the tone he wants is revealed. He uses oil paint in the way Rodin used clay, moulding it to his purpose. The result is three-dimensional, a sculpture created from paint and contained within a kind of sawn-off wooden box.

Maybe it is this three-dimensionality which gives the picture such presence. It has dominated my sitting-room for more than 30 years and has become as much a part of my life as my family. Yet although it seems to carry a great weight of unease, it has remained a curiously calming influence. It is a question, I suppose, of Kossoff's technique and temperament. Apart from sheer talent, what

separates real artists from the pretenders is not the intensity of their emotions – bad art is full of strong emotion – it is what Coleridge called "aloofness", a kind of indifference or impartiality, an artisan's canny and practical understanding of what is needed to get the job done properly.

Naturally, every true artist is in touch with what he feels and is able to express it, however obliquely. But once he starts working, the feelings get waylaid by the process itself and his only concern is to get the work right in terms of the medium he is using. The possibilities of the medium – paint, clay, stone, steel, language, music, film – become, to him, more urgent and more interesting than whatever it was that originally sparked the work into life.

Ezra Pound once divided artists into "carvers" and "moulders". The carvers chipped away patiently, refining the work, then refining it again, until they were left with something as near perfection as they could possibly get. The moulders worked fast, relying on instinct and flair, unbothered by repetition or sloppy execution, and more interested in the overall effect than in the details. As it happens, Pound was talking about writers, not painters; Flaubert and T S Eliot were the ultimate carvers, while Shakespeare, Walt Whitman and D H Lawrence were moulders. As for painters, Piero della Francesca, Velázquez and Seurat were all carvers, and the moulders were Tiepolo, Picasso and Jackson Pollock.

Kossoff, at first sight, looks like a moulder, particularly in some of his later work, where even the portraits seem to be on the move and full of raw feeling. But his attitude to paint is essentially that of a carver. It is as though he believes that paint itself holds some special kind of truth, a truth more valuable than whatever it was that he initially wanted to express, and that it is his duty as an artist to express that truth.

My Kossoff painting is a perfect example of Coleridge's "aloofness". The impulse behind it may be expressionist – grieving and wild – but the execution is restrained and the final effect is almost classical. The finished picture seems to have emerged from the dense mass of pigment terribly slowly and only as a result of great labour and concentration. 'Seated Figure II' is a powerful presence, but it is a power with all passion spent, peaceful and reassuring. I am glad to have been able to live with it for so long.