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## ***Leon Kossoff, 92, Who Painted Portraits of Urban Life, Dies***

His primary subjects were his family and friends, the many glories of London, and old master paintings in the National Gallery.



Leon Kossoff in an undated photograph. His paintings could be challenging, but they also communicated a great warmth, both for the act of painting and for everyday life.  
Walia S.S./L.A. Louver

By Roberta Smith  
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Leon Kossoff, whose expressionistic portraits and images of urban life made him one of the most important painters of postwar Britain, died on July 4 in London. He was 92.

The cause was complications of a stroke, said Annely Juda Fine Art, his London representative, and Mitchell-Innes & Nash in New York.

Mr. Kossoff worked in a thick impasto that pitted energetic brushwork against the scenes he depicted. Subject matter flickered in and out of sight, disappearing into and then rising from the painted surface.

Mr. Kossoff's paintings could be challenging, but they also communicated a great warmth, both for the act of painting and for everyday life.



**“The Flower Stall, Embankment Station (Stormy Spring)” (1994), one of Mr. Kossoff’s many paintings of life in London. Leon Kossoff Estate/Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery**

His subjects were highly specific, and he painted them again and again, sometimes for years on end. The main ones were his family and friends, or models who became friends; the many glories of London (its pedestrians, its streets, its railway and underground stations and their trains); and

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old master paintings in the National Gallery. One motif for several years around 1970 was a public pool roiling with schoolchildren. His active surfaces had precedent in artists ranging from Rembrandt to Constable to van Gogh to Chaim Soutine and Willem de Kooning.

Mr. Kossoff's work was closest in appearance and spirit to that of the German-born British painter Frank Auerbach, five years his junior and a close friend during their early years. Like Mr. Kossoff, Mr. Auerbach favored a loaded brush and dense surfaces that conveyed both anxiety and largess. They both painted construction sites that sprang up around London as it rebuilt from the Blitz, and they were both indifferent to the distinction between abstraction and representation.

Mr. Kossoff and Mr. Auerbach were students together at St. Martin's School of Art and the Royal College of Art and attended a class at Borough Polytechnic taught by the prominent British modernist painter David Bomberg, a dynamic teacher. They both had their first exhibition at the Beaux Arts Gallery in London in the mid-1950s; represented Britain in the Venice Biennale (Mr. Auerbach in 1986, Mr. Kossoff in 1995); and declined honors from the queen. And both were overshadowed in prominence by their contemporary, the realist painter Lucian Freud, who had a much more sensational personal history and a flashier painting style. In recent years, this imbalance has begun to correct itself.

Mr. Kossoff was a very private man, strikingly modest if not self-effacing. Yet he was uncompromising in his work, as reluctant to welcome visitors to his studio as he was to let paintings leave it.



"Inside Kilburn Underground" (1983). Mr. Kossoff painted the many glories of London, including its railway and underground stations and their trains.

Leon Kossoff Estate/Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery



In “Kings Cross, March Afternoon” (1998), Mr. Kossoff depicted the city’s streets and pedestrians. Leon Kossoff Estate/Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery

He had an extended working process; he would make countless sketches and then more finished drawings of any subject “until,” he said, “something happens and you realize you can start painting.” Then, working in oil on board rather than canvas, he worked and reworked his images, often scraping them down a few times a day as the light or mood changed. “Nothing is ever the same,” he said of his process.

In the end the final painting would be made in a very short time, maybe as short as an hour. He drew incessantly from life in many forms, making nearly daily forays with his sketchbook to various points in London or to the National Gallery, where he drew and redrew masterpieces by Poussin, Rubens, Veronese, Constable and others. He also focused on masterpieces in the form of great public buildings like King’s Cross Station, built in the mid-19th century, or Nicholas Hawksmoor’s Baroque Christ Church Spitalfields, completed in 1729, a familiar landmark from Mr. Kossoff’s East London childhood. He depicted the structure’s monumental forms as rising up and vibrating, almost ecstatic, and from a child’s low point of view, as the British critic David Sylvester pointed out.

He tended to depict only people he knew well: his parents, his brothers, Mr. Auerbach, the painter John Lessore. His wife, Rosalind (Pearl) Kosoff, known as Peggy, whom he married in

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1954, was his most frequent model. She survives him, as do their son, David; four grandchildren; two great-grandchildren; and two brothers, Chaim and Jack.



“Peggy II” (1999), one of many of Mr. Kosoff’s paintings of his wife. Leon Kossoff Estate/Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery

Sometimes Mr. Kossoff found his subjects near at hand, like the Booking Hall in the Kilburn Underground near his house or the faltering cherry tree in his backyard, which occasioned some of his greatest paintings. He depicted this ancient tree leaning, nearly on the horizontal, supported by two crutchlike pieces of lumber. The image communicated an unusual humanity, often evoking, a slightly abstracted combination of crucifix and Pietà.

Leon Kossoff was born on Dec. 10, 1926, in Islington, London, to Jewish immigrants from Russia. He was the second of seven siblings. His father was a baker.

He developed an early interest in drawing and at age 9 made his way on his own to the National Gallery — how he managed that, he said, he could not recall — where Rembrandt’s “Woman Bathing in a Stream” made an unforgettable impression. In 1939 he was one of thousands of children evacuated from London during the Blitz. He lived in East Anglia — where Constable

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was born — with a married couple who encouraged his interest in art. He made his first paintings there and became acquainted with Constable's work in a local museum.



Mr. Kossoff made many paintings of public buildings, like this 1999-2000 one of Nicholas Hawksmoor's Baroque Christ Church Spitalfields, a familiar landmark from his East London childhood.

Leon Kossoff Estate/Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery

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Mr. Kossoff found some of his subjects near at hand, like the faltering cherry tree in his backyard. This painting of it is from 2006-7.

Leon Kossoff Estate/Mitchell-Innes & Nash Gallery

Back in London in 1943, Mr. Kossoff attended St. Martin's. He spent the years 1946 to 1949 in military service attached to the Royal Fusiliers, and then returned to St. Martin's.

In 1957 he had his first solo show with Beaux Arts, and two years later he began teaching at Regent Street Polytechnic. He showed his work for the first time in the United States in an exhibition of figurative painting from Britain at the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven in 1981 and had his first solo show at the Hirschl & Adler Gallery in New York in 1983.

The Tate Gallery staged a retrospective in 1996, and in 2007 the National Gallery organized "Leon Kossoff: Drawing From Painting," bringing together a large selection of his drawings of its masterpieces.

For that show he granted a rare interview, videotaped among the paintings he had drawn so often. Avowing his lack of natural skill as a draftsman, he said, "Every day I think, 'Today I

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might teach myself to draw.’ ” He added, “If you love a picture, you can learn how to draw from it.”

*Roberta Smith, the co-chief art critic, regularly reviews museum exhibitions, art fairs and gallery shows in New York, North America and abroad. Her special areas of interest include ceramics textiles, folk and outsider art, design and video art.*