

## Feel the paint: connections between two Jewish artists explored in new exhibition

Chaim Soutine and Leon Kossoff are the stars of the show in Hastings... and it's long overdue

BY ANTHEA GERRIE | MARCH 30, 2023 16:56



Leon Kossoff's *Between Willesden Green and Kilburn, Winter Evening, 1991*, oil on board. (Private Collection. Leon Kossoff Estate)

They shared east European heritage, a reverence for Rembrandt and a resolute adherence to figurative painting while many of their contemporaries were turning towards abstraction. Now two of the world's most important Jewish artists of the 20th century — the post-Impressionist Chaim Soutine and Leon Kossoff, one of his greatest fans — are getting a joint exhibition in a museum in Hastings. The show, which opens tomorrow, is bound to draw serious art-lovers to the south coast to see these once-overlooked artists.

“This is the largest group of Soutines shown together since 1982 and the first since then that includes both portraits and landscapes,” says curator James Russell. As for Kossoff, he adds, the last time he was celebrated with a full-scale museum show in the UK was 1996, which was why the genesis of the show started with him. “The idea of pairing him with Soutine, whom he so admired, came from our trustee Nicholas MacLean, who knew there were works of Soutine’s he could borrow.”

Both artists were championed by a third Jewish artist — David Bomberg, who taught Kossoff at the Borough Polytechnic 40 years after meeting Soutine in 1913 in Paris. “Bomberg had been asked by the Whitechapel Gallery to seek out Jewish artists for an exhibition,” explains Russell. “Soutine had no work to show him, as he had only just arrived, so was not included in the show, but Bomberg was a great admirer of his work in the years that followed.” In 1957, Bomberg wrote a note praising Soutine as “a superb manipulator of oil paint and a great and individual stylist” and Kossoff, held his first solo exhibition.

It was clear that Soutine was an influence on the younger man also using paint in a highly expressive way. Two years later, this admiration would be acknowledged in a rare interview in which Kossoff said: “Of course, my Jewishness must emerge in my work... a painter’s work is what he is or it is nothing.

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Leon Kossoff's Seated Woman, 1957 (Leon Kossoff Estate)

"But it is not a question of subject matter. I prefer the living reality of Soutine, who never used a Jewish symbol, to the sweetness of Chagall, whose work overflows with Magen Davids and old men with beards." Rather than painting Jewish symbols, Soutine portrayed the lowly paid workers in the society around him.

One has been lent by the Ben Uri Gallery. It is one of only three Soutine paintings in the UK, a portrait of a serving girl in a white apron that shows off the artist's renowned virtuosity for painting white: "He showed every colour imaginable in it, not only in the apron here, but in one of my favourite Soutines, Le Petit Pâtissier," says Sarah MacDougall of Ben Uri.

Soutine was born into poverty in a shtetl near Minsk. There he took his first drawing lessons before getting his fees waived by the art school in Vilnius and eventually joining a major migration of Jewish artists from Russia to Paris. He lodged in the same rooming house as Chagall, who remembered him as a "morbid Expressionist", and Modigliani, who introduced him to his first patron.

He travelled to paint on the French Riviera and in the Pyrenees, and his prospects changed overnight when he returned to Paris in 1922 and sold 52 paintings to American collector Albert Barnes of Philadelphia's Barnes Foundation. International reputation assured, Soutine took to silk shirts and entered café society, but continued to paint those at the bottom of the ladder. While other Jewish artists fled France after Nazi occupation, he went into hiding, dying of ill-health in 1943. Picasso and Jean Cocteau attended his burial in his old stomping-ground of Montparnasse.

Kossoff was first inspired by a visit to the National Gallery at the age of ten. He became the quiet man of the School of London set that included Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud and Frank Auerbach. While others went out on the town, Kossoff went home to his family. "For him, paint tells the story itself," says Andrea Rose, a trustee of the Kossoff estate. She singles out landscapes reflecting two areas of London with particular resonance for Jewish Londoners — Willesden, where the artist enjoyed taking his son David to learn to swim at the newly-opened public pool, and the area of Dalston, where Kossoff had his second-floor studio.

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Leon Kossoff, Demolition of the Old House, Dalston Junction, Summer 1974. 1974 (Tate)

The swimming-pool painting is easy to enjoy, with its celebration of brown bodies mingling with white, children queuing up for the diving board and mothers sitting watching. But the east London scene, *Demolition of the Old House*, depicting a Victorian cottage in the yard of Forman's salmon smokehouse being torn down is an example of what can make Kossoff a tad unapproachable at first glance. It takes a lot of looking to make out the railway line, the tiny workers on the roof and the stalls of Ridley Road market, the view from Kossoff's studio.

Kossoff's landscapes are certainly lighter in mood than his portraits, which can seem very tortuous, reflecting his empathy for their subject matter. One subject was the writer NM Seedo, a refugee from pogroms who married into his family. She wrote of sitting for Kossoff: "He seemed to go through heaven and hell, falling in love with every happy stroke of the brush and hating the obstacles." He expresses the pain he perceived in Seedo by furiously slathering on the paint and scrubbing her likeness in charcoal in the sketches he always made before starting a painting. MacDougall of Ben Uri singles out from the Hastings show a much gentler image he made of his older brother Chaim: "It shows such tenderness and vulnerability."

Soutine's reputation soared after his death, just as Kossoff's continues to climb following his own death in 2019. In 1952, Soutine was chosen to represent France at the Venice Biennale and 20 years later was the subject of major retrospectives in Paris, New York and Tokyo.

Kossoff, when shown at the Venice Biennale in 1995, was declared irrelevant by one newspaper critic. A year later he had a successful retrospective at the Tate, but had to wait another 20 years to be publicly recognised as the equal of Auerbach, Bacon and Freud. All were hung together at a 2018 show that saw them lauded by the Guardian as "the true heroes of modern British art".

Getting in 40 works by two such major names was an arduous undertaking for a provincial gallery: "Hastings has done well bringing together as many works as they have, especially with so few Soutines in the country," says MacDougall. Key to getting so many loans from abroad were not only MacLean but Rose, an art historian who is well-connected after serving 20 years as director of visual arts at the British Council. "The estate was pleased to support the show and lend some works, and I was also able to help with loans of Soutine because I know some of the owners."

However, it was no easy task, she adds, not least because many are in the hands of oligarchs: "Kantor Vyacheslav, a big supporter of Jewish art, owns several, which are all in Switzerland, but as he has been sanctioned, none of his works can be borrowed." In a rare 2007 audience at the National Gallery, where he showed his work 70 years after first being

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inspired there as a schoolboy, Kossoff told Channel 4's Jon Snow he still needed courage to lift a stick of charcoal "because I'm not a natural draughtsman... but if you love a picture you can learn to draw from it". But that was never the end of the learning process for him. "However long you do it, it's always starting again — for me every day is a new beginning." He didn't even feel comfortable in his own studio while he was working. "The subject is always demanding more of you."



Leon Kossoff's Children's Swimming Pool, Autumn Afternoon, 1971 (Tate)

Modesty kept Kossoff under the radar for far too long, art critic Roberta Smith commented after seeing his 2021 show *Looking at Life with a Loaded Brush* in New York. "He has been unfairly overshadowed by fellow Brits like Francis Bacon and Lucian Freud, thanks in part to their colourful personal lives," she says. "But this may pass," she adds of the man she calls "among the most accomplished painters of the late 20th and early 21st century."

*Soutine/Kossoff runs from April 1 to September 24 at Hastings Contemporary.*