

Ben Uri: Hidden and Homeless

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The taxi drives me down Abbey Road, St John's Wood, London, turns left into Boundary Road and stops in front of a converted fruit shop. It is redolent with symbolism: Abbey Road is the home of the world's most famous recording studios, and thus a major voice of world communication; Boundary Road suggests an edge beyond which exists liminal space; and the painfully small converted fruit shop, currently the temporary home of the Ben Uri Gallery (the London Jewish Museum of Art), is a place of retail trade trying to shape itself into an art gallery. It seems appropriate that the name of the current exhibition is 'Hidden and Homeless'.

The Ben Uri Gallery was founded in 1915 in Whitechapel in London's East End by charismatic Russian-French Jewish artist, Lazar Berson. Berson was part of the Arts and Crafts movement in Paris and, finding himself in London during the First World War, immediately recognised the thrust of talent flooding into Britain in the form of immigrant Jewish European artists.

The name Ben Uri celebrates Bezalel Ben Uri, who built the Ark for the Ten Commandments in the Temple of Solomon, and is also elegantly connected with the formation of the Bezalel School of Arts and Crafts in Jerusalem, Israel's leading academy of art and design (est. 1906). So when Berson persuaded the artisans of the Jewish community to support these immigrant artists, he named it, evocatively, the Ben Uri Art Society. Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe all looked different, sounded different, talked differently, and if they painted at all, they painted differently to the British tradition.

Whilst the elders of the Jewish community preferred to maintain their distance from the bohemian artists, they were happy to funnel money and contacts through the Jewish Education Aid Society, which worked with Ben Uri, helping these artists get a break. It is said that Sir William Rothenstein, a great artist and teacher, detached himself from this immigrant community but was instrumental in helping a number of them gain entry into the Slade School of Fine Art. One can understand that someone in his position would not want artists filling his studio,

where his clientele of landed gentry came to have their portraits painted, and there were similar considerations with other prominent people. This arms-length support enabled the Jewish Education Aid Society to be a conduit for the elders of the Jewish community and the Ben Uri to help these artists. Hence Ben Uri developed close relationships with a number of artists who had a reputation but were not yet commercially successful, such as David Bomberg (*Ghetto Theatre*, 1920) whose work, and that of others like him, now fetches high prices.

So the task of Ben Uri was, first, to build a collection of art by Jewish artists, called 'Jewish art' at that time, and secondly, to help these artists. It was, ironically, a building collection without a building. Nevertheless, it was the intersection of British visual culture with Eastern European Jewish artist immigrants or Anglo-Jewish artists that produced a mutual flowering. This was evident in the Pre-Raphaelites, of whom Simeon Solomon (1840–1905) was hailed by Burne-Jones as 'the greatest artist of us all', and in the London Group, an artists' exhibiting society established to challenge the domination of the Royal Academy (which had become unadventurous and conservative) and of which Bomberg (1890–1957) was a founder member. This engagement is also seen in the works of 'the Whitechapel Boys' – Isaac Rosenberg, Joseph Leftwich, Stephen Winsten, John Rodker, and later Mark Gertler and David Bomberg – named as such since, coming mainly from overcrowded and deprived homes, they met in Whitechapel's Public Library and Art Gallery, which also gave them further education. 'We were the slum children, the problem youth, the beneficiaries of the Board of Guardians and the soup kitchen, and some of us (like Rosenberg and Bomberg) of the Jewish Educational Aid Society', wrote Leftwich (quoted in Jean Moorcroft Wilson's *Selected Poems and Letters*, Enitharmon Press, 2003), who later became a writer.

The Second World War brought more immigration and a completely different immigrant group: one where there was little distinction between a German Jew, a

Czechoslovakian Jew, a Polish Jew or a British citizen. Their style of dress was the same and an educated European often spoke English. These were immigrants used to a cultural existence. They quickly became a dominant force and ran Ben Uri as an 'interested community' with considerable zest, vitality and new direction. It became the cornerstone of the cultural element of the London Jewish community, with an orchestra, theatre group and poetry readings. With such a different focus, however, from about 1955 the quality of work in the collection suffered.

By the 1970s, Jews from commerce began to be recognised in the UK honours lists as knights and lords of the realm, which broke cultural barriers. It did not take long for the great doyens of the Jewish community, themselves chairmen of various boards in that community, to be invited to become the trustees of the National Gallery or the Tate or the Royal Opera House, a much more attractive proposition, particularly for those Jews interested in being accepted. They abdicated their Jewish cultural posts, leaving Ben Uri and many Jewish organisations the losers, unable to find people of equivalent quality.

By the 1980s, if a Jewish artist in the UK displayed any talent, plenty of dealers would take them on. Conversely, if the artist did not live up to his or her potential, then it did not matter whether they were Jewish or not, no dealer would take on a commercially unviable proposition. Ben Uri, however, continued to support Jewish artists long after the goalposts had been moved. Finally, as support dwindled, it simply ran out of steam. Then, in 1995, the gallery in Soho, situated on the fourth floor of a synagogue building in Dean Street, closed when the community moved on to other areas. The paintings were stockpiled in a museum store in south-east London and the administrative side moved offices several times.

In the late 1990s, more commercially minded people took an interest in Ben Uri. Whilst there are 1000 works in the collection, it is estimated that perhaps only about 700 are museum quality. Yet what makes the collection unique is that it is a reflection of an immigrant community

and its inclusion into a 'parent' community. 'The large mosaic of the British national cultural fabric absorbed these Jewish artists and the Jewish artists added something to the torso and benefited as a result,' observes David Glasser, Chairman of Ben Uri since 2001. 'It's the only collection of its kind in the world and having it in storage was unacceptable'.

Despite Ben Uri's liabilities – 'no money, no following, no reputation and no real strategy for the future', laughs Glasser – the incoming Board created a new strategy based on its three strengths. First, in 1994 it became a registered museum, a category that could not be bought and that would allow access to public funds; secondly it had a huge, important collection that was not available at auction; and thirdly, it had history and heritage, not just in the Jewish community but in early twentieth-century British art history (see, for example, Lisa Tickner's *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, YUP, 2000). So what is Ben Uri's role now? 'Although we're not big enough, bold enough or great enough to be Tate Jewish,' Glasser continues, 'we try and match the standards of Tate Jewish. We know the collection doesn't compare because there's a different benchmark, but we can play other roles'.

Ben Uri began life helping a Jewish immigrant group who had also been welcomed and helped by the British social fabric in the first decades of the twentieth century. The major challenge for Europe as that century was closing was how to deal with new immigrant groups, whether political or economic migrants. Thus, reasoned the new Board, the Jewish experience in the visual arts could work as a role model for other community groups.

In January 2001 Ben Uri rebranded itself and launched with an exhibition called 'The Ben Uri Story: From Art Society to Museum'. The Board dropped the term 'art society' because the Ben Uri no longer focused on supporting contemporary Jewish artists, and it was no longer run by artists for artists. The criteria for an artist to hold an exhibition there were changed, applying the same standard as any other

museum: the artist has to be outstanding; the exhibition has to be superbly curated; it has to have a great catalogue; and additional stories have to be communicated over and above the art work.

Stepping back from the tribalism of being in the 'Jewish' business and focusing more on the 'art' business meant that Ben Uri was now a place for artists of Jewish descent who might not be practising Jews. 'Art is a profession,' continues Glasser:

it's a practice, it's a passion, it's a lifelong commitment. Jewishness only extends from the mother, so these artists are only Jewish as a result of the fact they happen to be the child of their mother who was Jewish, so it's accident rather than design. It's the same with Jewish art. We don't feel that we are in a position to rewrite art history. As well, of the many great textbooks on Cubism, Impressionism, Fauvism, Futurism, and so on I've not seen any on Jewishism.

So Ben Uri stopped directing its energies to the Jewish community alone. 'Why do we want to talk to ourselves?' says Glasser:

The artists didn't. If our model is to use the Jewish experience of the visual arts as a model for other new immigrant groups, we have to talk to them. Even more importantly, we have to be in their community, so there is no point in being in north-west London.

The converted fruit shop was only leased as a space in which Ben Uri could test the water, to see if what it was doing would work. That it does is now obvious. Ben Uri was recognised as best museum in the region in 2005, and in 2006 won the National Sandford Heritage Education Award and the Visit London Visitor Experience Award. Whatever the restrictions of the museum's space, it regularly has 400 people at exhibition openings. Now it is looking for a building with 20,000 square feet, in South Bank, King's



David Bomberg, *At the Window* (Signed and dated 1919). Ben Uri Gallery, The London Jewish Museum of Art.

Cross or Whitechapel. What is needed is more than the space to exhibit great pictures: it is space for permanent exhibitions, blockbusters, local community exhibitions and experimental art, as well as a library and an artists' studio space. Space is needed in which the voices of those who came to the UK, in poverty, frightened, physically different and with empty bellies filled only with the desire to communicate through pigment and passion, can finally be heard. It is having the space where these artists no longer have to inhabit the 'boundary' country of nomadic existence, nor huddle in the confines of converted shops, but connect with the wider community from a permanent home, no longer homeless and hidden but accessible and visible, the building collection finally with its own building.

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