The ‘Heads of the People’ in the ‘Graphic’ (1875–83): further influences and legacies

As is well known, Vincent van Gogh greatly admired ‘Heads of the People’, a series of wood engravings of social types by Hubert Herkomer and other artists published over eight years in the Graphic. The visual sources of the series have been less studied, and the possible influence of the engravings on a generation of British painters has largely been overlooked.

by SAMUEL SHAW

Vincent van Gogh’s enthusiasm for English illustrated magazines, especially the early issues of the Graphic and the Illustrated London News, has been well documented in recent years.¹ Although the young Dutch artist’s appreciation for English artists was wide – encompassing, for example, John Everett Millais, Luke Fildes and Frank Holl – it was the Anglo-German artist Hubert Herkomer (1849–1914) who consistently rose above the rest in his estimation.² When he lived in London, from 1873 to 1876, Van Gogh used to visit the printing offices of the Graphic on a weekly basis to catch a glimpse of the latest illustrations of works by Herkomer and often dreamed of meeting or even working alongside him.³ Herkomer, for Van Gogh, ranked alongside Jean-François Millet as one of the great visionary artists of the nineteenth-century, artists to whom he was never afraid to pay


homage in his own work. Above all, he seems to have admired the earnest vision of society contained in their art. ‘What I value in Herkomer, in Fildes, in Holl and the other founders of The Graphic’, he wrote in 1882, ‘why I find and will continue to find them even more sympathetic than Gavarni and Daumier, is that, while the latter seem to view society more with mockery, the former, like such men as Millet, Breton, Degroux and Israëls, choose subjects which [...] have something noble and in which there’s a more serious sentiment’.

In 1883 Vincent boasted to his brother Theo that he had ‘almost’ the complete set of the Graphic since its founding in 1869. He also wrote of decorating his studio with some of the wood engravings that had first appeared in the magazine, including subjects by ‘Herkomer, Frank Holl, [Frederick] Walker, and others’. Tracking down, arranging and mounting his images from the Graphic became a priority for the artist. While admitting that the aesthetic quality of the images appearing in the magazine was inconsistent (he may have also been reluctant to admire those engravings that represented the higher echelons of society), Van Gogh was so impressed by the achievements of the magazine that he seriously considered setting up his own version.

A series of wood engravings that seems to have especially held his attention were the so-called ‘Heads of the People: Drawn from Life’: a set of full-page representations of anonymous figures that were published, rather irregularly, in the Graphic between 1875 and 1885. Although Van Gogh’s enthusiasm for this series has been analysed in some detail, the background of the Graphic’s

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5 Letters 278, letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 1st November 1882.
6 Letters 331, letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 21st March 1883.
7 Letters 199, letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 8th or 9th January 1882.
8 For instance, in Letters 331, letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 21st March 1883, Van Gogh notes that there is ‘too much lumber’ and a ‘mass of insignificant things’ in the Graphic, despite the many ‘beauties’. For more on Van Gogh’s collection of English magazine images see Pickvance, op. cit. (note 1), p.38; and Alessi, op. cit. (note 2).
‘Heads of the People’ has been only lightly sketched to date. No attention, for instance, has been given to an important precedent for the series: Kenny Meadows’s *Heads of the People*, a two-volume book published in the early 1840s. Likewise, examination of the legacy of the *Graphic*’s ‘Heads of the People’ has not been extended beyond Van Gogh. The present article offers some thoughts on both issues, placing this distinctive series of engravings in a context wider than that of Van Gogh’s admittedly significant appreciation, drawing in artists such as Walter Sickert and William Rothenstein, and suggesting paths for further research.

As noted in the catalogue to the exhibition *Van Gogh in Britain*, held at Tate Britain, London, in 2019, Van Gogh owned at least six of the *Graphic*’s ‘Heads’, which are now in the Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam. The catalogue is incorrect, however, in stating that the full series consisted of seven portraits. As noted in an earlier text, there were in fact ten illustrations in the series, after five separate artists, which appeared in the *Graphic* in the following order (* denotes a reproduction owned by Van Gogh):

1. *The British rough*, by William Small, 26th June 1875 *
2. *The agricultural labourer – Sunday*, by Hubert Herkomer, 9th October 1875 *
3. *At Court*, by William Small, 23rd October 1875 *
4. *The brewer’s drayman*, by Hubert Herkomer, 20th November 1875
5. *The barrister*, by William Small, 11th December 1875 *
6. *The miner*, by M.W. Ridley, 15th April 1876 *
7. *Her first engagement*, by Arthur Hopkins, 11th November 1876

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10 Alessi also states that there were seven illustrations, listing Hopkins’s *Cornish fisher-lad* as a ‘later addition’: Alessi, *op. cit.* (note 1) p.164 
11 L. MacCormick Edwards: *Herkomer: A Victorian Artist*, Aldershot 1999, pp.34–35. Edwards suggests that the ten illustrations appeared between 1875 and 1879; however, the tenth appeared in 1883. [small cut]
8. The coastguardsman, by Hubert Herkomer, 20th September 1879

9. The fireman, by Charles Green, 10th January 1880

10. A Cornish fisher-lad, by Arthur Hopkins, 23rd June 1883

Each image took up a full page in the newspaper and was supplemented with a short uncredited text, presumably written by the editor or a staff writer. This text, usually a single paragraph, appeared under the separate ‘Our Illustrations’ section of the paper. Although there are likely to have been technical reasons for this, since the letterpress would have been printed separately from the woodblock illustrations, this suited the Graphic’s wider intention to showcase high-quality wood engravings by allowing image to take precedent over text. As Andrea Korda has noted, the Graphic’s founder William Luson Thomas ‘encouraged his draughtsman to choose their own subjects’ and, in effect, ‘gave them the privilege of choosing what constituted the weekly news’. The Illustrated London News (the Graphic’s main rival) started with the stories, and commissioned illustrations to fit the story. The Graphic, where possible, tried to work backwards from the images. The ‘Our Illustrations’ section exemplifies this: the reader would likely encounter this section after viewing the images, and the texts therein read like afterthoughts.

In 1883 the ‘Heads’ series was replaced by a less socially-worthy set of engravings under the title ‘Types of Beauty’. However, as the list above suggests, ‘Heads’ had evidently run its course by this time. The first five images in the set, produced by two of the Graphic’s best loved artists,


13 The fireman, the penultimate image in the series, was accompanied by a poem, ‘The Brave Fireman’ by Arthur Locker. The poem was not written especially for the occasion, but reprinted from an earlier issue of the Graphic.

14 This replacement did not please Van Gogh, who noted ‘some people will not admire the Types of Beauty, and will think back with melancholy to the old Heads of the people (a series which has been terminated)’, Letters 293, letter from Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, around 11th December 1882. There is no evidence that ‘Types of Beauty’ (beauty in this case being an entirely feminine virtue) was either long-running or popular.
Herkomer and Small, all appeared in the second half of 1875. The second five, by four different artists, appeared much more haphazardly, with three years separating the final two. This suggests that the impetus for the series, which may have come from Herkomer and Small, was lost after initial enthusiasm, or that someone higher up (the Graphic’s founder W.L. Thomas, perhaps, or the editor, H. Sutherland Lewis) had lost faith in the enterprise. In so far as the series sought to create a profile of English society, encompassing the ‘people’ of the title, it must be counted as something of a failure, the subjects of the ten images representing as they do a slightly bizarre cross-section of society, mostly – but not entirely – focused on the working classes. The number of artists involved also ensured that the images do not necessarily look like a set. The images are all half-length portraits, and appear, in their attention to detail, to be based on specific individuals (although the woman in Her first engagement is notably idealised and all the images draw on contemporary stereotypes of the people they depict). The artists’ approach to background also varied. In most cases, it is left plain: a decision that concentrates the viewer’s attention on the figure and helps create the so-called ‘embodied’ effect that Andrea Korda has associated with the Graphic in its early days. This is especially effective in Herkomer’s The brewer’s drayman (Fig.1), where the top half of the drayman’s body fills the frame, his horse-whip cut off at the top of the image and the reins extending towards the viewer. The man faces outwards, but seems unaware of, or perhaps uninterested in, our presence. There is an intensity to this encounter: the veins of the driver’s right hand are clearly visible, and the background provides no geographical context. In a later offering, The coastguardsman, however, Herkomer rather surprisingly included a roughly-drawn coastal landscape behind his figure. This leads the eye of the viewer beyond the man, diluting the impact of the portrait.

Small began the series with The British rough (Fig.2), a striking image containing a background that hints at a wider narrative context for his central figure. The British rough and

Small’s *At Court* are the only contributions to feature more than one figure, present in the form of disembodied hands: those of a policeman, presumably, in *The British rough*, grasping the shoulders of the protagonist; and that of an anonymous aristocrat receiving a dutiful kiss in *At Court*. *The British rough* offers further context in its inclusion of reward posters behind the man’s head, hinting at a narrative in a manner reminiscent of Victorian ‘problem pictures’ (is this the man to whom the poster alludes or not? The accompanying text picks up on this mystery, suggesting but not confirming that it is not.) In his third image, *The barrister*, Small would leave more to the viewer’s imagination. The pages of notes that the barrister holds, unlike the headlines in the poster behind the rough, are not legible.

Within each artist’s contributions, then, there are differences in approach. There are also notable disparities between the five artists involved. Small’s portraits, for instance, are all views from the side or the back. Herkomer’s portraits, meanwhile, are viewed from the front. The two images by Arthur Hopkins, *Her first engagement* and *A Cornish fisher-lad* (Fig.3), most resemble traditional portraiture, with the sitter’s holding the viewer’s gaze. Charles Green and M.W. Ridley’s images, the former especially, are more in the line of ‘action shots’, with Green’s fireman bearing a passing resemblance to the one depicted in John Everett Millais’s dramatic canvas *The rescue* (1855; National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne).16

Laying aside these differences, ‘Heads of the People’ remains an engaging and, in the context of nineteenth-century magazine culture, a unique group of images. Bearing in mind Van Gogh’s passion for the series and the clear artistic quality of many of the engravings, it is perhaps surprising that only ten were produced. The wood engravings after Herkomer and Small were widely admired and Herkomer’s early-career commitment to images of social deprivation established his place in the narrative of realism in late nineteenth-century Britain. ‘Heads of the People’ could be also seen as

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central to the Graphic’s identity as a magazine that, encouraged by the popularity of Luke Fildes’s engraving Houseless and hungry (which appeared in the first issue, 4th December 1869), sought to foreground social realist subject-matter.\textsuperscript{17} Launched as an alternative to the Illustrated London News, the Graphic was committed to using high-quality images from the outset and recognised the agency and creativity of its artists.\textsuperscript{18} Although it remained a ‘news’ paper in the true sense of the word, carrying stories from across the British Empire, with an emphasis on contemporality and on attention-grabbing subject-matter, ‘Heads’ reminds us of the paper’s underlying artistic ambitions, that which Vincent Alessi has referred to as the newspaper’s ‘overall air of artistic superiority’.\textsuperscript{19} Van Gogh recognised that these engravings were part of a wider European tradition and was quick to link Herkomer to artists such as Millet and Josef Israëls. These are important connections and remind us that narratives of the development of modern art in Europe have not tended to give enough space to illustrated newspapers. This article proposes two further artistic contexts in which we might view the Graphic’s ‘Heads’ series: that of British print culture in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries; and early twentieth-century British painting.

The Graphic’s ‘Heads’ series sought, and was recognised as doing, something new. Full-page, half-length portraits of largely working-class individuals – even if these individuals were never named – were not commonly seen at the time. Images of this size and detail were probably unprecedented in terms of newspaper illustrations. Yet they also belong to a long tradition of representing working-class culture in Britain that can be traced back to the so-called ‘Cries of London’ or ‘London Cries’, images that first appeared in the seventeenth century, and which were

\textsuperscript{17} As noted by Julian Treuherz, it didn’t always succeed in doing this, and may have been as popular for its images of ‘fancy balls, new town halls, royal visits and portraits of famous people’. J. Treuherz: Hard Times: Social Realism in Victorian Art, London 1987, p.54. The Graphic is also notable for the coverage it gave of international affairs, clearly reflecting Britain’s imperial interests and, in some cases, anxieties.

\textsuperscript{18} See Korda, op. cit. (note 12), for more on the differences and similarities between the two papers.

\textsuperscript{19} Alessi, op. cit. (note 1), p.17.
imitated and developed by artists including Marcellus Laroon (1653–1702), Paul Sandby (1731–1809) and William Marshall Craig (d.1827). These popular graphic images focused on working-class individuals found on the streets of London. Although many of the images may have been based on actual figures encountered, they also represented types. The mackerel seller might look like a specific woman, but she also stood in – like the figures appearing in ‘Heads of the People’ – for all mackerel sellers. The tradition of ‘Cries’ simultaneously made visible figures that were not always visible in print culture, but maintained control over the way such figures were represented. Although some may have qualified as showing the ‘serious sentiment’ that Van Gogh admired in Herkomer, the mockery of the caricaturist was often present.

The tradition of the ‘Cries of London’ was ripe for expansion in the nineteenth century and the task was duly taken up by the Punch illustrator Kenny Meadows (1790–1874), who published two volumes of portraits of social types in 1840 and 1841, taking in the whole country, and giving his project the overall title Heads of the People: or, Portraits of the English. This book was much more than just an artistic project. Meadows’s illustrations (all half-length engravings by John Orrin Smith after drawings by Meadows) were accompanied not only with brief quotations from such authorities as Shakespeare and Milton, but also with texts extracted from contemporary writers such as Douglas Jerrold, William Makepeace Thackeray and Leigh Hunt. More than eighty characters were represented across the two volumes, from ‘The old housekeeper’ and ‘The factory child’ to ‘The Radical M.P’ and ‘The bricklayer’s labourer’. Most of the figures represented are categorised by their social role, but a few are identified according to personality traits – ‘The common informer’ or ‘The lion’ of a party’, for example – or even personal circumstances – ‘The debtor’, ‘The debutante’, ‘The dowager’.

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Meadows’s project was exceptional in its ambition even by comparison with the much better known *London Labour and the London Poor* by Charles Mayhew, first published in periodical form in 1850–52, which illustrated its interviews with engravings (mostly based on daguerreotypes) of street ‘types’ as well as named portraits.\(^{22}\) There can be little doubt that Meadows’s *Heads of the People* served as inspiration for the *Graphic’s* series. That said, there are important distinctions to be made. First is the fact that Meadows’s book was as much a literary as it was an artistic project. The relationship between text and image in Meadows’s books was very different than that of text and image in the *Graphic*. Meadows’s texts are by well-known writers and each stretches to about ten pages. This was a book with illustrations, as opposed to illustrations with accompanying text.

Second, and not unrelated, is the fact that, although social woes are frequently highlighted in Meadows’s book, and sympathy regularly invoked, we are constantly reminded that Meadows was primarily a humourist. More often than not the drawings are grotesques or overly idealised. For instance, the opening image of the first volume – *The dress-maker* (Fig.4) – is accompanied by text by Jerrold that reads ‘Is there a more helpless, a more forlorn and unprotected creature than, in nine cases out of ten, the Dress-Maker’s Girl’?\(^{23}\) The image itself hints at desperation, but still feels like a caricature. Other figures are clearly comic, and satire is the keynote in a book that is clearly intended to entertain as well as to elicit compassion.

Despite the broad range of figures selected for it, Meadows’s ‘Heads of the People’ do not include many of the occupations that appeared in the *Graphic’s* series: neither miner, fireman, coastguardsman nor brewer’s drayman feature. In terms of subject matter direct comparisons can be drawn, nonetheless, between some of Meadows’s drawings and those of the *Graphic’s* artists: for example, between Meadows’s *The debutante* and Small’s *At Court*, and between Meadows’s *The English peasant* and Herkomer’s *The Agricultural Labourer*. Less direct, but similarly instructive

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\(^{22}\) *London Labour and the London Poor* was published in book form in four volumes in 1861–62.

comparisons can be drawn between Meadows’s *The British sailor* and Hopkins’ *A Cornish fisher-lad* and between Meadows’s *The English pauper* (Fig. 5) and Small’s *The British rough*. These comparisons all remind us of the distinctive approaches of the two projects.

The clearest difference lies in the sense that most of the images taken from the *Graphic* seem to represent individuals, albeit un-named individuals. They are tangible in a way that Meadows’s portraits never are. Although Meadows’s ‘pauper’ gazes out at the viewer, his ill-fitting clothes and sad smile strike a slightly comic note. As in all of Meadows’s drawings, the economy of line corresponds to a lack of depth in drawing out character. In Small’s *The British rough*, on the other hand, close attention seems to have been given to every vein on the man’s hands and face, to every hair on his balding head. These details are carefully reproduced, but without exaggeration. As with Small’s *At Court*, we seem to be within touching distance of the sitter: too close, perhaps, to afford ourselves a laugh at their expense. We are also afforded no immediate distractions. In Meadows’s illustrations the reader jumps naturally from the title to the image to the quotation below – and later to the accompanying text. The image is informed and modified by the surrounding texts. In the *Graphic*, however, there is only a title and the image has much greater power as a result. In this sense, the title – ‘The Heads of the People’ – feels more appropriate. In the *Graphic* it seems that a line of communication is being sought solely through the heads depicted.

The *Graphic* was not the first to reuse Meadows’s title. In 1847 the Sydney-based artist William Baker launched a journal called *Heads of the People*, which achieved a run of fifty issues and took as its subject ‘distinguished’ figures in colonial Australia. The ‘people’ in this instance, however, were specific individuals, whose heads were very much in the public eye. The *Graphic* understood the title in the same way as Meadows, but arguably took it a step further. It offered portraits of working-class people, but afforded them (in the images at least, the texts tending to be)

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the ‘dignity’ usually reserved for the dignified. This is not only what drew Van Gogh – with his interest in ‘serious sentiment’ – to the series, but is also what inspired him to make his own series of portraits of working-class figures from 1882 onwards.\textsuperscript{26} These culminated, arguably, in his well-known portraits of the postman Joseph Roulin, who Van Gogh met in Arles in 1888. Alessi notes, among other similarities, the ‘striking resemblance’ between Roulin and the drayman in Herkomer’s \textit{The brewer’s drayman}.\textsuperscript{27} The heavily bearded old man in his hat and working clothes sitting across from the viewer, who is met with a steady gaze, is present in both images. Van Gogh also makes use of Herkomer’s flat background to ensure that our attention is not overly distracted from the figure. What Van Gogh added, of course, was colour – and, in the title of the painting, the name of the actual individual depicted. He also returned to the figure repeatedly, as if to suggest that one portrait would never be enough.\textsuperscript{28}

It seems unlikely that Van Gogh was the only artist to have drawn such direct inspiration from the \textit{Graphic}’s ‘Heads’. There is, however, little evidence that any other prominent artists held this series in such great esteem, even in Britain, where Herkomer in particular was a well-known and largely respected figure. This could be read as an indication that drawing inspiration from illustrated newspapers was not a common practice; however, it is perhaps more likely that the reputation of the ‘Heads’ series was damaged by the circumstances of its publication. Meadows’s images were published together in two volumes whereas the \textit{Graphic}’s ‘Heads’ appeared individually across a period of eight years. Even Van Gogh failed to collect the full series of the prints. It may also be argued that, for the generation of artists emerging in the last two decades of the nineteenth century,

\textsuperscript{26} Alessi, \textit{op. cit.} (note 1), p.167.
\textsuperscript{27} Alessi, \textit{op. cit.} (note 1), p.180.
Herkomer’s earlier print work was overlooked on account of his later success as a portraitist. The Graphic’s decline in quality after its early years may also have discouraged later artists from perusing earlier editions.

What must not be overlooked, however, is that artists of this later generation were very much open to the influence of nineteenth-century newspaper prints. As Ysanne Holt has explored, the ‘types’ of the London Cries and of Mayhew’s London Labour and the London Poor had an afterlife in late nineteenth-century print culture, most notably in William Nicholson’s striking ‘London Types’ woodcuts of 1898.29 Nicholson had briefly studied with Herkomer, but according to the art historian John Rothenstein, ‘realized he was learning nothing – nothing, at least, from Herkomer’.30 His ‘London Types’, despite the clear debt they owe to William Hogarth, suggest otherwise.

However, it wasn’t only printmakers that were drawn to print culture. For example, while Walter Sickert’s debt to avant-garde artists such as Edgar Degas and James McNeill Whistler has been well documented, his fondness for the work of the Punch illustrator Charles Keene is less celebrated. Sickert’s writings, make clear, however, that he perceived such artists as Keene and Honoré Daumier as giants of nineteenth-century art, and that newspaper prints were a subject of great interest to him.31 Newspapers and journals often formed a late-Victorian artist’s first exposure to art. In his memoirs the artist William Rothenstein wrote of how, as a child, he and his siblings ‘all painted, sitting round the table, colouring pages of The Illustrated London News’.32 Rothenstein later considered enrolling in the Bushey School of Art, founded by Herkomer in 1883, attracted by their

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31 See, for example, A. Gruetzner Robins, ed.: Walter Sickert: the Complete Writings on Art, Oxford 2000, pp.70, 109 and 509.
shared German heritage and also, perhaps, by Herkomer’s links to the illustrated newspapers and the British realist tradition.\textsuperscript{33}

Rothenstein’s admiration for Herkomer did not last – when they met in the later 1890s, they did not get on, and Rothenstein had little enthusiasm for Herkomer’s portraiture.\textsuperscript{34} As William Nicholson had discovered, Herkomer was not fond of those who worked in a Whistlerian style, as both Nicholson and Rothenstein did.\textsuperscript{35} Sickert, likewise, found Herkomer a frustrating figure, and publicly attacked him in the early 1890s for selling mechanically reproduced drawings as original etchings.\textsuperscript{36} Now a professor, and elected to the Royal Academy in 1890, Herkomer had evidently lost some of the qualities that had once attracted Van Gogh. But what of the Graphic’s ‘Heads’?

Although it is not known whether other artists collected them or responded directly to their challenge, we can nonetheless point to a series of paintings produced by a variety of artists that appear very much to be part of the same tradition.

For instance, James Guthrie’s portrait \textit{Old Willie, village worthy} (Fig.6) also presents a working-class figure sitting in front of a plain background, partially named in this case, looking back at the viewer. The expression on the face of the elderly sitter recalls, again, \textit{The brewer’s drayman}, or \textit{The agricultural labourer}. Guthrie, like Van Gogh, was greatly influenced by the rural naturalism of Millet as well as the more recent example of Jules Bastien-Lepage. His painting \textit{The wash} (1882; Tate) would have attracted Van Gogh’s attention had he seen it. However, while Guthrie’s enthusiasm for French art is well known, it seems likely that he was also responding to English graphic artists such as Herkomer and Small, whose printed work would have been much more accessible than paintings by Millet.

\textsuperscript{33} Rothenstein entered the Slade instead, see \textit{ibid.}, p.17.
\textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p.276.
\textsuperscript{35} Rothenstein, \textit{op cit} (note 30), p.115
Sickert shared Guthrie’s admiration for Millet, and it may have been through Millet (rather than the *Graphic*) that he developed an interest in portraits of the working classes. Ever wary of fashion, Sickert was keen to translate Millet’s vision into a more personal idiom, writing in 1889 that ‘it is a carefully-fostered delusion that a French peasant is in any sense a nobler or a fitter theme for art than an English peasant, or a dweller in the country than a dweller in the heart of the city’. A year later he added that ‘if Millet had been born a modern cockney, he would have found sublime themes in Upper Street, or Piccadilly’. This was, in a sense, a statement of intent: Sickert was, after all, largely an artist of urban subjects, who would indeed go on to find ‘sublime themes’ in the heart of the metropolis. He confirmed this 1910, when he wrote that ‘Camden Town has been my Barbizon’.

It was in Venice, however, that Sickert produced some of his finest and strangest studies of working-class figures, many of which echo the *Graphic’s* ‘Heads’. Between 1901 and 1901 he repeatedly returned to a small group of figures, posed in dingy interiors. They are hard to classify as images, falling somewhere between the genre tradition, and that of portraiture, a quality they share with the *Graphic’s* ‘Heads’, which they frequently echo. Like Herkomer and Small, Sickert found his subjects on the street. They were mostly prostitutes, but he also painted a grocer, *Signor de Rossi* (1901; Hastings Museum and Art Gallery) and, most notably, an old lady whom he christened ‘Mamma Mia Poveretta’, who appeared in at least three paintings between 1903 and 1904. One of

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37 ‘No one has been more imitated than Millet, and no one is more inimitable’, Sickert once wrote in an article, for which, see Gruetzner Robins, *op. cit.* (note 31) p.86.
41 In a previous essay by the present author these studies are referred to as ‘quasi-portraits’, see S. Shaw: “‘Characters in search of an author’: the single-figure study and the Pritzker collection”, in I. Collins, *et al.: Modernism and Memory: Rhoda Pritzker and the Art of Collecting*, London and New Haven 2016, pp.93–121.
42 W. Baron: *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, p.288, cat. Nos 205, 205.1 and 205.2
these (Fig.7), with its relatively plain background, use of dark outlines and respectful attitude to its subject, clearly belongs in the company of the ‘Heads’. It also provided the foundations for later improvisations on this subject by some of Sickert’s acolytes, most obviously Harold Gilman’s quasi-portraits of his landlady Mrs Mounter, produced between 1916 and 1917, as, for example, *Mrs Mounter at the breakfast table* (1916–17; Tate). Here the chain of influence gets complicated, for Gilman may have been thinking as much of Van Gogh, who was thinking of Herkomer and Millet, as he was of Sickert, who was probably thinking of Millet more than he was of Herkomer. What brings all the artists together, however, was the desire to make a sympathetic, and serious, portrait of a working-class figure.

The final artist this article will consider is William Rothenstein (1872–1945), whose own enthusiasm for Millet and late nineteenth-century realism would eventually lead him down a similar path to that of Van Gogh. In the mid-1890s Rothenstein, like Nicholson after him, was briefly attracted to images of the London poor, exhibiting a full-length portrait of two coster girls at the New English Art Club in the winter of 1894.\(^{43}\) Shortly before the outbreak of the First World War, however, Rothenstein embarked upon a series of paintings that represented his own ‘Heads of the People’, depicting figures from the village of Far Oakridge in Gloucestershire, where he had recently bought property. If Camden Town was Sickert’s Barbizon, then Far Oakridge was certainly Rothenstein’s. Having spent several decades drawing portraits of the great and good, Rothenstein was now determined to focus his attention on less familiar names. Three of the paintings from the series are now in public ownership: *The old priest* (c.1914; Bradford Museums and Art Galleries); *The old gardener* (c.1914; Bradford Museums and Art Galleries); and *Eli the thatcher* (Fig.8). *Miss Grant* (Cartwright Hall Gallery, Bradford) may also form part of the series.\(^{44}\)

\(^{43}\) For further discussion of this painting see Holt, *op cit* (note 29) 34-36. For more on this and other works by Rothenstein see also S. MacDougall, ed. *William Rothenstein and his Circle*, London, 2016.

\(^{44}\) Also related, but very different in approach, is the group portrait *Oakridge Craftsmen* (c.1915) in The Wilson, Cheltenham, inv. no.1957.7.
The most dramatic of these is *Eli the thatcher*, which (despite Rothenstein’s hesitation over Van Gogh’s significance) is strongly reminiscent of the Dutch artist’s portraits of Roulin, as well as of the *Graphic*’s ‘Heads’. The backdrop is not absolutely flat or featureless: some trees and buildings are just visible below the blue sky. However, the composition and demeanour of the figure again recall Herkomer’s *Brewer’s drayman*. Like Van Gogh, Rothenstein seems in his style of painting to be invoking the strong outlines and expressive swirls of Herkomer’s engraving. The paint has been applied thickly, especially over the face, and the jacket in particular is subtly coloured.

The black line visible along the inside edge of the thatcher’s jacket, however, feels like a memory of Herkomer’s monochromatic image, brought to life again almost forty years later. Like the ‘Heads’ series, Rothenstein’s painting is difficult to categorise. It is a dignified portrait of an individual, that nonetheless struggles to escape the origins of the tradition in which it deserves to be placed. The spectre of the ‘type’ remains, both in the title of the painting (Eli is still identified according to his trade) and in its self-awareness of this tradition – its simultaneous desire to serve as a portrait of a particular person and a homage to other portraits: to other heads, of other people.


6. *Old Willie: The village worthy*, by James Guthrie. 1886. Oil on canvas, 60.8 by 50.8 cm. (Kelvingrove Art Gallery and Museum, Glasgow; Bridgeman Images).

7. *Mamma Mia Poveretta*, by Walter Sickert. c.1904. Oil on canvas, 46 by 38.2 cm. (Manchester Art Gallery; Bridgeman Images).

8. *Eli the thatcher*, by William Rothenstein. 1913. Oil on canvas, 76.5 by 63.3 cm. (Manchester Art Gallery; Bridgeman Images).