

STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



Eric KENNINGTON (London 1888 - Reading 1960)

Portrait Study of a Boy Wearing a Cloth Cap: Study for The Costardmongers

Black chalk and charcoal, with stumping. Laid down.

460 x 303 mm. (18 1/8 x 11 7/8 in.)

This large sheet is a study for the head of a young boy seated at the left of Eric Kennington's first major canvas, *The Costardmongers* of 1914, today in collection of the Musée National d'Art Moderne at the Centre Pompidou in Paris. (The painting, which measures 132 x 122.3 cm., is currently on loan to the Musée d'Art et d'Industrie André Diligent – La Piscine in Roubaix.) The painting depicts costermongers – street sellers of fruit and vegetables working from stands or barrows, also known as costers or costards – in the Walham Green district of Fulham, and was the culmination of a series of paintings of London street life and vendors painted by Kennington in 1912 and 1913. As the Kennington scholar Jonathan Black has opined, 'Kennington...set out to idealize his coster subjects because they were not ordinary working-class people who would have worked in a factory or within some other form of enclosed and strictly regulated environment. By painting them in the manner of the Northern or Italian Renaissance, Kennington has elevated these costers not only to make them worthy of a large canvas but also to locate them within a sort of elegy for a way of life. His costers occupy a niche of open-air working-class independence that seemed to be threatened by developments in modern urban life.'

When it was exhibited at the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers at the Grosvenor Gallery in London in April and May 1914, *The Costardmongers* was praised for its sympathetic treatment of working-class Londoners. As one contemporary critic noted, 'There is strength of purpose,

intensity of characterisation, with an almost pre-Raphaelite finish and downrightness, in Mr. Eric H. Kennington's curiously hard yet, in its own way, very interesting group, "Costermongers". The onlooker, rebelling at first, is in the end won over by the resoluteness and the sincerity of the artist.' Another review of the Grosvenor Gallery exhibition praised the painting as 'an extraordinary clever piece of work, vivid, without a patch of atmosphere, a personal vision...', while yet another noted that 'this larger composition quite establishes Mr. Kennington as one of the best painters who have appeared of late years...His costers are real live people in modern clothes, his accessories real bits of paper and pots and pans and other common objects of the lee-shore of a coster's life - only he has composed them and coloured them as Van Eyck or Ouwater would have done.'

As Jonathan Black has noted elsewhere, 'The Costardmongers was the first work Kennington exhibited which really made the critics sit up and take notice. He was described as a worthy successor to the mantle of Ford Madox Brown and as a draughtsman whose talent rivalled that of the far better known William Strang and William Orpen. Indeed, a number of influential critics identified him as by far the most promising among the younger generation of up and coming British artists.' The sale of The Costardmongers to the portrait painter William Nicholson allowed Kennington to move to a studio on Kensington High Street in London. Two years later, in 1916, the large canvas entered the Musée du Luxembourg in Paris as the gift of Sir Edmund Davis, as part of a group of nearly forty British paintings and drawings from his collection, including works by Edward Burne-Jones, Frederick Cayley Robinson, William Holman Hunt, Augustus John, John Everett Millais, William Orpen, Glyn Philpot, Arthur Rackham, Walter Sickert, William Strang and George Frederic Watts.

A related charcoal full-length study for the figure of the same youth, with a large basket alongside him, is in the Kennington Family Collection, as is a very large charcoal drawing for the woman standing at the centre of the painted composition.

Exhibitions

London, The Maas Gallery, Eric Kennington: An Exhibition of drawings, pastels and watercolours. 1905 to 1930, 1981, no.5.

Literature:

Rosemary Treble, 'London. British Paintings 1837-1930', The Burlington Magazine, June 1981, p.373, illustrated p.375, fig.4; Jonathan Black, The Face of Courage: Eric Kennington, Portraiture and The Second World War, exhibition catalogue, Hendon, 2011-2012, p.14, fig.4.

Artist description:

The son of a portrait and genre painter, Eric Henri Kennington was active as a painter, draughtsman, printmaker and sculptor, and is perhaps best known for his work as an official war artist during both World Wars. He studied at the Lambeth School of Art and at the City and Guilds School, and first came to public notice for his paintings of costermongers in London. With the outbreak of the First World War, Kennington immediately volunteered for duty, and served as a private in the 'Kensingtons'; a battalion of part-time soldiers of the London Regiment. He served in France in the winter of 1914, eventually returning to England and receiving a medical discharge after being shot in the foot and losing a toe. His first significant war painting, The Kensingtons at Laventie: Winter 1914, was exhibited to much acclaim at the Goupil Gallery in the spring and summer of 1916. The painting brought Kennington to the attention of the artist William Rothenstein, who became a close friend and colleague, and who campaigned for him to be appointed an official war artist. As he described the younger artist to one correspondent: 'No-one has so marked a gift as he for drawing and understanding the magnificence of the Tommy.'

On his own, Kennington made a return trip to the Somme in December 1916, and some thirty portrait drawings of British and French soldiers that he made during this journey were eventually shown at the Goupil Gallery in March 1917. Partly as a result of this exhibition, he was appointed an Official War

Artist, and in August 1917 he returned to the Western Front, with a specific brief to make drawings of British infantrymen, or 'tommies'. As a former 'tommy' himself, he was able to produce convincing and realistic depictions of the soldiers he encountered; as the scholar and British Museum curator Campbell Dodgson noted, Kennington was 'a born painter of the nameless heroes of the rank and file.'

Commissioned to produce several drawn portraits during his time in France - as the artist wrote in a letter to an official at the Department of Information in London, 'a portrait draughtsman is welcomed out here, everybody wanting to be drawn from Generals to Privates and, consequently, I am treated magnificently' - he also produced landscapes of the trenches and their shattered surroundings. In December 1917 Rothenstein joined Kennington in France, and the two artists produced a number of portrait drawings of soldiers, which Rothenstein hoped might eventually be published as a book by the Ministry of Information, although the project never came to fruition.

Kennington eventually returned to England after more than seven months on the Western Front, and a selection of the work he had produced was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries in the summer of 1918.

The exhibition, entitled *The British Soldier*, was accompanied by a catalogue with an essay written by the poet Robert Graves. Later that year, however, Kennington resigned his commission as a War Artist, over a disagreement with the price offered by the government to acquire his work for the collection of the recently founded Imperial War Museum. Towards the end of the war Kennington was commissioned by the Canadian War Memorials Scheme to accompany the soldiers of a Canadian infantry unit as it marched into a defeated Germany. Another highly successful exhibition of his war drawings was held at the Alpine Club Gallery in London in 1920.

Soon after his return to London Kennington moved into a new studio, and in the early 1920s began to take up stone carving, mentored by Jacob Epstein and Eric Gill; among his first public commissions as a sculptor was a memorial to the 24th Infantry Division in Battersea Park, completed in 1924. From this time onwards Kennington would describe himself as primarily a sculptor, though he continued to accept portrait commissions. Throughout the 1920s, art critics favourably compared Kennington's skill as a portrait draughtsman to such contemporaries as William Orpen, Augustus John and John Singer Sargent. He contributed a number of portrait drawings as illustrations for an edition of T. E. Lawrence's *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*, first published in 1922, and also gave lectures at the Royal College of Art (whose Principal was Rothenstein), while continuing to work as a sculptor. Among his notable public sculptures is an effigy of his friend Lawrence for a monument in St. Martin's Church in Wareham in Dorset, on which he worked between 1937 and 1939. In 1939 Kennington was appointed an Official War Artist for the second time. He was attached to the Royal Navy and Royal Air Force between 1939 and 1942, and spent the later years of the war working for the War Office as a portraitist. Elected an Associate of the Royal Academy in 1951 and a full Academician eight years later, Kennington was occupied for much of the last years of his career in creating tomb monuments for Anglican churches.