

Tanya Leighton

TATE

Matthew Krishanu keeps returning to two of Sickert's portraits for their ability to conjure a life

Walter Sickert
Portrait of an Afghan Gentleman c.1895
Oil paint on canvas
33 x 24 cm

Walter Sickert
La Hollandaise c.1906
Oil paint on canvas
51.1 x 40.6 cm

Two prints of Sickert's paintings are taped to my studio wall: *La Hollandaise* c.1906 and *Portrait of an Afghan Gentleman* c.1895.

In *La Hollandaise*, a woman is shown partially reclining on a bed. The figure is contained within the curves of the iron bedstead, her shoulder and hip echoing its lines. Like all Sickert's paintings, the work is, for me, primarily about the paint itself – the calligraphic certainty of its marks, the beauty of the light catching form out of shadow, and the atmosphere of greens, pinks, creams and greys.

I first saw the painting hung alone at Tate Britain and was drawn in. Years later, in 2007, I saw it alongside other paintings from Sickert's group of Camden Town Nudes in an exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery, where it seemed set in a world together with its companions. I love how constructed these paintings are; they are painted from pencil sketches and then invested with atmosphere and form in the artist's studio, away from the scene. They are like places and people remembered and imagined.

In 2015, while visiting the Jerwood Collection in Hastings for the first time, I met Sickert's *Portrait of an Afghan Gentleman* and was halted, struck by how present the man seems. Judging by the attention and



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formal interest that Sickert invested in the painting, it was surely painted from life. I love the wisps of the man's moustache and beard, the curls at the back of his neck; the gradations of red-brown, greenish brown and cream in the skin tones, and the powerful, textured brushstrokes that form his white collar. I am taken by the interiority of the gaze – the man has an inner life, a sense of purpose. By contrast, *La Hollandaise* is more constrained by her circumstances – boxed in by the bed, bare and somewhat downcast, but to me still possessing a sense of dignity, even monumentality. Not just their figures, but so much of their lives, their worlds, are created in the paintings.

I keep returning to these two images when in my studio. When feeling my way around the face of one of the 'two boys' who recur in many of my paintings, I think of the Afghan man's cheekbones. And when creating a bed in a room (whether in a domestic setting or in a hospital), I feel once again the weight of Sickert's mattress and his iron bedframe.

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