



John Cooper's mosaic on the floor of the Wharrie cabbies' shelter, Rosslyn Hill, 1935, Hampstead, London.

As the abundance of wall plaques in the area testifies, visual artists have been drawn to the physical and cultural attractions of Hampstead¹ since the late eighteenth century. It was in the 1930s and early 1940s, however, that this area of north-west London occupied a unique place in the story of British art and architecture – due, in large measure, to the number of talented émigrés from Nazi-dominated Europe who found refuge there, and the British individuals who welcomed, supported and worked alongside them. As Fiona MacCarthy observed in 1984, 'It sometimes seems that everyone one had ever heard of gravitated towards Hampstead', adding, 'Hampstead has become a kind of buzzword for the thirties'.² Yet, although the fact is frequently mentioned in passing, to date too little detailed attention has been paid to this richly rewarding topic of cultural enquiry.³

By 1940, there were approximately 14,000 (mostly Jewish) refugees living in the Hampstead area. 'What Louis MacNeice called . . . [their] "guttural sorrow" . . . pervaded the district – people as noticeable for their looks as any other immigrant group, and often similarly welcome'.⁴ And in Norman Rosenthal's words, 'There is a whole Proustian biography to be written about that lost world that stretched from Swiss Cottage to the Heath and that included the

likes, of course, of Sigmund Freud and Elias Canetti and many others who would congregate in cafes such as the Cosmo to relive the spirit of their lost Central European worlds'.⁵

The small but graceful, semi-detached Regency villa at 47 Downshire Hill NW3, purchased by Fred and Diana Uhlman in late 1938, is as good a place as any to start to give a sense of the area's rich cultural history. The first artist to live there was Italian-born Gaetano Meo, a colourful character who earned his living first as a model for the Pre-Raphaelite circle, and later as a mosaicist of some accomplishment.⁶ When, during the First World War, the Carline family moved into No. 47, it soon became a meeting place for like-minded artists. Richard Carline, the key player, who lived in the house until 1936 (when he moved around the corner to 17 Pond Street), later recalled that

*My artist family – George my father, Sydney, Hilda and myself, occupied 47 Downshire Hill . . . and the former church school opposite [at 14A] provided us with two large studios. With such ample space we were able to entertain large gatherings of our artist friends. Besides Lamb and Gertler, there were the two Spencers, Stanley and Gilbert, who lived with us for a while, Ginner, Ethelbert White and Nevinson, who all lived in Hampstead, Macnamara, Dorothy Brett and others.*⁷

His 1924–5 canvas, *Gathering on the Terrace at 47 Downshire Hill* (now at the Ferens Art Gallery, Hull), vividly corroborates such verbal accounts.

In Hampstead, as elsewhere, the 1930s saw a dramatic sea change. To quote Carline again,

*In the thirties the atmosphere had completely changed. The sense of detachment with constant aesthetic discussions, which were typical of the twenties, was to be overwhelmed by new theories and movements during the next decade. Artists were to be caught up in the political and social uncertainties, with threats to liberty and the shadow of war, from which they could not remain aloof.*⁸

And as MacCarthy has observed, the Isobar at the Lawn Road Flats, an important social hub, 'in its early years had a unique quality, inseparably related to that time and place and purpose. An atmosphere of serious intention . . . and at the same time a kind of quality of craziness, a sense of dislocation, broken accents, broken marriages. An irresponsibility engendered by the number of arrivals and departures, set against a background of political uncertainty.'⁹

The Spanish Civil War of 1936–9 was seen by many the world over as the testing ground for a global conflict between fascism and democracy, and 'Hampstead Man and Hampstead Woman, leftish, argumentative, alarmingly progressive'¹⁰ were no exception. In the words of Edward Carter, it 'hung like a burning destructive sun over all political feeling and woke us again to awareness of the agony and suffering of war . . . Hampstead . . . characteristically glowed with partisanship and every variety of possible and near impossible activity on behalf of the Republicans'.¹¹ A letter from English International Brigade volunteers George and Nan Green, written in 1938, speaks volumes: 'Mother dear, we're not militarists, nor adventurers nor professional soldiers . . . to hold the line here and

now means that we can prevent this battle being fought again later on Hampstead Heath or the hills of Derbyshire'.¹² And as poet Louis MacNeice, a Hampstead resident, observed in his 1939 Autumn Journal, in Spain 'our blunt ideals would find their whetstone'.¹³

As Antony Penrose's account of his father's activities¹⁴ makes clear, Roland Penrose was a key figure in galvanising like-minded artists into expressing their support for the Spanish Republican cause, and into criticising the British Government for sitting on the political fence. Even apparently apolitical, artistically unaligned figures such as Henry Moore added their names to the 1936 Surrealist manifesto protesting against British non-intervention. In 1938, Moore designed another British Surrealist broadsheet on a similar theme, and in 1939 produced his first lithograph, called Spanish Prisoner, intended to raise money for the Republican cause.¹⁵ Barbara Hepworth too did her bit, by producing a wooden maquette for an unrealised, abstract Monument to the Spanish Civil War (1938–9), which was destroyed during the Second World War.

Although far less numerous than the only slightly later influx of refugees from Nazi Europe, Spanish refugees also found their way to Hampstead – among them artist and Republican politician Francesc Galí, who, years earlier, had taught Joan Miró in Barcelona and who initially lived at the home of art historian and gallerist Ewan Phillips.¹⁶ Wilfred Roberts, brother of Winifred Nicholson (Ben's first wife), Liberal MP for North Cumberland (1935–50) and a leading figure in the Basque Children's Committee, the National Joint Committee for Spanish Relief and other relief bodies – and thus popularly known as the 'MP for Spain' – lived in Keats Grove during this period.

Penrose later recalled,

*When I returned to London in 1935, having spent some thirteen years in France, I found in Hampstead a climate which had some slight resemblance to that which I had left in Paris . . . Having been away for so long, I had lost contact with my own generation in England, and if it had not been for the colony of artists that I discovered around me when I settled in Downshire Hill, it could have taken me a long time to find my feet again in my native town.*¹⁷

As Carline observed, 'It was to the west of Hampstead in Fitzjohn's Avenue that fashionable and prosperous artists [such as Philip de László¹⁸] settled in the late Victorian and Edwardian era. Old Hampstead was a dilapidated neighbourhood . . . The younger and progressive artists took a fancy to old Hampstead . . .'¹⁹

By September 1938, when – under the shadow of the Munich Agreement – Fred and Diana Uhlman moved into their house, the 'progressive' artistic presence in Downshire Hill and its environs was well established, and the area was no longer quite so dilapidated. Penrose had moved into No. 21 in early 1936 (to be joined in mid-1939 by Lee Miller); in the run-up to and during the war years, Belgian-born E.L.T. Mesens, Penrose's companion-at-arms and director of the radical if short-lived London Gallery, would also live there. Avant-garde art patron and collector Margaret Gardiner, herself partly of European-Jewish descent, and her partner, pioneering crystallographer and ardent Communist, John Desmond Bernal, lived almost opposite Penrose at No. 35.²⁰ Among her other anti-fascist

activities, Gardiner was Honorary Secretary of a non-party political organisation called For Intellectual Liberty, founded in early 1936 and active until 1940, intended as 'a rallying point for those intellectual workers who felt that the condition of the world called for the active defence of peace, liberty, and culture'.²¹ It is evident that Gardiner, Penrose and the Uhlmans were at the very heart of a network of individuals intent on lending practical and moral support to refugee artists.²²

They were not the only ones, however. Other Hampstead residents should also receive their due in this respect – among them, sculptor and educationalist Betty Rea, who was Secretary of the Artists' International Association between 1934 and 1936, and lived at the Penn Studios, 13a Rudall Crescent. The latter was also one of the Hampstead residences of Mark Gertler. Although the son of a different immigrant generation, having moved to Hampstead from the East End of London in 1915, the fact that he was one of the signatories of a letter sent to potential benefactors by the Artists' Refugee Committee (ARC) in late 1938, suggests that he too wished to play a part in helping the new wave of immigrants.

Muirhead and his son Stephen Bone, both leading lights in the ARC, were also based in Hampstead, as was Marie Sturge Moore (wife of writer and artist Thomas Sturge Moore), who apparently took responsibility for ensuring that the artists were adequately fed. Actor Walter Hudd (usually cast in supporting and character roles, initially as part of the stable of actors associated with Hungarian émigré Alexander Korda's London Films²³) played host, it seems, to Hans (Johannes) Schellenberger, founder-member of the Free German League of Culture (FGLC). Mention should also be made of Canadian-born designer Austin Cooper, director of the pioneering Reimann School, who lived at 34 Downshire Hill,²⁴ and of Richard Carline (again) and art-world eminence Kenneth Clark, who lived in a suitably patrician villa called 'Capo di Monte' in Windmill Hill, near Whitestone Pond – all of whom were signatories of the aforementioned ARC letter.²⁵

The presence of (in Herbert Read's memorable phrase) a 'nest of gentle artists'²⁶ – Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Henry Moore et alia – a short-ish walk from Downshire Hill at the Mall Studios in Tasker Road,²⁷ as well as that of Paul Nash in nearby Eldon Grove, had no doubt acted as an incentive for Penrose to move to the area.

As Annely Juda put it,

*These were the difficult years leading up to the war. In a part of London, Hampstead, there was a group of great artists living near to each other including Gabo, Hepworth, Moholy-Nagy, Mondrian, Moore and Nicholson. At the time they produced their art quietly and modestly but now we recognize that their abstract works were among the most radical being made in Britain.*²⁸

Through the intervention of Winifred and Ben Nicholson as well as Naum Gabo, Piet Mondrian lived a stone's throw away from the Mall Studios at 60 Parkhill Road between 1938 and 1940 (before – like Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer and László Moholy-Nagy – moving on to the USA). Gabo himself lived for a while at nearby 11 Lawn Road, close to the Isokon Building, which, thanks to Jack and Molly Pritchard, provided a temporary abode for these Bauhaus

luminaries. Modernist architect Ernö Goldfinger built a house for himself in 1939 at nearby 2 Willow Road, which during the war not only played host to art classes for traumatised children but in 1942 was the venue for a fundraising exhibition organised in association with the Aid to Russia Fund of the National Council of Labour.²⁹ Rarely noticed or commented on, the floor of a humble refreshment kiosk on Rosslyn Hill – the ‘Wharrie Cabmen’s Shelter’ of 1935, sporting a colourful abstract mosaic created by artist John Cooper and his students³⁰ – bears unusual witness to this brief flowering of the geometric avant-garde in Hampstead.

Notes

1. Strictly speaking, the area in which the émigrés congregated also embraces Belsize Park (like Hampstead village, part of London NW3) and West Hampstead (NW6) – and, to a lesser extent, St John’s Wood (NW8) and Golders Green (NW11).

2. Fiona MacCarthy, Introduction to Jack Pritchard, *View from a Long Chair*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984, pp 22 and 9.
3. Michael Bird's book, *The St Ives Artists: A Biography of Place and Time*, Lund Humphries, London, 2008, for example, includes a chapter entitled 'Connecting Circles: A Detour via Hampstead', in which Hampstead is seen as little more than a stopover en route to Cornwall.
4. Jeremy Adler, Introduction to Elias Canetti, *Party in the Blitz: The English Years* (transl. Michael Hofmann), Harvill Press, London, 2005.
5. Norman Rosenthal, Introduction to Nicola Baird (ed.), *Fred Uhlman*, Burgh House and Hampstead Museum, London, 2018, p.7.
6. Meo appears to have taken up residence in the 1880s, introduced to the area either by Dante Gabriel Rossetti, who had earlier lived in the street, or by Ford Madox Brown, who had lodged in Hampstead while working on his iconic canvas, *Work*, of 1852–63.
7. Richard Carline, 'Downshire Hill and the Hampstead Gatherings', in K. Jacobson and C. Wade, *Stanley Spencer: A Hampstead Vision*, Hampstead Museum, London, 1991 (unpaginated).
8. Richard Carline, 'Richard Carline and his Circle', in *Hampstead in the Thirties: A Committed Decade*, exh.cat., Camden Arts Centre, London, 1974, p.8.
9. MacCarthy, *Insiders/Outsiders*, Lund Humphries, London, 2019, Introduction, p.22.
10. *ibid.*, p.9.
11. Edward Carter, 'The Social/Architectural Background', in *Hampstead in the Thirties*, p.27.
12. Quoted in Paul Preston, *The Spanish Civil War: Dreams and Nightmares*, exh.cat, Imperial War Museum, London, 2001, p.27.
13. Louis MacNeice, *Autumn Journal*, Faber & Faber, London, 1939.
14. Antony Penrose, *Insiders/Outsiders*, Lund Humphries, London, 2019, chapter 16.
15. By the time the lithograph was ready, however, Franco had won the war.
16. See www.ithellcolquhoun.co.uk/i_palpitates_with_joy.htm.
17. Roland Penrose, 'Hampstead and Surrealism in the Thirties', in *Hampstead in the Thirties*, p.37.
18. Ironically, Hungarian-born society portraitist de László had been commissioned in the interwar period to paint Diana Uhlman's parents, the First Lord Croft and The Hon. Nancy Beatrice Borwick, Lady Croft.
19. Carline, 'Richard Carline and his Circle', p.8.
20. Gardiner's fine collection of works by the artists whom she supported long before they became famous – notably, Hepworth and Ben Nicholson – form the basis of the permanent collection of the Pier Art Centre, Stromness, Orkney.
21. 'Bulletin no.1' of *For Intellectual Liberty*. The organisation was formed in February 1936 following a conference in Paris called by the 'Comité de Vigilance des Intellectuels Antifascistes'. Members held meetings, wrote to the press and lobbied their MPs. In the late 1930s, they were also involved in schemes of practical assistance for refugees. Other members included Virginia Woolf and Aldous

Huxley. See www.nature.com/articles/139188c0.pdf.

22. Beyond the art world, financier Otto Schiff not only helped thousands of Jews to escape Nazi Europe but also opened up his home in Netherhall Gardens as a place of refuge. Émigré actor Anton Walbrook, who lived at 69 Frognal, did much to help refugees less fortunate than himself, while Regents Park boarding school at 5 Maresfield Gardens was set up specifically to cater to the needs of child refugees. At No. 20 Maresfield Gardens, Anna Freud and her colleagues set up the Hampstead War Nurseries to take care of and observe traumatised children.
23. Alexander Korda lived in Avenue Road, NW8, while his less extravagant and ostentatious artist brother, Vincent, lived in Well Walk. It was here that he worked on the designs for the science-fiction film *Things to Come* (1936), to which László Moholy-Nagy also contributed.
24. Also worth a mention here is the discreetly Modernist house at 13 Downshire Hill designed in the mid-1930s by Michael and Charlotte Bunney. Hampstead's wealth of Modernist architecture is touched on in Alan Powers' essay in *Insiders/Outsiders*, Lund Humphries, London, 2019, chapter 2.
25. Clark's secretary was half-German Helen Roeder (partner of Carel Weight), who was also secretary of the Artists' Refugee Committee. Correspondence in the Tate Archive reveals that she wrote to him to enlist his support for the ARC (TGA 8812/1/4/152/5).
26. Herbert Read. 'A Nest of Gentle Artists', *Apollo*, vol. LXXVI, no.7, September 1962, pp 536–40, reprinted in Benedict Read and David Thistlewood (eds), *Herbert Read: A British Vision of World Art*, Lund Humphries, London, 1993, pp 59–63.
27. The Mall Studios had been built in 1872; earlier residents may have included Walter Sickert. In the 1930s, in addition to Hepworth and Nicholson at No. 7 (the former had previously lived at the Studios with her first husband John Skeaping), Cecil Stephenson lived at No. 6 and Herbert Read at No. 3. Moore lived at nearby 11a Parkhill Road and Arthur Jackson, Hepworth's cousin, at No. 22 Parkhill Road.
28. Anneli Juda, Foreword, *The Thirties: Influences on Abstract Art in Britain*, exh.cat., Anneli Juda Fine Art, London, 1998.
29. Goldfinger was also closely involved with the *Artists Aid Russia* exhibition held at the Wallace Collection in July/August 1942.
30. The students may have belonged to the East London Group of non-professional, working-class artists. More research, however, needs to be done into this unusual project.