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David Buckman, *From Bow to Biennale: Artists of the East London Group*, paperback, 377 pages, London: Francis Boutle Publishers, 2012. ISBN 978-1903427682; £25

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A beautifully illustrated and well-researched coffee table book, *From Bow to Biennale* revives interest in a now-forgotten [group of 'Cockney' artists](#) that enjoyed remarkable critical and commercial success in the 1920s and 1930s. Rich in biographical detail, the book provides an animated if rather sentimental account of this unique group of working-class artists from the East End who, under the tutelage of the Yorkshire-born painter, John Cooper, produced works that found their way into the Tate, the Lefevre Galleries and Biennale di Venezia. Comprised of window cleaners, basket makers and engine drivers who attended evening classes at the Bow and Bromley Institute, the Group (the most prominent members of which included William and Henry Steggles, Albert Turpin, Murroe FitzGerald and Henry Silk) painted for recreational purposes and to make a bit of extra cash. Their key focus was their habitual environment, the capital's postal district E3, and they earned praise for their ability to transform dingy backyards, dirty canals and chimney stacks into aesthetic subjects. They depicted mundane items and settings—the bridge over Mile End Road, the signals at Stratford station and fog at Clapton—in such a way as to make them charming and even magical, suffusing the grim East End with beauty.

Generally opting for sombre tones and a flat perspective—a style suited to their subject matter—the artists won the admiration and support of several high-profile figures such as Aldous Huxley, Lady Cynthia Mosley, J. B. Priestley and Walter Richard Sickert. Their works, Buckman enthuses, were even favourably compared with many seen in West End galleries, and one critic commented that East Londoner Elwin Hawthorne's 'brownish expanses of street and sky and clumsy dwellings' as well as 'absence of brush-marks upon his canvas' constituted a welcome relief from the

'heavy slogging-in of the pigment of Vanessa Bell' (238). Similarly, a critic writing in the *Sunday Referee* claimed 'Bell's actual work was essentially commonplace. It lacks imagination, creative drive'; by contrast, 'in Mr. Elwin Hawthorne we have an outstanding, possibly great, artist in the making' whose 'renderings of commonplace city streets seem to be conjured onto canvas by an imagination which is compounded of magical atmospheres' (238). Here, and throughout Buckman's book, the familiar trope of raw talent surpassing education and privilege is deployed.

One suspects, however, that some of the attention lavished on the East London Group, including from famed Bloomsbury Group members, Roger Fry, Clive Bell and Lady Ottoline Morrell, might be regarded as an example of 'poverty porn'. As Buckman concedes, some celebrity and other buyers were 'attracted by [the East London Group's] novelty value' while others were simply 'hoping for inexpensive Christmas presents' (81). The national (and international) press tended to report on the Group's activities in a rather patronising and clichéd manner, describing their paintings and sketches as 'sincere' and 'primitive' and pointing out that the artists possessed appropriately 'Dickensian names' (113). Buckman pays limited attention to this as well as to how, conversely, the Group arguably called the bluff of professionals and the 'super-geese'—Sickert's term for artistic fashion-followers—and manipulated the art industry.

The East London Group was widely congratulated for refusing to follow trends or develop a specific school, though some branded them a 'Cockney school of art'—minus the 'gawbliminess' that typically characterises Cockney Literature (108). This, in fact, became one of the Group's main selling points: 'there's no Chelsea-Bloomsbury nonsense about us', Cooper told journalist Constance Vaughan (108). Instead, bleak realism and individual expressions of daily life were said to characterise their work—a small sample of which I had the pleasure of viewing at [Bow Arts' Nunnery Gallery](#) during the summer. Such descriptions do not do justice to the rich, diverse and sometimes sensual nature of the works: they are not all focused on exterior scenes or have a limited colour spectrum, for instance. Nor is it fair to value the collection—once hailed 'Labour's own art show' (82)—for mainly political or social reasons, which unfortunately often appears to have been the case. To counter this, Buckman could have offered more analysis of artistic technique and of the ideas or emotions conveyed through the paintings rather than focusing so much on individual personalities. The author devotes much of *From Bow to Biennale* to artist biography as well as to superfluous information regarding their patrons, teaching venues and the price tag of works. More, too, on the Group's legacy and contribution to British art would have been welcome.

Nevertheless, Buckman's book is an interesting and valuable reappraisal of this oft-neglected group and was the inspiration behind the exhibition at the Nunnery. Moreover, the book serves to increase awareness of other London-based groups, both past and present, and pictorial representations of the city in general. For example, the Literary London Society inevitably privileges the textual over the pictorial and runs the risk of overlooking the multifarious ways in which artists, sculptors, photographers and filmmakers have responded to and been inspired by the metropolis. For centuries,

visual artists have turned to London for inspiration and often they share the same interests, influences and techniques as their literary counterparts; indeed, some of the most prominent writers of London had close connections with painters. Thus the complex interplay of text and image can enrich our readings of London, in addition to challenging the supposed superiority of literature as a representational medium.

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