

LEON KOSSOFF
Drawings and Prints
from Rembrandt, Constable and Poussin

27 February – 25 April 2025



From Poussin: The Rape of the Sabines No. 2, 1998, etching & aquatint, 42.9 x 57.9 cm (plate)

“The art of the past is a torment and a spur to invention.”¹

The prints and the drawings in this exhibition were all made by Leon Kossoff in the presence of oil paintings in the collection of the National Gallery and the Poussin retrospective at the Royal Academy in London in 1985. His passion for certain painters of the past began in childhood and he began to draw from Old Master paintings as a student in the 1950s. Later the National Gallery gave him out of hours access and he would start early at 7am before the Gallery was open. Armed with charcoal and paper or a metal plate and an etching needle he would draw and redraw repeatedly in an effort to seek afresh an ever more meaningful experience and familiarity with the painting that goes far beyond the merely visual. They “... suggest deep reverence, as well as the possibility of a humbling, liberating engagement with a practitioner from a remote epoch.”².

This exhibition brings together a group of *unique proofs* after Rembrandt, Constable and Poussin along with 15 rare *artist's proofs* after Poussin that Kossoff had gifted to a close friend that have only recently been brought out into the light. And the drawings, some never previously exhibited, have been chosen specifically to match the same subjects as the prints. Seen together they reveal something of Kossoff's

strategies to make contact with some of the great predecessors through the eyes and mind of a contemporary painter.

They are immediate, rapid, and free with a striking freshness and lucidity. But despite this apparently spontaneous appearance they were not made in a sudden burst of activity. The process was one of slow emergence, only achievable after a long and deep affinity had been established; an affinity born out of an endless dissatisfaction that spurred him to work and rework drawings and plates “as if trying to discover some elusive truth that stubbornly refuses to completely reveal itself.”³.



From Poussin: Bacchanal before a Herm, charcoal on paper, 41.8 x 59.7 cm

In the 1980s Kossoff became increasingly serious about printmaking and more experimental and began a collaboration with Ann Dowker, herself a painter-printmaker. Together they adopted an experimental approach that went far beyond the conventional idea of uniform editions of an image and started to probe the medium itself with rich variations. Dozens of proofs were made that differ in inking, wiping, aquatinting from one impression to the next so that each print is a *unique* and an independent act of interpretation in its own right.

Like Degas before him, he worked and reworked plates through state after state, and even reworked editioned states or avoided editioning altogether for to do so implied it was definitive. He has left behind a difficult trail for the archivist and historian to follow but for the lover of Leon Kossoff's work, it is a legacy of a restless, and fascinating, search.

Endnotes:

1. Richard Kendal, *Drawn to Painting*, (Merrell Publishers, 2000, ISBN 1 85894 094 X) p.9
2. *ibid.*
3. Colin Wiggins, *Drawing from Painting* (National Gallery, 2007, ISBN 13 978 1 85709353 7) p.48

48-page catalogue with an essay by Colin Wiggins is available.

View online www.artspacegallery.co.uk

Gallery Hours: Tuesday - Saturday, 11 am – 6 pm during exhibitions