

# LEON KOSSOFF

## 1926 – 2019



Photo: Toby Glanville

It is with great sadness that we announce the death of our dear friend, Leon Kossoff. He was 92 years of age. “Our thoughts are with his friends and family, who along with his hometown of London, were the essence of his being,” says Peter Goulds, Founding Director, L.A. Louver.

One of Britain’s greatest artists, Kossoff was known for his paint-laden canvases and vigorously gestural charcoal and pastel drawings. His early cityscapes give us a potent vision of a ravaged post-war London, and over subsequent decades, his more recent depictions captured the rejuvenation and light of the city. Kossoff also drew and painted the figure and was renowned for his unsentimental portrayal of the human condition. He worked from life, and those who sat for him were family members and a small group of close friends and models. A fervent champion of figurative art, Kossoff found kinship with the School of London, a postwar generation of painters that embraced figuration and landscapes in an era of abstraction and conceptualism, and whose members included Francis Bacon, Lucian Freud, Frank Auerbach, David Hockney, R.B. Kitaj and Euan Uglow.

Kossoff relentlessly pursued painting and drawing, as well as printmaking, to comprehend his changing world. He used paint to build heavily impastoed compositions through a rigorous process of repeated application and removal. While he never considered himself a gifted draughtsman, it was the act of drawing and his love for the medium that allowed Kossoff entry into his subjects. “Drawing is a springing to life in the presence of the friend in the studio or in the sunlit summer streets of London... painting is a deepening of this process.” He studied the Old Masters with enthusiasm, and maintained a lifelong habit of frequenting London’s museums where he would spend hours contemplating and drawing from works of art by Titian, Tintoretto, Veronese, Poussin, Rembrandt, Rubens, Constable and Cézanne.

Kossoff was born to Russian Jewish immigrants in East London in 1926, and was raised on the borders of Islington, not far from Shoreditch where his family owned a bakery. At the age of nine, Kossoff visited the National Gallery of Art where he saw Rembrandt van Rijn's painting *Woman Bathing in a Stream* (1634), a defining moment that remained a guiding presence throughout his life.

In 1945, he commenced military service for three years with the Royal Fusiliers (2nd Battalion Jewish Brigade), in Italy, Holland, Belgium and Germany. Thereafter, he reengaged with his youthful passion for drawing and resumed his studies at St. Martin's School of Art in 1949 (where he had taken classes 1943-45), and attended evening classes at Borough Polytechnic with David Bomberg. From 1953-1956, he studied at the Royal College of Art, London.

Exhibiting in London since the late 1950s, Kossoff had his first solo museum show at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, London in 1972, and gained an international presence in 1981 with his inclusion in the exhibition *Eight Figurative Painters: Michael Andrews, Frank Auerbach, Francis Bacon, William Coldstream, Lucian Freud, Patrick George, Leon Kossoff, Euan Uglow* at Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, CT (traveled to Santa Barbara Museum of Art, CA), which presaged numerous group shows in places as far afield as Australia, Germany and India in the decade that followed.

Kossoff represented Great Britain at the 1995 Venice Biennale exhibition (traveled to Kunstverein Düsseldorf, and Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam 1995-96), and in 1996, Tate presented a major solo retrospective. A painting survey presented by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Humlebæk, Denmark, traveled to Museum of Modern Art Lucerne, Switzerland in 2004/2005. Exhibitions of Kossoff's old master-inspired work have been staged at The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Los Angeles County Museum of Art; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; The National Gallery, London and National Gallery of Australia, Canberra.

L.A. Louver was first to present Kossoff's work outside of the UK with *This Knot of Life: Paintings and Drawings by British Artists* in 1979, the same year we began our representation. Over the past 40 years, the gallery has featured Kossoff in over a dozen group shows and five solo exhibitions, including *Leon Kossoff: London Landscapes* in 2014 (co-organized with Annely Juda Fine Art, London; Galerie Lelong, Paris and Mitchell-Innes and Nash, New York). The exhibition centered on drawings and paintings made of his beloved London, which Kossoff has described so: "Ever since the age of twelve, I have drawn and painted London... the strange ever-changing light, the endless streets and the shuddering feel of the sprawling city linger in my mind like a faintly glimmering memory..."

While we will miss Leon greatly, we are fortunate that his pictures remain with us, imbued with his quiet, resolute, gentle, passionate spirit, and his keen intellect and sensitive eye. They will forever glimmer with memories of his London and his vision of humanity.

Leon Kossoff is survived by his wife Peggy, son David, four grandchildren and two great grandchildren.