ART/01/190

a singular vision



drawings and paintings by

BERNARD MENINSKY

The exhibition has been financially supported by the Friends of the University of Liverpool

THE UNIVERSITY *of* LIVERPOOL

Contemporary Art Society

Graves Art Gallery

Royal Kingston

a singular vision

drawings and paintings by

BERNARD MENINSKY



THE UNIVERSITY
of LIVERPOOL

Contemporary
Art
Society

Exhibition organiser: Ann Compton
Adviser: Gill Hedley
Transport and tour management: Matthew Clough
Administration: Carole Clarke
Research: Dr Paula Simpson
Additional Support: Jessica Wallwork
and Jonathan Blond

Design: Vivienne Palfreyman
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Black & white photographs on page 26 supplied by:
Mark Gertler, *The Rabbi and his Grandchild*,
Bridgeman Art Library
David Bomberg, *Jewish Theatre*,
Jacob Kramer, *The Day of Atonement*,
Photographic Survey, Courtauld Institute of Art

A touring exhibition organised by the University of Liverpool, Art Collections in association with the Contemporary Art Society with financial support from the Friends of the University of Liverpool

19 October - 21 December 2000
University of Liverpool Art Gallery
3 Abercromby Square, Liverpool L69 7WY

24 January - 2 March 2001
The University Gallery • Leeds
Parkinson Building, Woodhouse Lane
Leeds LS2 9JT

17 March - 28 April 2001
Graves Art Gallery
Surrey Street, Sheffield S1 1XZ

6 - 23 May 2001
Ben Uri Art Society
The Manor House, Sternberg Centre
80 East End Road, London N3 2SY

16 June - 14 July 2001
Kingston Museum
Wheatfield Way
Kingston upon Thames KT1 2PS

Introduction

Fifty years after Bernard Meninsky's death 'A Singular Vision' celebrates the work of a leading twentieth century Jewish emigré artist. Liverpool was home to the Meninsky family after they left the Ukraine in 1891 and was the city in which Bernard embarked on his career as an artist. It is therefore fitting that the exhibition tour begins in Liverpool. The show also aims to bring Meninsky's work back into the public eye. The last major public exhibition was organised by the Museum of Modern Art, Oxford almost twenty years ago. Despite the lack of exposure in the intervening years Meninsky's work attracts many collectors but wider recognition is long overdue. It is with great pleasure that the University of Liverpool Art Collections have collaborated with the Contemporary Art Society to highlight the work of Bernard Meninsky in 'A Singular Vision'.

The idea of mounting the exhibition came from Gill Hedley, Director of the Contemporary Art Society who wished to mark Nora Meninsky's generous bequest to the CAS from her late husband's studio. During his lifetime, the CAS purchased several works from Bernard Meninsky, presenting them to member museums throughout

Britain. Nora Meninsky's bequest will be used for the benefit of CAS member museums and a substantial group of works will be given to University of Liverpool Art Collections to mark the artist's connection with the city. Other gifts have already been made to the Ben Uri Art Society and to the Tate Gallery Archives.

We are delighted to have had the opportunity to work closely with the tour venues, the majority of whom are also lenders to the exhibition. All the staff at the venues have been most helpful, we particularly wish to thank: Dr. Hilary Diaper at the University Art Gallery Leeds; Anne Goodchild and Ann Chumbley at Sheffield Museums and Galleries Trust; Jo Velleman and David Glasser at the Ben Uri Art Society; and Anne McCormack at the Kingston Museum and Heritage Service. Vital financial support has come from the Friends of the University of Liverpool to whom we are deeply grateful. Bernard Meninsky's younger son, Philip Meninsky, has been very supportive of the exhibition for which we are most grateful. We also want to thank him for contributing a very personal text to the catalogue. The writer and critic John Russell Taylor has contributed generously in a number of ways to the project; we thank him warmly for his catalogue essay, for giving a speech at the opening in Liverpool and a talk about the exhibition. Monica Bohm-Duchen has drawn on her extensive knowledge and research into Jewish artists working in Britain to write an article with fresh insight into the life and work of Bernard Meninsky. Dr. Paula Simpson contributed extensively to the research for the exhibition and the preparation of the chronology for the catalogue. The organisation of the exhibition and management of the tour has been ably supported by Matthew Clough and Carole Clarke at the University of Liverpool with further assistance on loans from Jessica Wallwork at the Contemporary Art Society. Jonathan Blond has also been enormously helpful in a variety of ways; his knowledge of Bernard Meninsky's work is remarkable and invaluable. The exhibition could not have taken

place without the generosity of the lenders, we are indebted to all of them. The exhibition includes lenders who choose to remain anonymous, we thank them as warmly as: Mr. and Mrs. D. Abbott, Belgrave Gallery, Ben Uri Art Gallery, Jonathan Blond, Brighton and Hove Museum and Art Gallery, Contemporary Art Society Bequest of Nora Meninsky, Peter Geiringer, Mr. and Mrs. Jocelin Harris, University of Leeds Art Collection, Philip Meninsky, the Collection of the Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust, Tate Gallery Archive, Wakefield Museums and Arts.

Ann Compton
Curator
University of Liverpool Art Collections

Gill Hedley
Director
Contemporary Art Society



Bernard *(in deckchair)* with John Nash in his garden 1928-29

A Chronological Portrait

by Ann Compton & Dr Paula Simpson

1891

25 July born in the Ukraine, family left soon after and came to Liverpool where settled.

Born in 1891, brought from Russia to Liverpool, Bernard Meninsky could have chosen no time more inauspicious to start a life of consistent development. Revolutions in the art world, war and financial disturbances broke the spirit and cut in half the early development of many.

Cora Gordon, 'Bernard Meninsky',
The Studio, 132, July 1946

1902

Left St. Simon's School and worked as an errand boy, attended evening classes in art.

1906

Entered Liverpool School of Art, won several awards including a travel scholarship enabling him to study in Paris for three months in 1911 at *Académie Julian*.

Paris in those days meant little beyond a continuation of art school training. Work was strenuous. Usually one took the morning class from eight o'clock until midday and the evening

class from seven until ten. To all who could afford five-pence a time the afternoon ***croquis séances*** *were of real value…The short poses encouraged spontaneity and discouraged stagnation. Famous artists were often among the fifty or so draughtsmen surrounding the model.*

Cora Gordon, 'Bernard Meninsky',
The Studio, 132, July 1946

1912

Scholarship to study for one year at Slade School of Art, tutors included Philip Wilson Steer and Henry Tonks.

As it is by drawings that we make our records of form, its importance cannot be exaggerated. A school of painting in which drawing is not taught and drawing dissociated from painting is not worthy of the name of school. When the student begins in paint he will soon perceive the relation of drawing to paint.

Henry Tonks quoted in Joseph Hone,
The life of Henry Tonks, (London, 1939) p.173

1913

Invited by Edward Gordon Craig to teach at his newly founded School for Art and Theatre at the *Arena Goldoni*, Florence. After disagreement with Craig returned to London and obtained a teaching post at Central School of Arts and Crafts. Joined newly formed London Group which included Wyndham Lewis, Edward Wadsworth, C.R.W. Nevinson, William Roberts and Mark Gertler.

Nowadays to the young it is natural to see approximately as Cézanne saw…it must be difficult for them to realise how the young of [Meninsky's] days had to choose between the painful acquisition of a new vision or a passive acceptance of things as they were.

Cora Gordon, 'Bernard Meninsky',
The Studio, 132, July 1946

1914

Work included in first London Group exhibition, also exhibited with the New English Art Club. During the war enlisted with 42nd Battalion, Royal Fusiliers, served as a clerk.



Bernard *(left)* during the war with Epstein *(right)*

1917

Married Margaret O'Connor.

1918

Birth of first son David. Discharged from Salisbury Road Military Hospital, Plymouth 'as physically unfit on account of neurasthenia' (letter from Major MacAllen to the Secretary, Ministry of Information, July 1918, Imperial War Museum Archive). Meninsky commissioned to paint 'pictures representing typical London scenes during and after the arrival of a leave train from the front'. (Secretary, Ministry of Information, to Colonel Fisher, War Office 7 June 1918).

Whatever the strain of war, for the individual the greatest strain was those periodic partings at the termination of the brief periods of leave spent at home. The whole tragic poignancy of war was condensed daily in the departure of the leave train from London.

Brigadier-General John Charteris quoted in
Meirion and Susie Harries, *The War Artists*,
(London, 1983)

1919

Birth of second son Philip. Elected member of the London Group, exhibited every year with the group until 1939. First one-man exhibition, 'Mother and Child Drawings' at the Goupil Gallery, London. His first wife left him.

In those days the [London] group organised exhibitions twice in each year and these became exciting events, eagerly anticipated. As a student I remember wondering just what X or Y would produce next. It was that kind of atmosphere. To become a member was something to strive for…That is the background for my relation to Bernard Meninsky…To us, as students,

Meninsky was a name to conjure with.
Morris Kestelman, 'Reminiscences', *Meninsky*, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1981

1920

Publication by John Lane of *Mother and Child: 28 Drawings by Bernard Meninsky*, text by Jan Gordon. Succeeded Walter Richard Sickert as teacher of life drawing at Westminster School of Art. First wife returned to him but he rejected her and she died in childbirth soon afterwards.

These drawings represent the spirit of paternity as vividly as that of maternity…They are little intimacies which reveal, both by their touch and by their conception, a controlled intensity of feeling which is remarkable…Meninsky made these drawings of his wife and child after his return from the army, and one has only to imagine the contrast between the aridities of army life for an imaginative and sensitive man and the joys of home, to understand how vividly the latter must have excited his sensibility.
Jan Gordon, *Mother and Child: 28 Drawings by Bernard Meninsky*, (London, 1920)

1922-3

Trip of about three months to France with Stewart Edmonds, visited the artist Theo van Rysselberghe.

1926

Met Nora Barczinsky (stage name Edwards). Exhibition of drawings at the Mayor Gallery, London.

His great contribution [to drawing] was his feeling for construction in the model, how part fitted into part, how movement, twist and stress were linked. It was almost a sculptor's mode of thinking.
Morris Kestelman, 'Reminiscences', *Meninsky*, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1981

1927

Married Nora Barczinsky. Exhibition at the Collector's Gallery, Manchester.

Many people evade the fulfilment of their love because it would mean the entire submission and giving up of their individuality…In such a case only self-knowledge and the rich field of great mutual interest can help. We are choked by trifles as in a sea of sand…The happiness of marriage rests on the capability of persistently over-looking trifling objects.
Letter from Bernard Meninsky to Nora Meninsky [hereafter referred to as BM and NM] 6 July 1926, Tate Gallery Archive, 8225.4.1

1930

Exhibition of oil paintings at St. George's Gallery, London

Indefatigable in extending the boundaries of his art, and in projecting his talent towards fresh discovery, his various phases have been milestones of veritable progress.
T.W. Earp, 'The Work of Bernard Meninsky', *Apollo*, vol 11 No 63, March 1930

1931-34

Suffered severe clinical depression, treated by Dr. Suttie, spent time in Maudesley Hospital. Exhibited watercolours at Zwemmer's Gallery, London.

I have spent the morning destroying my oil paintings - I have destroyed about fifteen so you know the sort of mood I am in…I now realise very well my lack of success. My pictures are for the most part ugly – I dislike them myself and understand why other people don't like them …I have never hated my work as I do now.
Letter from BM to NM, undated, Tate Gallery Archive, 8225.4.2

1935

Designed sets and costumes for the ballet *David*, produced by the Markova-Dolin Company. Spent winter months painting in Spain, exhibited results at Zwemmer's Gallery, London, the following year.

I finished the backcloth – worked on the same one and improved it out of all recognition [but]…I am slowly beginning to think that there must be something wrong with David since it has been admired by all these old frousers who hate modern art.

Letter from BM to NM, 1935,
Tate Gallery Archive, 8225.4.2

1937

Trip to *Cagnes-sur-Mer*, south of France.

1939

After outbreak of war moved to Oxford where remained until end of war. Taught at Oxford City School of Art.

Every evening now I go for a walk along the river and realise more than ever what a healing balm nature can be.

Letter from BM to NM,
Tate Gallery Archive, 8225.4.8

1945

Returned to London and old job of teaching at Central School of Art. Exhibited gouaches at Leger Galleries, London.

The moment of enlightenment came when Meninsky sat down at one's drawing and started a drawing of his own. The transformation in the model's pose was magical; where it had been all confusion became a logical and inevitable shape.

Gabriel White, 'Meninsky at Westminster'
Meninsky, Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1981

1946

Book published of Milton's *L'Allegro and Il Penseroso* with illustrations by Meninsky.

1947

Painting trip to *Torremolinos*.

He had a strong sense of pictorial construction and had made a deep study of the classical tradition, especially the Florentines – Massacio, for example, or Mantegna. But it would be wrong to give the impression that his mind was fixed in traditional, classical modes… As an artist working in the 20th century he was concerned with Cézanne, another great constructor.

Morris Kestelman, 'Reminiscences', *Meninsky*,
Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1981

1948

Selected 'The Art of the Drawing' exhibition for the Arts Council. The catalogue essay 'The Appreciation of Drawing' by Meninsky based on lectures given at Central and Westminster Schools of Art. Painting trip to *Cagnes-sur-Mer*.

…to discuss drawing, is ultimately to enter upon a discussion of the whole field of the visual arts. Drawing is to these arts what the bony and muscular structure is to the living organism, it is their foundation, lacking which, there is no possibility of life.

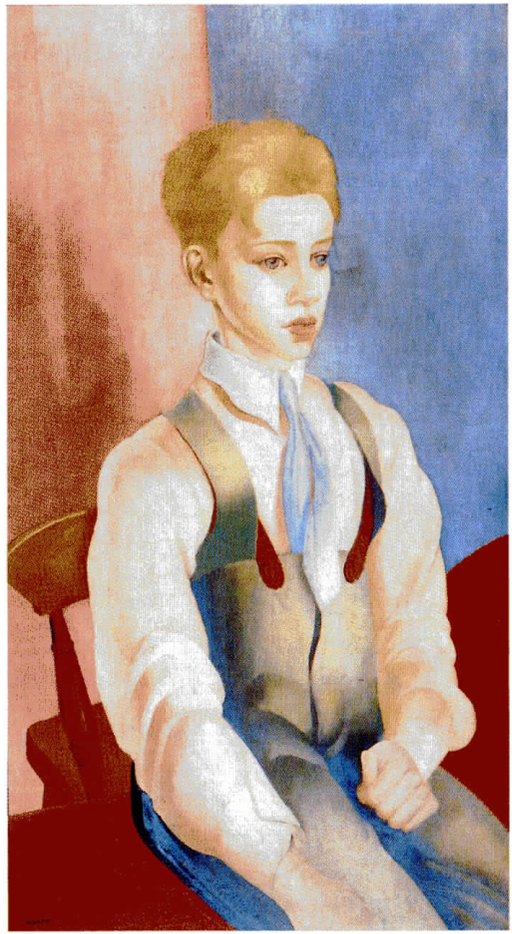
Bernard Meninsky 'The Art of Drawing',
lecture given at the Central School of Art,
Tate Gallery Archive, TAV 224B.

1950

12 February, suicide at home in Canfield Gardens.

Bernard's death came as a great shock to all his friends. Although often moody, he was really a most loveable man, unshakeably devoted to the highest aims, quite uncompromising, pitiless towards himself, tragically lonely in his inner self. One can never forget him.

Hans Feibusch, 'Reminiscences', *Meninsky*,
Museum of Modern Art Oxford, 1981



Portrait of a Boy 1917
Wakefield Museums and Arts

My Father

by Philip Meninsky

I have always regarded my father as one of the most important British artists and teachers of the first half of the twentieth century, and certainly one of the greatest draughtsmen. For various reasons he has never received the acknowledgement that his work deserved.

Because my mother died when I was a baby I never lived with my father. A wonderful lady (a retired nanny) agreed to look after me for six months while my father sorted his life out. My brother, two years older than me, went to Liverpool to live with my father's sister Kate. Instead of six months I stayed with Sarah Sewell until I was eighteen. I could not have had a better foster mother together with Harry, her husband, a market gardener.

My father visited me from time to time together with a female companion who I think was called Ida Schuster. I lived in Hoddesdon, Hertfordshire a splendid village, in St. Pauls Lane opposite the church. The front door of our cottage faced the entrance to the infant's school so my journey to school could not have been shorter.

On my father's visits we walked into the splendid local countryside and my father looked with interest at my early drawings. I was fascinated with drawing from a very early age, a fascination that has stayed with me for the rest of my life. I was a star pupil in the local secondary school and the art teacher Miss Giddings gave me personal tuition. I had some of my watercolours framed and hung in the school corridors. It was during these years that my father met and married Nora.

On the occasions that I visited my father in London I must have driven him to distraction when he sketched or painted me. I was constantly straining at the leash to see what was happening on the canvas or paper.

I remember my father telling me after the war that Winston Churchill would often arrive and just sit and watch him working which irritated him beyond measure.

The time came to decide my future and I expressed a desire to become an artist. My father replied "you have talent but it is a hard life – better you qualify in a profession and paint for a hobby", and so I was articled to a firm of accountants in the City, Jeffreys Alfred Henry & Marks. The senior partner Herbert Marks was a true lover of the arts and our offices were full of paintings and sculpture including works by my father and Epstein. Herbert Marks lived at Cookham and had periodical meetings at his home, those present included Barbara Hepworth, Ben Nicholson, Epstein, my father and others I have forgotten.

Meanwhile I continued to draw and paint. Sadly all the work I did pre-war was lost during the war. That is another story.

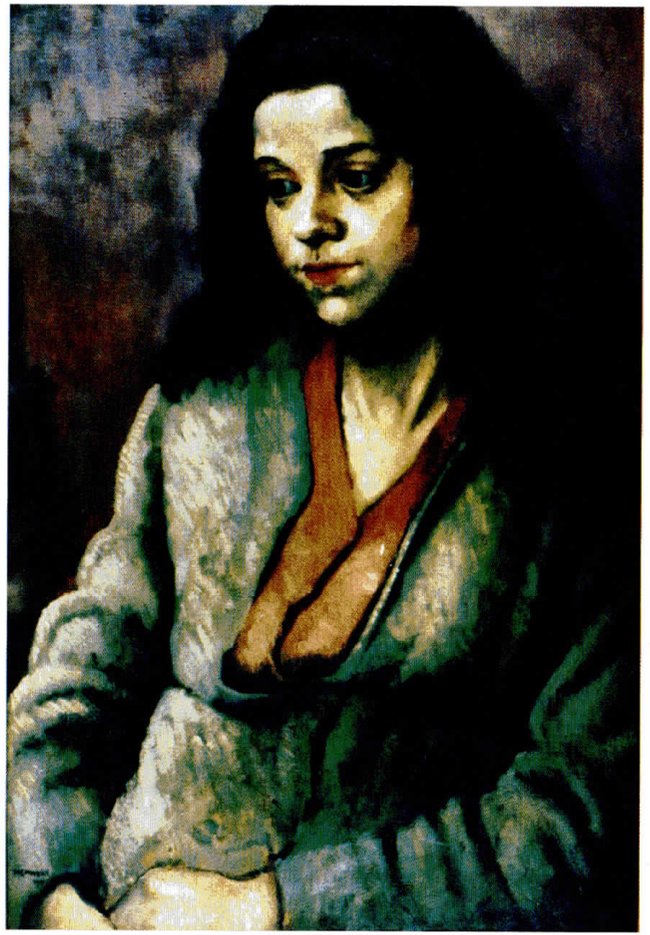
At the outbreak of the war in 1939 I was called up into the 5th Battalion of the Bedfordshire & Hertfordshire (my county regiment). I still continued to draw and was encouraged by the Padre Captain Stallard, himself a talented watercolourist.

I little knew then how important my continuing to draw would be. Posted to the Far

East, at the fall of Singapore I was taken prisoner and by a stroke of good fortune found myself near a bombed out school where I was able to rescue a good collection of paper, watercolours and brushes and a stick of Chinese ink. To cut a long story short I began to work for Major Arthur Moon of the Australian Army Medical Corp, recording camp and medical conditions of all types. These were hidden and eventually buried so that we were able to retrieve them after the war. There are now some seventy in the Imperial War Museum and the balance in the Australian War Museum.

I have told that story for a reason. When I returned to England I had about thirty of the drawings with me and took them to show my father. He must have spent at least an hour looking at the drawings without uttering a word. When he had looked at them all, he turned to me and said "I have made a mistake, but it's not too late you must carry on studying and working you do have talent". So began my career.

I only saw my father on a few occasions after that. Then came the shock of his suicide. I understand that when the news reached the Central School where he had been teaching, the staff and students all ceased working and made their way home. It was the 12th of February 1950.



Portrait of a Girl, Kate 1919
The University of Leeds Art Collection

'I'm trying to rid myself of the Jew in me'

by Monica Bohm-Duchen

The anti-semitic pogroms of Tsarist Russia and their consequences were to have a far-reaching impact on western artistic culture. For it was as a direct response to discrimination, persecution and worse that nearly two and a half million Russian and Eastern European Jews fled the countries of their birth between 1881 and 1914 to seek a better, safer and freer life in the West. In the United States of America, which gave refuge to the vast majority of these emigrants, a whole generation of visual artists emerged including in their ranks such well-known names as: Moses and Raphael Soyer, William Gropper, Louis Lozowick, Ben Shahn, Louise Nevelson, Mark Rothko, and Barnett Newman. These were the children of immigrants who, in varying degrees, sought both to perpetuate the traditions of their parents and grandparents and to assimilate themselves into the 'melting-pot' culture of the New World. The remarkable influx of Jewish artists into Paris in the period immediately before the First World War – of whom Chagall is only the best-known – represents a related, but significantly different phenomenon, in that these immigrants were already young people with artistic ambitions, for whom Paris stood not only for physical but also artistic freedom.

In 1880 the Anglo-Jewish community numbered a mere 65,000; by 1914 it had risen to 300,000. Much to the dismay not only of many gentiles, but also of the established Jewish community, which was predominantly of Sephardi(1) origin, middle-class and relatively anglicized, the Ashkenazi(2) newcomers, being predominantly working-class, orthodox and Yiddish-speaking, constituted an emphatically alien presence. Whereas most British Jews had already largely abandoned the inner cities for the suburbs, the newcomers congregated in conspicuous, densely-crowded ghettoes in urban centres, notably in the East End of London, in Manchester, Leeds, Glasgow and Liverpool. In contrast to the established community, which, as a result of political and social emancipation during the course of the nineteenth century, was pursuing an increasing diversity of occupations, the new immigrants were overwhelmingly employed in a handful of manual trades, about forty percent of them in the tailoring business. Yet the initial 'otherness' of these Jewish immigrants notwithstanding, most of the younger people eagerly sought to leave the ghetto and assimilate themselves as rapidly as possible into mainstream British society. Indeed it has been argued that this wave of immigrants ultimately became more integrated into the life of the 'host' country than any other comparable Jewish immigrant community. Assimilation, however, was a complex process that was necessarily fraught with ambivalence, ambiguities and tensions.

In this context, Meninsky's culturally complicated position as the son of orthodox Jewish immigrants from the Russian Pale of Settlement seeking to establish himself in

(1) Sephardi Jews were descendants of the Jews who lived in Spain and Portugal before the Expulsion of 1492.

(2) Ashkenazi Jews were Jews of Germanic extraction.



Mother and Child 1919
The University of Leeds Art Collection



David 1922
Private Collection

the artistic mainstream, becomes easier to understand. Although he was less than two months old when his parents left the Ukraine, the cultural milieu of his early childhood was emphatically un-English. His father, typically, was a tailor; less typically, he seems also to have been a heavy drinker. The family name appears to have originally been Menushkin; but on their arrival in England, was changed unceremoniously (as often happened) by a customs officer to Menisky; Bernard later added the 'n', to conform to the recognized Russian ending. Like many of their fellow immigrants, the family's original, but unfulfilled, intention was probably to proceed from Liverpool to New York. The fact that Bernard attended St. Simon's School, evidently not a Jewish establishment, where he learnt to read and write English fluently (although Yiddish remained the language spoken at home) testifies to the process of anglicization mentioned above.

This was hardly a conventional beginning for an aspiring young artist. Yet, as is now well-known, Meninsky was by no means the only Jew to emerge from this milieu. Remarkably – but not, I would suggest, surprisingly, given the rich cultural leaven of their formative years, five British artists of major stature were born within a few years of each other, in very similar circumstances: David Bomberg and Isaac Rosenberg in 1890; Meninsky and Mark Gertler in 1891; and Jacob Kramer in 1892. All had arrived in England as young children, the sons of Russian or Eastern European Jews. Of the five, only Kramer hailed from a family with any artistic credentials; the others' fathers were all humble artisan-tradesmen.

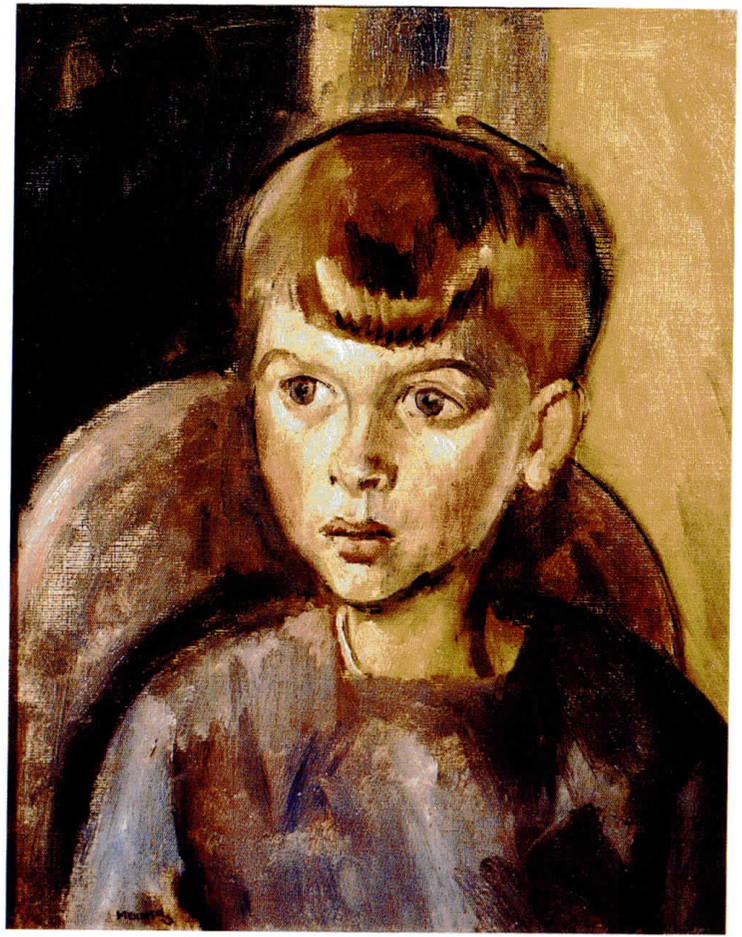
Rosenberg, Bomberg and Gertler grew up mainly in Whitechapel in East London, and had already had social contact with each other before ending up at the Slade School of Art. Kramer grew up in Leeds; Meninsky in Liverpool – and hence had no contact with the others until he moved to London in 1912. All, however, were given crucial

practical support by an organization called the Jewish Educational Aid Society, set up in 1896 with the aim of giving grants to talented Jewish children to enable them to train for the professions or a career in the arts. The 1904 Annual Report loftily stated that the committee's 'true function is to assist the embryo of genius to mount to the top of the ladder, not to drag mediocrity up a few rungs'. In 1907 an art sub-committee was set up, calling upon the expert opinions of established Anglo-Jewish artists Solomon J. Solomon[3] and William Rothenstein to aid the selection procedure.

Thus it was that when Bernard Meninsky entered the Slade School of Art in 1912, his fees and maintenance expenses were paid largely by a fifty pound grant raised by the Liverpool Jewish community but administered by the Jewish Educational Aid Society. Further grants from the latter came his way; which like Kramer and Bomberg (but unlike Gertler and Jacob Epstein[4], who seem not to have been expected to return the money they had been given), he pledged in writing to repay when he could. Ultimately he would owe the Society eighty pounds. After the First World War, a change of administration exerted greater pressure on the artists to pay back what was owing. These demands imposed a considerable burden on artists such as Meninsky, struggling to support young families and finding it difficult to sell their work in a post-war economic

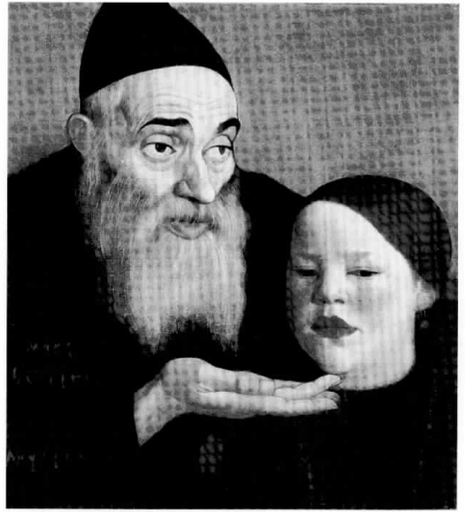
(3) Solomon J. Solomon (1860-1927) had been elected a Royal Academician in 1906, only the second artist of Jewish birth to be so honoured. The first had been Solomon Alexander Hart (1806-1881), in 1840. In his *Reminiscences*, Hart describes how one of his artist colleagues introduced him to his children as follows: 'This is Mr. Hart whom we have just elected Academician... Mr. Hart is a Jew, and the Jews crucified our Saviour, but he is a very good man for all that, and we shall see something more of him now...'.

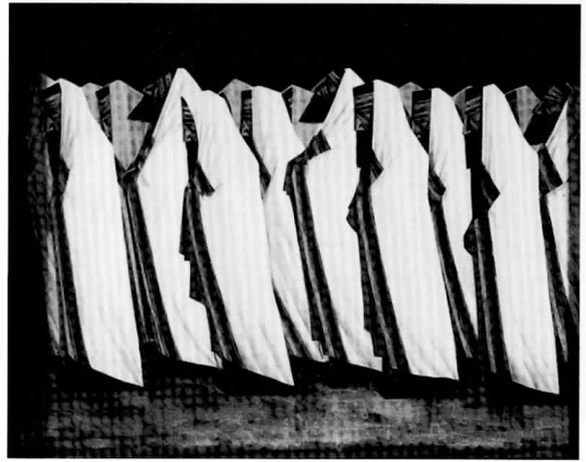
(4) Jacob Epstein was born in 1880 in New York's Lower East Side (directly comparable to London's East End) to Eastern European Jewish immigrant parents; he settled in England in 1905.



David 1923
Private Collection







(above left)
David Bomberg
Jewish Theatre 1913
Leeds Museums & Galleries
(City Art Gallery)

(above right)
Mark Gertler
The Rabbi and his Grandchild 1913
Southampton Art Gallery

(left)
Jacob Kramer
The Day of Atonement 1919
Leeds Museums & Galleries
(City Art Gallery)

recession. Although he offered to present the Society with paintings or drawings in lieu of money, his offers were rejected, with the result that at his death in 1950, he still owed demands imposed a considerable burden on artists such as Meninsky, struggling to support young families and finding it difficult to sell their work in a post-war economicthe Society fifty pounds (5).

The failure of the Society – and indeed Anglo-Jewry at large – to follow the enlightened example of the pre-war committee in playing an active role in nurturing the careers of Jewish artists did not go unremarked. In one of his rare references to things Jewish, Meninsky wrote bitterly to the committee after the failure of his 1930 exhibition: 'A little patronage from the wealthy art lovers in our Jewish Community would have made the world of difference to my exhibition but, alas, experience has taught me not to look for help and encouragement in that direction.'

Coming to London meant, of course, leaving home; and it seems that it was also around this time that Meninsky abandoned the strict religious orthodoxy of his parents. Yet in contrast to most of his Jewish contemporaries who were similarly turning away from the world of their childhood, Jewish subject-matter never features in his work. [see facing page] It is interesting that in spite of this, Bomberg saw fit to include examples of Meninsky's work in the Jewish Section of the Twentieth Century Art exhibition held in 1914 at the Whitechapel Art Gallery. When in 1935 he was commissioned to design the sets and costumes for the ballet *David*, an occasion on which an avowal of his Jewishness might have seemed appropriate, neither his designs (in marked contrast to the curtain

(5) I am grateful to Julia Weiner for alerting me to her article published in the *Anglo-Jewish Association Review* (vol.23, 1994), which contains hitherto unearthed information about Meninsky's relationship with the Jewish Educational Aid Society.

designed by Epstein) nor his public statements give any hint of his own origins. In adulthood Meninsky seems to have suppressed the fact of his Jewishness almost completely.

That Meninsky so rarely made explicit references to his Jewishness makes those he did make all the more significant. Mostly tellingly, he apparently once shocked his Jewish doctor friend Emmanuel Miller (father of Jonathan) by declaring that 'I'm trying to rid myself of the Jew in me'. His first – disastrous – marriage, to an Irish Catholic, further separated him from his roots. Yet it is worth noting that his eldest son David was brought up by the artist's sisters, both of whom married Jewish tailors and remained devoutly orthodox. Again, an unexpected comment is revealing: when a Jewish student of his announced that he was about to marry a gentile, Meninsky commented abruptly: 'You're making a mistake. It never works'. And when he was courting for the second time, Nora Barczinsky's Polish-Jewish origins seem to have been important to him. On one occasion, he wrote to her: 'I go on marvelling that I have found a Jewish maiden so adorable and so wholly delightful as you are'. Yet when they actually married, it was Nora, not he, who insisted on a synagogue wedding.

There were clearly numerous factors that contributed to Meninsky's fragile and unstable psyche and ultimate suicide; and it would undoubtedly be rash to ascribe too much psychological significance to the suppression of his Jewishness. Yet it would be equally foolish to claim that it played no part at all. (Much the same might be argued in the case of Mark Gertler, whom Meninsky knew well, and who also died by his own hand.) As for his art, one could speculate that it is precisely Meninsky's determined, almost over-assiduous appropriation of an artistic vocabulary and iconography far removed from his Jewish roots that imbues much of his work with a disconcerting and often haunting tension.



Farm Buildings
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky



illustration for L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Meninsky and the Miltonic

by John Russell Taylor

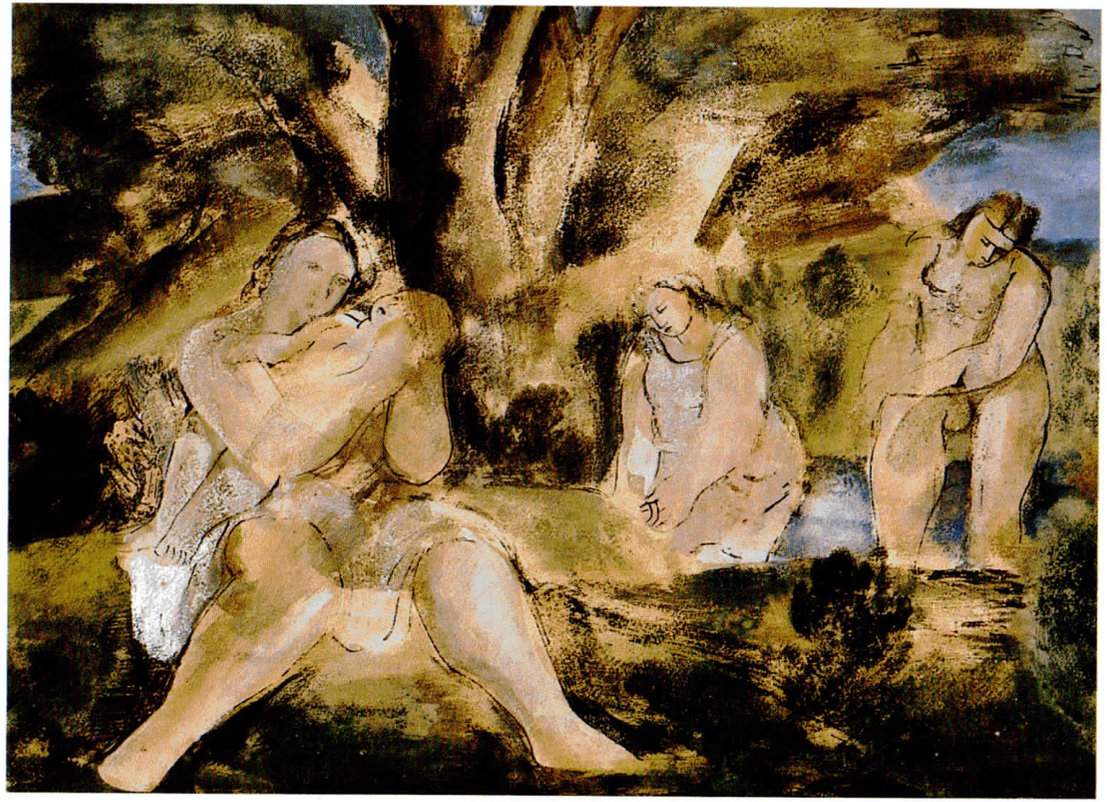
The subjects in Meninsky's work remained fairly consistent throughout his career: he painted landscapes, nudes, still-lifes, he also painted the occasional portrait, notably of his own two sons and of his second wife, Nora. It is striking that few of these works make any allusions, either cultural or religious. His concern seems primarily to have been with the process of drawing and painting, of colour and form. However, towards the end of his life there was a shift towards more defined subjects. This process may have begun as a result of his involvement with the ballet *David* for which he designed the sets and costumes in 1935. Whilst the designs made little direct reference to Meninsky's Judaism there was a necessary engagement with the story of the ballet.

The shift toward allusions in his easel painting appeared a few years later in what has been called his Miltonic style, probably because the *locus classicus* is in his line illustrations for an edition of Milton's poems *L'Allegro* and *Il Penseroso*. The book itself appeared in 1946, but it is not clear exactly when the idea of Meninsky illustrating this particular text came up. Just possibly it might have been before the war, and put on hold

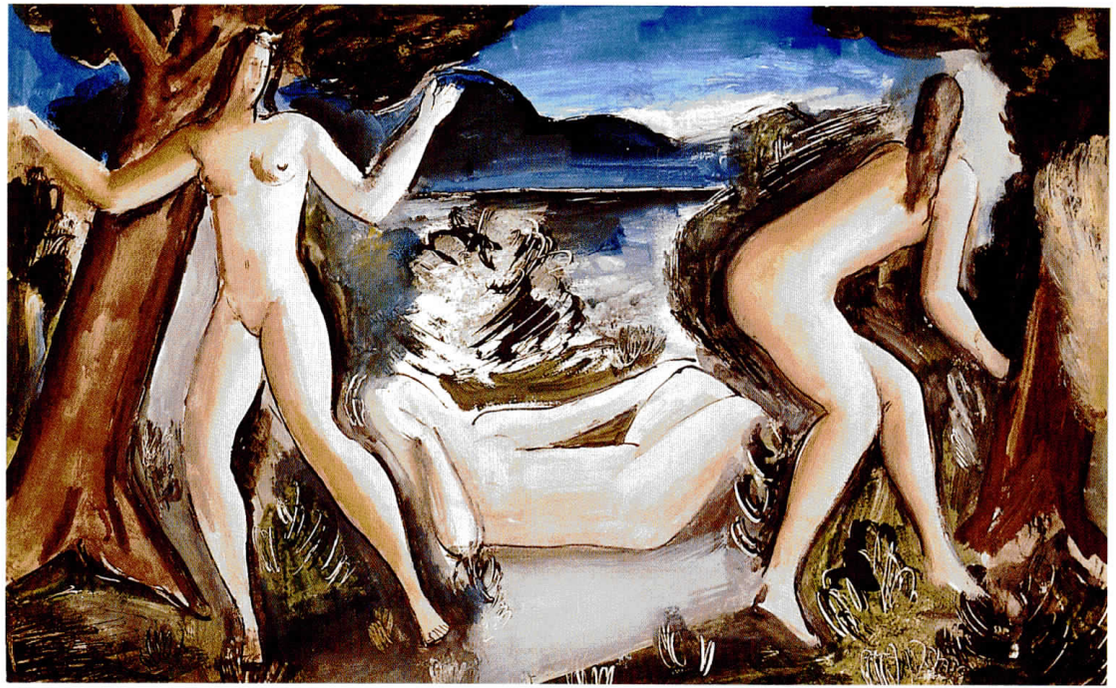
like so many publishing projects. That could explain where the inspiration for his new style and subject matter came from, as they first really manifested themselves around 1940. But it is much more likely that the commission came his way at the end of the war, precisely because he would by then have been for several years painting the kind of thing which would seem to make him eminently suitable as an illustrator of Milton's pastorals. The theme of the two poems was also close to Meninsky's heart, 'L'Allegro' concerns the banishment of sorrow and an evocation of joy whilst 'Il Penseroso' embraces melancholy.

Either way, it must have something to do with Meninsky's sojourn in Oxford. When war broke out in 1939, all London art schools were instantly closed, in a fit of Phoney War panic; in any case, many of their male students were required to go off to the Forces. Among the schools closed were, inevitably, the Central and the Westminster, from teaching in which most of Meninsky's basic income came. As there was little point his staying in London, he moved first to Tunbridge Wells, then to relatives of Nora near Marlow, and then, very shortly, to friends of his in Hampden Poyle, a village near Oxford. Since the art schools in Oxford were still staggering on, though with a much reduced student intake, one of them seemed the obvious place for Meninsky to find teaching work. By the end of 1940 he was found a position in the Oxford City School of Art, and moved into rooms nearer the centre.

It must have been then that he began painting fully fledged examples of his Miltonic pastoral landscapes with figures. A typical example would place one or more figures in a generalised, idealised setting. For the most part the people in the paintings are calm and monumental, though occasionally, as in the gouache called (without Meninsky's authority) *Flight*, there are signs of violent movement. In this picture, to the right of the composition, a nude female figure, back to the spectator, seems to be running



Bathers in a landsape
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky



Three Bathers
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky

precipitately away across a field. But the main emphasis is on the group of three to the left, a Madonna-like mother and child, and a nude female figure reclining at their feet, all radiating peace and tranquillity.

The word 'flight' in one of Meninsky's own titles always seems to be associated with the New Testament Flight into Egypt: the journey is a frequent theme in his pictures of this period, despite the number of works which simply have immobile, thickset, monumental figures, clothed or unclothed, male or female, standing or sitting, or sometimes reclining. But again and again we see groups of figures clearly on their way (unhurriedly) through a characteristically idyllic landscape.

This sudden appearance of Christian references at this point in Meninsky's life may be thought significant, and for a while in Oxford Meninsky became friendly with the famous Roman Catholic priest Father Martin D'Arcy, who was presumed to regard him as a ripe subject for conversion. On any practical level this proved not to be the case, and the tête-à-tête D'Arcy/Meninsky dinners stopped as suddenly as they had started. But on a less practical level the friendship with D'Arcy may have sparked Meninsky's interest in Christian imagery – at least when it suited his purpose. On the other hand, it may mean no more than the vague but persistent references to the legend of Leda and the Swan – once, surprisingly, with the place of Leda being taken by a lissom youth. The Flight into Egypt, after all, is as much as Leda and the Swan an unarguable part of the European post-classical, post-religious image bank. And we know from the famous story of Meninsky looking excitedly at a Cézanne drawing and asking "What is it? Is it a landscape?" when it quite unequivocally was not, that subject-matter in art was low in his list of priorities.

Naturally the style in which these pastorals are painted does not come from nothing. The female figures in particular seem to be extraordinarily chunky and solid, and this

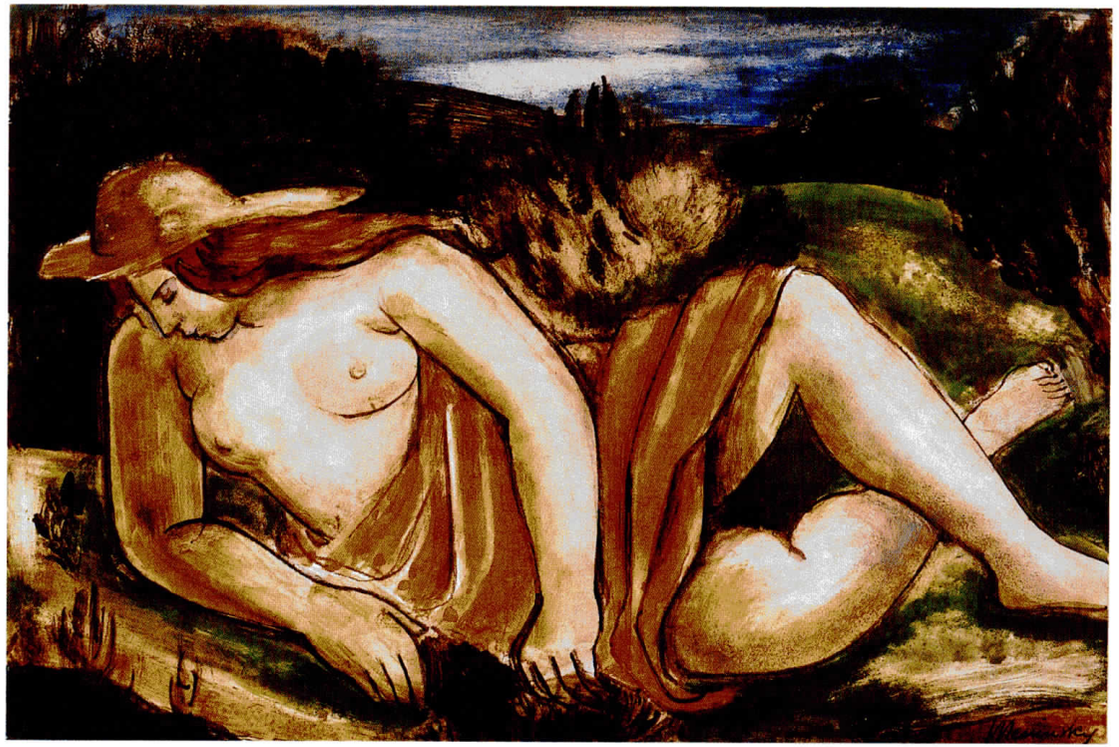
goes back in Meninsky's own work to the point in the early thirties when a monumental way of painting the human figure took over from his earlier, lightly worn Naturalism. When we see this style burgeoning in Meninsky's compositions with female figures we may perhaps see also some influence from Picasso's monumental neoclassical style of the early twenties, notably the drop curtain for Diaghilev's ballet *Le Train Bleu* (1924), with its hefty female figures thundering across a beach. It is certainly useful at this juncture to see Meninsky in an international context, and bear in mind that his travels to paint made him considerably less parochial than many of his contemporaries.

Picasso notwithstanding, the influence most people immediately recognise in Meninsky's later period is that of Samuel Palmer. Palmer, friend and disciple of William Blake, had been virtually forgotten for a century, when in the twenties a whole group of young artists like Graham Sutherland were enthused by his quaintness and intense mysticism, the playing in his prints and small paintings with 'the light that never was, on land or sea'. Through Sutherland in particular, a whole generation of painters in the forties, the so-called neoromantics, came under Palmer's spell, and you find something of Palmer's close-packed intensity in the work of John Craxton, John Minton, Keith Vaughan. Some of his crabbed perversity too, if truth be told. And this seems to be precisely where Meninsky's paintings of the war years belong. 'Enter these enchanted woods, Ye who dare…'

This particular kind of very English romanticism, with its overtones of national beleaguerment during the dark days of the war and its nods to surrealism in a period when wildest surreal fantasy had become sober post-blitz fact, was very much in the air at the time, and perfectly capable of infecting even Meninsky, who had always been the 'Cat Who Walked by Himself', and was even more so now, in the relative isolation of Oxford. But one thing that Oxford had at that time was plenty of Palmers: the



Nude in Red Robe
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky



Nude in Red Robe 1943
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Ashmolean had a splendid collection of his prints, and there Meninsky could have seen – and surely did – the great progenitor of the whole movement in English art, Blake's own woodcut illustrations to Thornton's translation of Virgil. Often in exile, however lightly worn, it is a question not of what you are excluded from as what you are shut in with.

As it happens, we know that Meninsky had become aware of Palmer and his circle almost twenty years before. When Laurence Binyon's book *The Followers of William Blake*, with its excellent reproductions of Blake's Virgil woodcuts and the prints of Palmer, Calvert and others, was published in 1924, Meninsky was not slow to acquire a copy. Two years later he went several times to the very influential exhibition at the Victoria & Albert Museum 'Drawings, Etchings and Woodcuts by Samuel Palmer and other Disciples of William Blake'. These were the same sources from which Graham Sutherland, quite independently, caught the Palmer bug. In Sutherland the influence was evident immediately, if perhaps it remained superficial. For Meninsky it took longer, but when it finally did manifest itself, it proved to permeate his art, root and branch.

Catalogue

Dimensions in brackets are frame sizes
All sizes in centimetres

Two Women and a Child 1913
pen, pencil, & coloured inks 32 x 25 (45 x 36)
Ben Uri Art Gallery, London

Portrait of a Girl 1916
oil on canvas 40 x 24.8 (56 x 41)
Collection, Sheffield Galleries and Museums Trust

Head of a Boy 1916
oil on board 32 x 22 (42.5 x 32.5)
John Evans

Portrait of a Boy 1917
oil on canvas 112 x 61 (115.5 x 65)
Wakefield Museums and Arts
(shown at Liverpool, Leeds and Sheffield)

Child Study 1918
black chalk 25.5 x 15 (48.5 x 36)
Private collection

Mother and Child 1918
watercolour 27 x 20 (52.5 x 33)
Private collection

Mother and Child 1918
watercolour 35.5 x 25 (48 x 41)
Private collection

Mother and Child 1918
ink & wash 21 x 19 (50 x 41)
Private collection

Portrait of a Girl, Kate 1919
oil on canvas 76 x 50.8 (89.5 x 64.8)
The University of Leeds Art Collection

Mother and Child 1919
oil on canvas 121.9 x 91.4 (134.6 x 104)
The University of Leeds Art Collection

Mother and Child
28 Drawings by Bernard Meninsky
text by Jan Gordon
John Lane (London, 1920)
Private collection

Still Life with Bowl of Pears 1922
oil on canvas 39 x 49 (60 x 70)
Private collection

Still Life with Apples
oil on canvas 41 x 51 (50 x 60)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

David 1922
pastel 46 x 29 (68 x 53)
Private collection

David 1923
oil on canvas 49 x 39 (66 x 57)
Private collection

John Banting c.1924
watercolour & pencil 33.5 x 23 (53 x 44)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Boy with Cat 1925
oil on canvas 133 x 65 (138 x 70)
Royal Pavilion, Libraries & Museums,
Brighton and Hove
(shown at Ben Uri and Kingston Museum only)

Portrait of Nora
chalk 52 x 34.5 (72.5 x 54.5)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Head of a Girl
chalk 35 x 29 (54 x 46.5)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Landscape with Trees
gouache 31.5 x 38 (47 x 53)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

River Barge
watercolour, pencil & ink 42 x 59 (62 x 77.5)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Mother and Child
watercolour & pencil 45 x 25 (75 x 57)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Seated Nude
chalk 47 x 51 (69.5 x 74)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Standing Nude
watercolour & chalk 41 x 11 (66 x 34)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Reclining Nude
chalk 35 x 54 (51 x 70)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Farm Buildings
watercolour, pencil & ink 38 x 55 (57 x 72)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Cookham Deane c.1930
oil on canvas 70 x 90 (84 x 104)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Portrait of a Girl
pencil & watercolour 35 x 32 (53.5 x 48)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Bathers in a Landscape
gouache & ink 36 x 50 (59.5 x 72)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Three Bathers
gouache & ink 34 x 56 (48.5 x 69.5)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Nude in Red Robe
gouache 54 x 31 (77.5 x 52)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Peasant Girl
gouache 57 x 35 (74 x 52)
Mr. and Mrs. Jocelin Harris

Philip (aged 16) 1935
oil on canvas 49 x 38 (64 x 54)
Philip Meninsky

Two Standing Bathers c.1940
oil on canvas 55.8 x 38 (70 x 52)
Private collection

The Bathers c.1940
oil on canvas 71 x 91 (85 x 105)
Mr. and Mrs. D. Abbott

Reclining Nude with Hat 1943
watercolour, pencil & ink 19 x 27 (44.5 x 53.5)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Design for Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
ink 33 x 19.5 (52.5 x 41)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Design for Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
pencil & ink 33 x 20 (52.5 x 41)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Design for Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
ink 33 x 19.5 (52 x 41)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Design for Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
ink 33 x 19.5 (52 x 41)
Contemporary Art Society
Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Design for Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
ink & colour wash 32 x 20 (53 x 42)
Peter Geiringer

Design for Milton's L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
pencil & wash 31 x 20 (53 x 42)
Peter Geiringer

John Milton L'Allegro and Il Penseroso
illustrated by Bernard Meninsky
Allan Wingate (London, 1946)
Jonathan Blond

Landscape with figure c.1946
oil on canvas 27 x 37 (51 x 61)
Private collection

Lovers on a Beach c.1947
oil on canvas 70 x 90 (94 x 114)
Private collection
courtesy of Belgrave Gallery, London



Head of a Girl
CAS Bequest of Nora Meninsky

Family Group 1947
gouache 54 x 35.5 (76 x 56)
Ben Uri Art Gallery, London

The Flight 1947
gouache 26 x 56 (54 x 84)
Private collection

Bust of Bernard Meninsky 1926
Edward Carter Preston
plaster 43 x 17 x 18
Private collection
(shown at Liverpool only)

The exhibition will be accompanied by a display of archive material from public and private collections including: sketches, photographs and exhibition catalogues, and books which belonged to Meninsky. The content of the display will vary at each venue. We are particularly grateful to the Tate Gallery Archive for lending material to the display (Tate Gallery Archive Meninsky collection catalogue reference 8225).