ART/02/142

MEMORIAL EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS

ALFRED WOLMARK

1877 - 1961

BEN URI
ART GALLERY
1961

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27th September — 22nd October, 1961

BEN URI ART GALLERY

14 Berners Street, London W.1. LANgham 4864



Self Portrait, 1941 (No. 73)

Foreword

It was through my mother, the late Mrs. Herbert Cohen, that I first got to know Alfred Wolmark. For many years she had been interested in this young revolutionary artist who painted, in those early days at the turn of the century, in such vivid colours. He was first and foremost a Jew, had lived most of his youth in Whitechapel, but when I knew him he had a studio in Paddington and it was there I sat to him for several of his pictures. By this time the art world of London had recognised him as one of their *avant-garde* young men — he was no longer painting the old men of Whitechapel, but was launching out in the very individual style and bold colouring that we associate with Wolmark's work. Though he no longer actually lived in Whitechapel he had many friends there and in 1915 he and a few kindred spirits inspired by Leon Berson, a Polish-Belgian artist, founded the Ben Uri Art Society which for so many years was supported and encouraged almost entirely by East End Jewry. It must have been in the early thirties that they aroused my interest in the activities of the Ben Uri, making me a member, and later I was to join the Art Committee and finally to become the Chairman. At that time the Society had no home of its own and Wolmark never ceased to stress at every meeting the importance of founding a Ben Uri Art Gallery. This eventually took place during the Second World War, with the help and courage of Mr. Cyril Ross, one of Wolmark's most ardent admirers and patrons.

The Ben Uri Art Gallery and Society and its many exhibitors owe Alfred Wolmark a real debt of gratitude, for without his constant fighting on its behalf many Jewish artists, both from this country and from the Continent, and latterly Israel, would not have had the encouragement and opportunity of holding exhibitions and of being recognised in the world of art.

It is to pay tribute to his memory that this exhibition of his paintings covering a period of 47 years has been arranged, and we hope that it will be seen and enjoyed by a wide and varied public. The Honorary Officers of the Ben Uri Art Society are deeply grateful to Mr. Archibald Ziegler and to Mr. Kalman Kemeny who selected the paintings, and to Mr. Alan Hall and Mr. Eric Wolmark for their co-operation and assistance in the organisation of the exhibition. To Mr. William Gaunt we express our thanks for the introduction to this catalogue, and to Dr. Geoffrey Konstam for his memoir and for his invaluable help and advice. The Society is much indebted to Mr. Cyril Ross, Dr. and Mrs. Geoffrey Konstam and Mr. and Mrs. H. Faber who have so generously lent their pictures.

Ethel Solomon.

Biographical Notes

1877 December 28th, born Warsaw.
1883 Came to England with parents and spent early years in Devon.
1895 Entered Royal Academy Schools.
1897 First silver medal for drawing at R.A. Schools.
1905 First one-man exhibition at Bruton Galleries, London.
1910 Exhibited with Post-Impressionists in International Society of Artists' show at Grafton Gallery, London.
1911 Married Bessie Leah Tapper.
1911 Designs for two Diaghilev ballets.
1911 Concarneau paintings exhibited at Goupil Galleries, London.
1915 Exhibition of stage designs at Incorporated Stage Society.
1915 Stained glass window for St. Mary's Church, Slough.
1916 Exhibition of decorative pottery at Martyn's Gallery, London.
1919 Exhibition at Barreiro's Gallery, Paris.
1920 Exhibition at Kevorkian Galleries, New York.
1922 Exhibition at the St. George's Gallery, London.
1925 Exhibition at the Charpentier Galleries, Paris.
1928 Exhibition of Portrait Drawings at the Lefevre Galleries, London.
1947 70th Birthday Exhibition at the Leicester Galleries, London.
1948 70th Birthday Exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery.
1952 75th Birthday Exhibition at the Ben Uri Gallery.
1959 Exhibition at the Woodstock Gallery, London.
1961 January 6th, died London.

Works in the Tate Gallery, National Portrait Gallery, Arts Council, Galleries at Aberdeen, Derby, Stoke-on-Trent, Leamington, Southampton, York, Shakespeare Memorial Museum, Stratford-on-Avon, Musée d'Orleans, Tel Aviv Museum, Ben Uri Art Gallery and many private collections.

Introduction

The late Alfred Wolmark has an individual place among the post-Impressionists of British painting. His best work may justly be considered from this point of view in its simplifications of form and especially in its sense of colour. It was, I recall, through the magazine *Colour*, that in youthful days I first became interested in his painting. Though not an *avant-garde* periodical of the modern kind or even in the strictest definition an art magazine (it included poems and articles on a diversity of subjects), *Colour*, somewhat before and during the 1914-18 war, showed an original spirit in its choice of reproductions and among them it was always exciting to come, as one frequently did, on a still-life by Wolmark or other pictures by him, unusual at that time in England in its post-Impressionist *élan*. It would be too much to say that he introduced a movement to this country or that he arrived in entire independence at a direction of style and aim comparable with that of painters in France. He liked to assert that he was painting in a Gauginesque manner before he had ever seen a Gauguin and, in his old age, spoke of his unique role as a pioneer, reflecting with astonishment on the fact that the public had become, or remained, oblivious to what he had done. One would have to demur that Gauguin had died in the South Seas and that his art was already a matter of history before Wolmark embarked on his early adventures in colour. It could be pointed out that he was not alone in England and that a number of brilliant young artists in the years before 1914 were already profiting by the lessons they had learned from Cézanne, Gauguin, and Van Gogh; Spencer Gore, Gilman, Bevan and other members of the Camden Town Group. It is distinctly worthy of note, nevertheless, that at a time when post-Impressionism was a mystery, still vaguely horrifying to an insular majority (critics and painters included) here was an artist who in some degree reflected its spirit. Whatever threads of influence were or were not involved, he effected a revolution in his own style in the early years of this century. After beginning with portraits and religious subjects in which he took Rembrandt as his ideal, painted in sombre tones of brown, he suddenly cleared his palette and replaced a rather melancholy naturalism with a radiance in entire contrast. Even before Roger Fry staged his famous Post-Impressionist exhibition he exhibited in the effort of kindred character organised by the International Society of Artists at the Grafton Gallery in 1910. He remembered with satisfaction that a painting of his hung alongside a Van Gogh.

Wolmark was then thirty-three and well versed in the language of colour though his earlier, like his later work, has several phases. The earliest picture in the present exhibition "On the Beach" of 1908 (No. 1) has a certain delicacy which brings him for the moment nearer to Conder than to Van Gogh. There is delicacy also in the Concarneau paintings of 1911, the flat, pale colours and simplified contours of which form a well-marked and attractive stage in his development. One painting in particular of a figure seated beneath a tree "Rest" (No. 26) draws the attention by its combination of pastel colour and firmness of design. A more definite use of colour, a bolder simplification followed in the period between 1911 and 1920 which, I should say, was Wolmark's best on the whole. The still-lifes of this time stand out and the Ben Uri exhibition has a number of choice examples—for instance "Apples in a Blue Bowl" of 1915 (No. 32) in which the artist gave a personal demonstration of the fact that a few apples in a dish are subject enough to provide a satisfying richness of colour and form.

It does not make him less of an artist that he was various in his intentions and that the results of his experiments in one direction or another were unequal. At the same time as he was painting his admirable still-lifes he applied himself to decorative undertakings in which he was not so happy. His decorative pottery was one of those efforts to devise an abstract scheme of ornament, applicable to objects of use, of which I can think of no successful modern instance. As far as objects of use are concerned, modern painting suggests basic simplicities of shape and texture rather than a repertoire of ornamentation, and Wolmark's attempt to make one from unsymmetrical and geometrical patterns of colour did not grapple with the realities of the problem. Some of the picture frames he himself designed are open to the same criticism, though occasionally they have a period attraction.

It is the painter, however, and not the decorative designer, whom this exhibition is designed to present. Here we see him at different times in a number of moods. He comes near to the best of his achievement in such renderings of the figure as the "Seated Negro" (No. 30) of 1914 against a rich red ground or the standing female nude (No. 38) of 1917; nearer I think than in a more elaborate effort at subject composition like the "Temple Builders" (No. 46) of 1919. His portrait of the art critic C. Lewis Hind (No. 45) is a vigorous piece of work which well shows his ability in this department of painting. In landscape he is variable from the attractive restraint of the London houses in snow (No. 36) painted in 1915 to such bursts of colour as the Haystack series which seems to have been inspired by Van Gogh.

It is not easy to trace a consecutive development in his work from 1920 onwards. In general he seems to have turned to a lower key of colour. One scarcely recognises the early associate of Gaudier-Brzeska and the young Epstein, faintly tinted with Vorticist enthusiasm, in the painter of country scenes in the 1940s which sometimes descend to an unremarkable level; yet as late as 1943, he was capable of a good solid still-life, if with less of a glow than it would have had a quarter of a century before. The self-portrait of 1941 (No. 73), soberly conceived in dull blues and purples has vitality still. Wolmark is an unequal painter from whose work one has to pick and choose with care—with as much care as the present exhibition has been chosen. This qualification having been made, it can be affirmed that there are some very good things in this retrospective display and that the visitor will be well rewarded by a discriminating exploration.

William Gaunt.

Catalogue

All the paintings are in oils. Measurements are given in inches, height first.

Many of the paintings are for sale. Prices may be obtained on application to the Secretary.

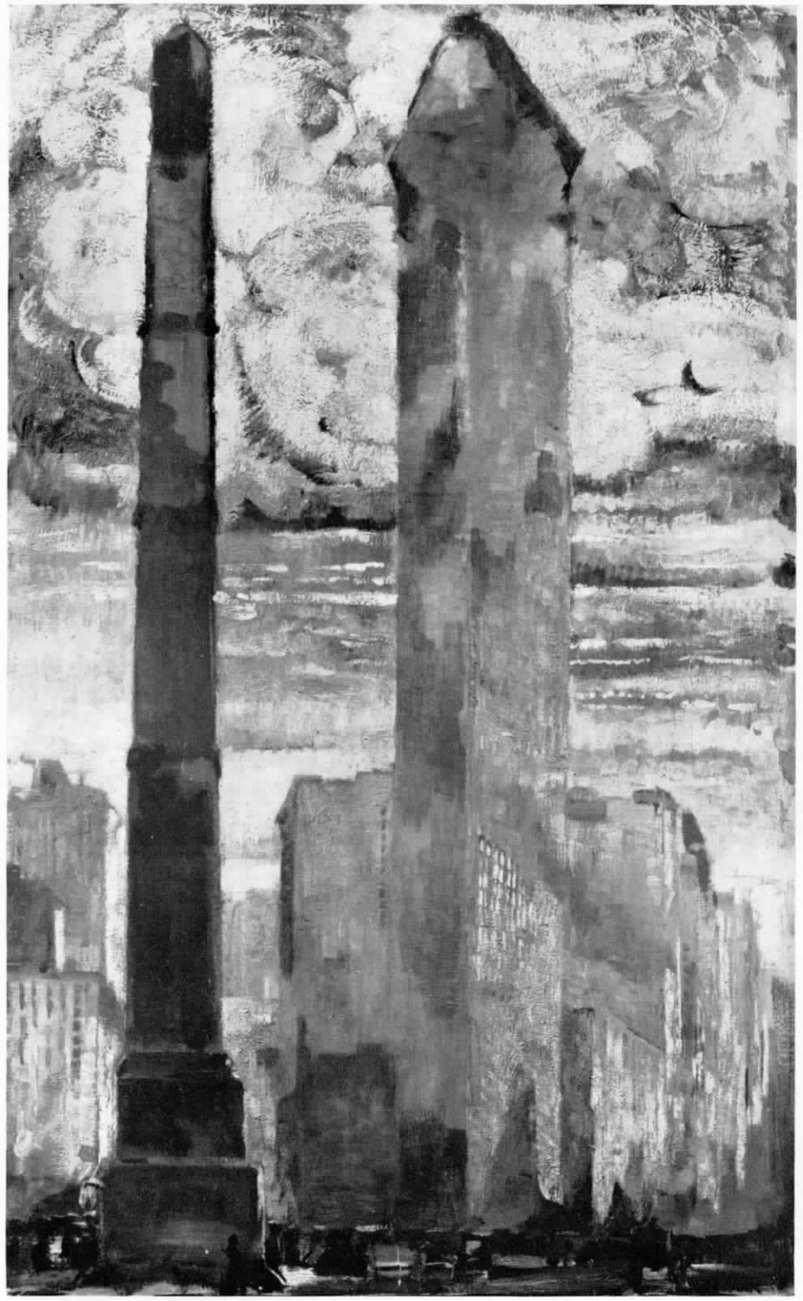
1. On the Beach, Devon, 1908 .. .. 30 × 25
2. Men of Old, 1908 .. .. 20 × 16
   Ben Uri Permanent Collection
3. Trees with Figures, 1909 .. .. 20 × 16
4. Portrait of Mrs. Robert Solomon, 1909 .. .. 36 × 28
   Lent by Mrs. Robert Solomon
5. Seaside, 1909 .. .. 16 × 20
6. A Decorative Arrangement, 1909 .. .. 30 × 22
7. Landscape with Tree, 1909 .. .. 18 × 15
8. The Yellow Trees, 1910 .. .. 16 × 12
9. Trees in the Sun, 1910 .. .. 20 × 16
10. Miss Wilmersdoerffer, 1910 .. .. 24 × 20
11. Flowers in a Green Vase, 1910 .. .. 20 × 16
12. Concarneau—Figure in Blue, 1911 .. .. 18 × 15
    Lent by Mrs. Geoffrey Konstam
13. Fisher Boy, 1911 .. .. 30 × 25
    Lent by Cyril J. Ross, Esq., O.B.E., R.O.I.
14. Morning in Concarneau, 1911 .. .. 15 × 18
15. Concarneau, 1911 .. .. .. 18 × 15
16. Boats, 1911 .. .. 18 × 15
17. Fishing Boats, Brittany, 1911 .. .. 18 × 15



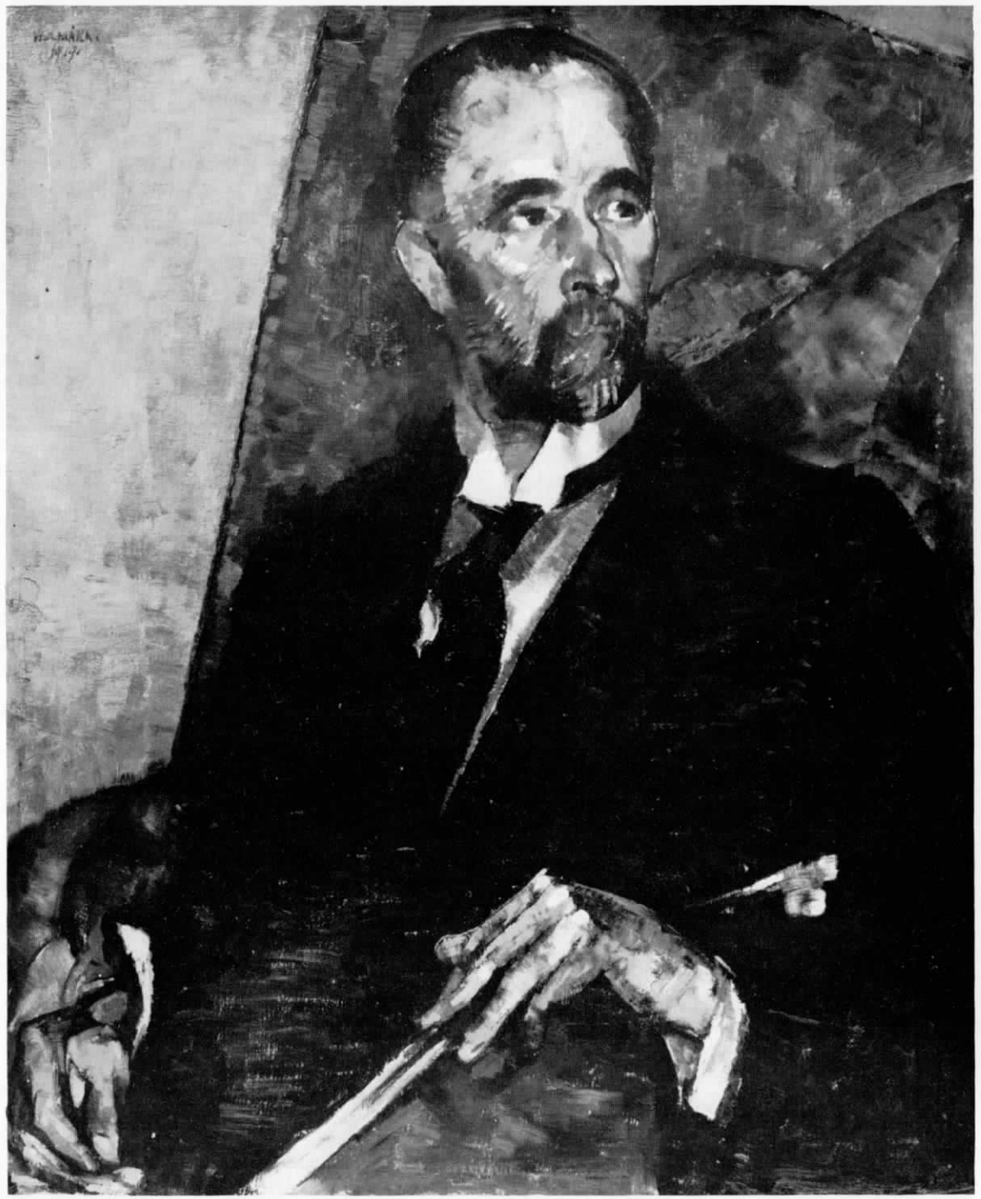
On the beach, Devon 1908 (No. 1)



A Decorative Arrangement, 1909 (No. 6)



Flat Iron Building, New York, 1919 (No. 47)



Lewis Hind, 1919 (No. 45)

18.	THE MARKET, 1911	18 × 15
19.	CONCARNEAU—FISHERMAN AND BOAT, 1911 Lent by Mrs. Geoffrey Konstam	18 × 15
20.	CONCARNEAU FISHERMAN, 1911	18 × 15
21.	UNDER THE TREES, CONCARNEAU, 1911	18 × 15
22.	YELLOW CHRYSANTHEMUMS, 1912	20 × 16
23.	SARA, 1912	30 × 25
24.	SELF PORTRAIT, 1913	30 × 25
25.	STILL LIFE, 1914	20 × 24
26.	REST, 1914 Lent by Cyril J. Ross, Esq., O.B.E., R.O.I.	18 × 15
27.	FROM MY WINDOW, 1914	16 × 12
28.	LANDSCAPE WITH COWS, 1914	15 × 18
29.	PORTRAIT OF A WOMAN IN OFFICER'S DRESS, 1914	30 × 20
30.	SEATED NEGRO, 1914	30 × 25
31.	WOMAN IN A RED DRESS, 1915	24 × 20
32.	APPLES IN A BLUE BOWL, 1915 Lent by Cyril J. Ross, Esq., O.B.E., R.O.I.	16 × 20
33.	THE HAYSTACK, 1915	16 × 12
34.	HAYSTACK AND TREE, 1915	20 × 16
35.	HAYSTACK IN THE SUN, 1915	20 × 16
36.	BROADHURST GARDENS IN SNOW, 1915	16 × 20
37.	PORTRAIT OF MRS. ALFRED KONSTAM, 1915	44 × 34
38.	NUDE, 1917	36 × 22
39.	THE BIG TREE, 1918	16 × 12
40.	THE ARTIST'S BROTHER, 1919	15 × 12

84. LANDSCAPE WITH TREES, 1948 .. .. $16\frac{1}{4} \times 24\frac{1}{4}$
Lent by Cyril J. Ross, Esq., O.B.E., R.O.I. ..

85. FLOWERS, 1948 .. .. 22 × 16

86. BEECH TREES, 1951 .. .. 18 × 20

87. THE RED TULIPS, 1952 .. .. $13 \times 9\frac{1}{2}$

88. STILL LIFE, 1952 .. .. 12 × 16

89. STILL LIFE WITH FRUIT, 1955 .. .. 6 × 8

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90. HEAD OF ALFRED WOLMARK, bronze .. ..
by Gaudier-Brzeska. Lent by Dr. Geoffrey Konstam

Alfred Wolmark

My early memories of Alfred Wolmark datefrom the first World War when he was a frequent visitor at my parents' home. Then in 1919 a fellow medical student and I posed as nudes for a large painting he was doing of an army medical examination. Wolmark had recently experienced such an examination and was turned down because of his severe myopia. The composition included a self-portrait as one of the examinees. After this a warm friendship grew up between us which lasted through the years.

I remember Wolmark in the twenties and thirties as a small, dapper, bespectacled man with an outsize head and a flowing mane, sporting white spats, bow-tie and sombrero—unmistakably the artist.

He was engrossed in his experiments in colour, the exuberance of which so overshadowed the work of his contemporaries that he was an unpopular co-exhibitor. To be hung at the Academy exhibition, on occasions he would send pictures acceptable to the selectors and then repaint them on 'Varnishing Day'.

He read widely and particularly enjoyed the poetry of Keats, Swinburne and Robert Browning. His study of Rabbi Ben Ezra was a work of which he was justly proud.

He would settle down in his studio arm-chair at Broadhurst Gardens and discourse at length on his favourite authors, and also pin-point salient characteristics of his sitters, many of whom were distinguished men and women of the day. His artistic interests were many and were reflected in his stage settings, book illustrations, decorative pottery, poster designs, sculpture and interior decoration. The vivid and contrasting colours of the walls and ceiling of his Broadhurst Gardens home, then far in advance of contemporary ideas, attracted much comment.

His large coloured glass west window, at St. Mary's Parish Church, Slough, entitled "Days of Creation", was the subject of legal proceedings. Wolmark, impulsive and convinced of the merit of his design, was dissatisfied with his counsel's presentation of his case and insisted on pleading on his own behalf. Supported by the opinion of experts he helped to win the day.

P. G. Konody, the noted art critic, wrote in 1915 ... "the jewelled splendour of this window stands unrivalled in modern decorative art, and may lead to a great revival of colour glass work in a hitherto unexplored direction." The design was near-abstract and of brilliant hues, and Konody's opinion offset the violent hostility aroused in conventional circles.

Generous to the point of selflessness (his own ship was usually close to the rocks) he would do anything to help young and promising artists. During Epstein's early years in England when he could

scarcely afford metropolitan train fares, Wolmark introduced him to prospective clients and thereby helped to tide him over a difficult period.

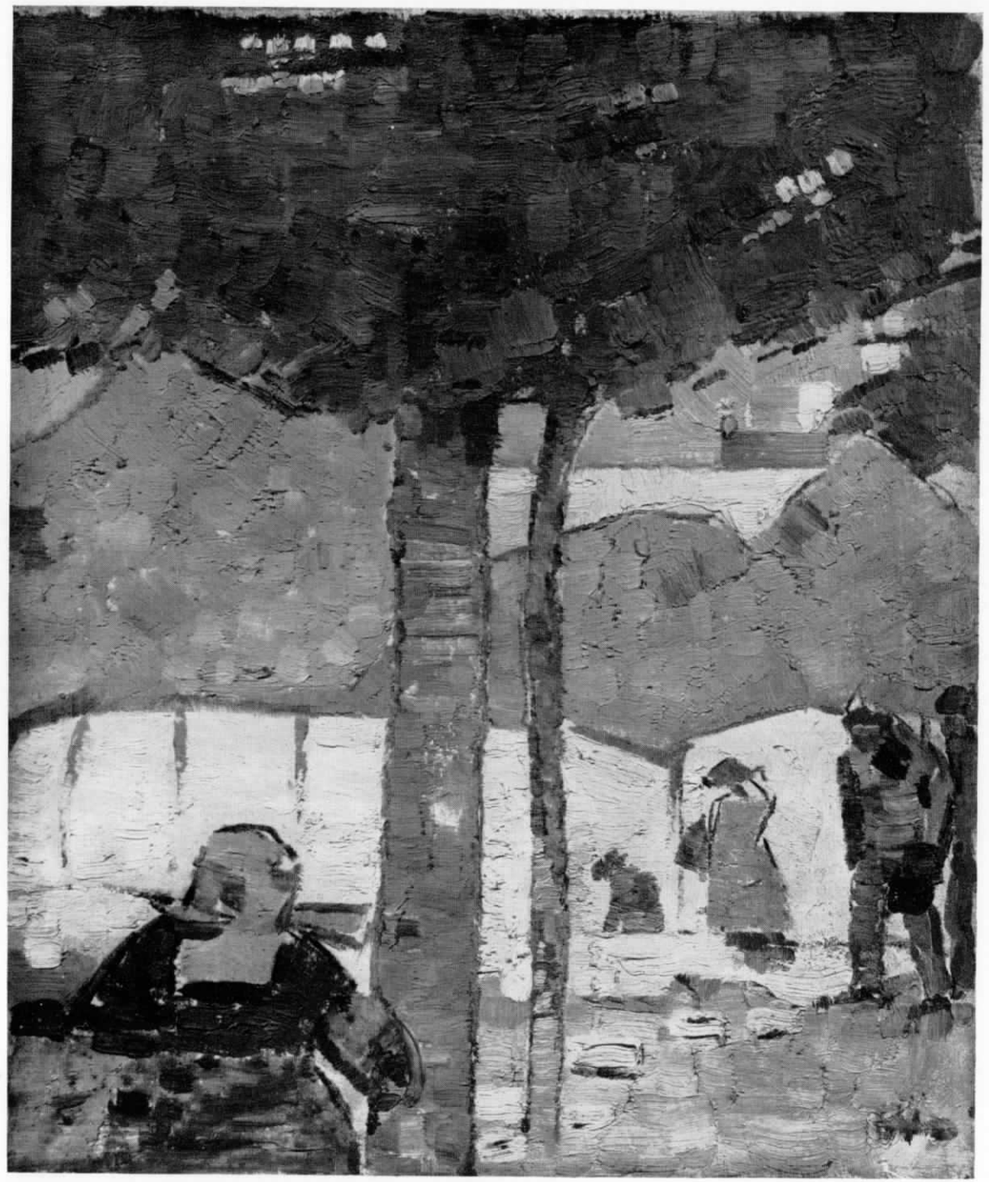
He quickly recognised the genius of Gaudier-Brzeska and befriended him during his highly productive four years in this country. Gaudier was at that time sculpting under a railway arch. He would arrive in the morning dirty and dishevelled at Wolmark's house in Glenilla Road, Swiss Cottage. Countless drawings of his carried out there, many on odd scraps of paper, testified to their keen friendship, and Gaudier's pleasure in working under his roof and guidance. The portrait head of Wolmark, shown at this exhibition, is ranked as one of Gaudier's finest works, and casts of this are now in the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, Leeds and Southampton Galleries, and in the Musée d'Art Moderne in Paris. The sculpture was carried out in the heroic manner, and reflects Gaudier's assessment of Wolmark as a great innovator of his time.

Wolmark was averse to joining any group and refused approaches of the 'Vorticists' of which Wyndham Lewis and Gaudier were founder members. He regarded true artists as too individualistic to tie themselves to any 'ism'.

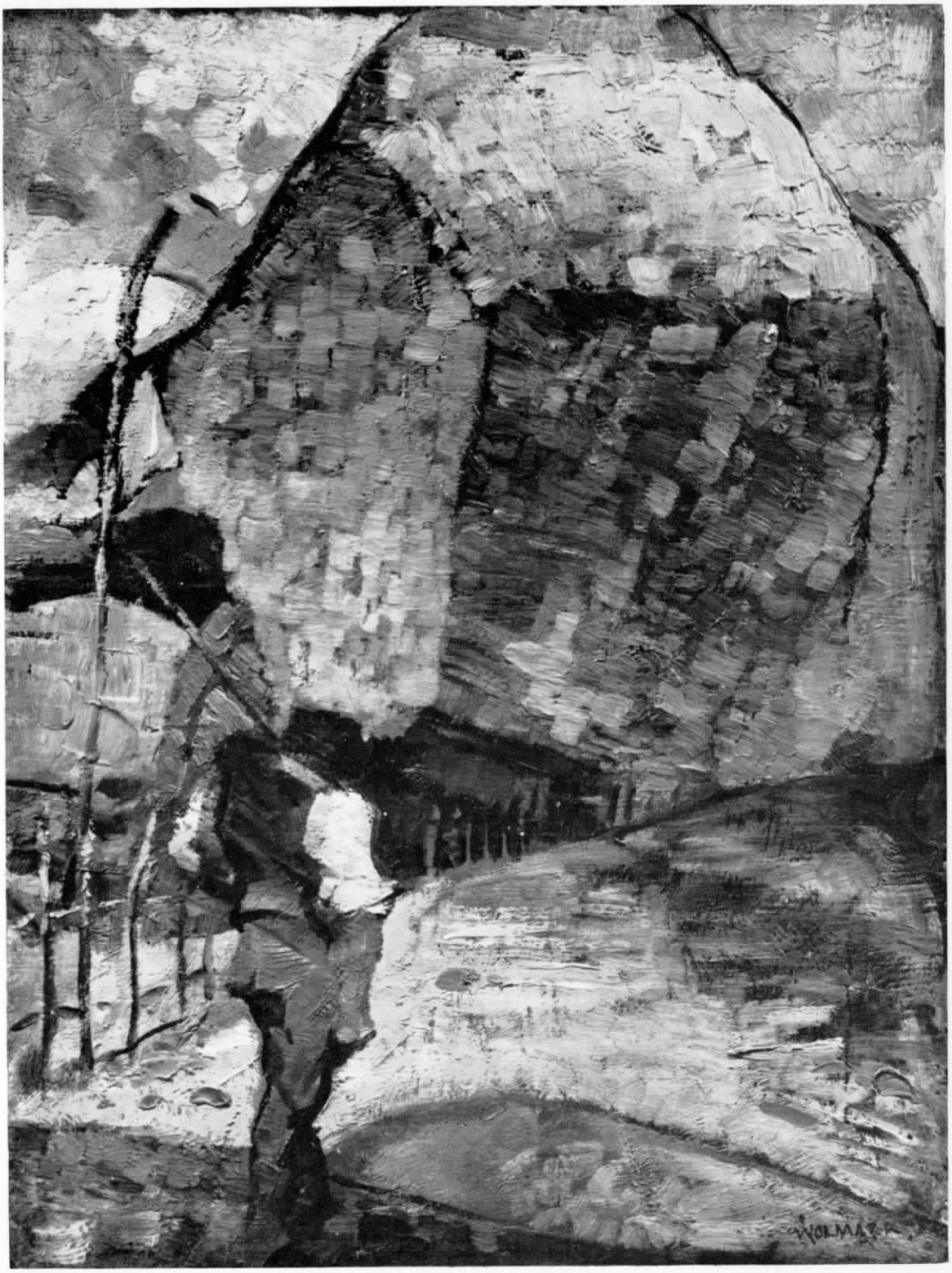
Unlike many creative men and women, Wolmark was ready to appreciate the work of his contemporaries. He was always anxious to understand an idiom with which he was unfamiliar, but if after careful study he could not equate this with his own standards, he had no hesitation in expressing his distrust and incomprehension.

Wolmark's later years were clouded by the conviction that he had been 'forgotten', and he received little comfort from the assurance of his many admirers that the colourful beacon he had lighted had done much to influence later generations, and that in due course his important contributions to art would endure.

Geoffrey Konstam,
M.D., F.R.C.P.



Under the trees, Concarneau 1911 (No. 21)



The Haystack, 1915 (No. 33)