*David Bomberg and the Borough: A Different Class*

During the 1950s, post-school art education in Britain was changing. Some artists and art educators viewed the prevailing pre-war system as a practice too devoted to conformity. Based as it was on the classical tradition, they believed that it essentially reduced art to a technical skill. Questioning the validity of this system, they searched for viable alternatives. Increasingly, some art teachers moved away from what they saw as restrictive rote methods of instruction towards more open-ended explorations. Figures like Richard Hamilton, Tom Hudson, Victor Pasmore, Marion Richardson, and Harry Thubron are among those credited with turning art education towards a general commitment to the principle of individual creative development.1[[1]](#endnote-1) This was followed in 1960 by the ‘First Coldstream Report’, which proposed a complete restructuring of art education. Over ten years before, however, the artist David Bomberg (1890-1957) had already rejected the academic approach to teaching art, and had pre-empted many aspects of this upheaval by putting into practice a unique off-curriculum approach at the Borough Polytechnic Institute in London. Contextualised by this post-war history of art education, what follows is an attempt to arrive at a clearer understanding of Bomberg’s teaching, its contradictions and complexities, as well as the practical implications for those under his instruction. Ancillary to this is the aim to establish for Bomberg a place in debates surrounding art education. Whilst Bomberg’s approach was perhaps not as systematic as were later developments, his devotion to the principle of individual creative development and his subsequent influence upon a generation of students who would themselves become artists and art teachers should secure him more than a footnote in the genealogy of British art education.

Despite early acclaim at the beginning of the twentieth century with modernist masterpieces like *Ju-Jitsu* (c.1912), *In the Hold* (c.1913) and *The Mud Bath* (1914), by the 1940s David Bomberg’s reputation had languished and he had become somewhat of a pariah on the British art scene.2[[2]](#endnote-2) In 1945, after submitting over three hundred job applications to schools across the country, his efforts to secure a permanent teaching post were finally rewarded by his appointment as a part-time lecturer at the Borough Polytechnic where he taught painting and drawing for eight years until 1953. The last scholarly investigation of Bomberg’s time at the Borough was Richard Cork’s landmark monograph, *David Bomberg*, published in 1987. Since then, the vast collection of papers and notes left by Bomberg after his death have been organised and now reside at the Tate Archive; and many former students have written memoirs and conducted interviews recounting their time at the Borough – testimony that offers fresh perspective and reflective views of their experience. Among Bomberg’s papers is a ‘*Syllabus*’ that he wrote almost ten years before he began teaching at the Borough. Intended as a series of lectures on ‘Drawing & Painting’ and the ‘Appreciation of Art’, the document seemingly held some significance for him because the pages of handwritten notes were typed up, signed, and dated (22nd May 1937).3[[3]](#endnote-3) Though it is unlikely that he ever got to present these lectures formally, many of the principles and theories espoused within the typescript were developed and applied during his time at the Borough.

Bomberg’s appointment did little to enhance his reputation in the art world. The Institute’s primary objective was ‘the promotion of industrial skill, general knowledge, health, and well-being of young men and women belonging to the poorer classes’.4[[4]](#endnote-4) Pioneering the introduction of diplomas and certificates for structured courses in the 1920s, the only art practiced at the Borough was commercially-oriented and craft-based. Famed for its Bakery School and its trade and industry training rather than its art department, the skills taught in the life-model and still-life classes were for the ‘application’ of art – aimed at, for example, pottery or cake decoration. The only ‘serious’ drawing done was that practiced by the architectural or engineering departments in their technical draughts and designs. Added to this was the fact that in 1945 the Polytechnic was set-amongst urban decimation. Situated in the Borough of Southwark, marked by the loop of the Thames as a dock and industrial area, it was targeted and heavily bombed during the Blitz. Newspaper headlines at the time labelled the Borough ‘The University of the Slums’.5[[5]](#endnote-5)

But Bomberg cared little for reputation or diplomas, and even less for the opinions of the establishment; his classes soon gained notorious distinction because of his unorthodox approach and the cult-like fervour with which those receptive to his ideas followed him. Anthony Hatwell (1931-), sculptor and former student at the Borough, recalls that he first went to the classes with some ‘anxiety’ because ‘Bomberg was a kind of hated figure in the art schools and derided’.6[[6]](#endnote-6) Students were often warned by their schoolmasters to stay well away from Bomberg’s classes lest they risk expulsion. Hatwell says: ‘stories were told of how you crunched back and forth over acres of charcoal to Bomberg’s classes, crunch, crunch, crunch’7[[7]](#endnote-7) – a reference to the amount of material supposedly used by the students in their manic efforts. The derision from the schools was both deep-seated and reactionary, but amongst the student body it was often nothing more than adolescent insecurity preemptively striking out against the bewildering experiments being conducted there. The artist and critic, Andrew Forge (1923-2002), who studied at the nearby Camberwell College, remembers that of the other artists’ groups in London ‘the group that one was sort of vaguely aware of and took seriously but with great suspicion and with a sort of readiness to anathematise, was the group around David Bomberg at the Borough’. He says:

One was aware of their presence, and of course there was a sort of tendency to dismiss them completely and to say they were kind of sort of wild bohemians who were just throwing paint around, but at the same time one knew that something was going on, that something was afoot there.8[[8]](#endnote-8)

And indeed, there was something going on. The work conducted by Bomberg and his students was undertaken in complete earnest and with total conviction. During his time at the Polytechnic, two groups formed with Bomberg as the creative linchpin. The first was ‘The Borough Group’, which worked and exhibited from 1947 until it disbanded in early 1950; the second group, ‘The Borough Bottega’, began in 1953 just as he left the Polytechnic, moved with Bomberg to Spain in 1954, and ended with a final exhibition in March 1955.9[[9]](#endnote-9) The first group caused enough of a stir to find itself included in *A Glossary of Art Terms* published just as the group sounded its own death knell in 1950. The entry, no doubt written in consultation with Bomberg himself, describes the Group as a ‘vital contemporary movement’, which is ‘seeking a new method of expression’:

Dissatisfied with the tradition of academic art, and unable to subscribe to the purely formal preoccupations of abstract painting, they consider it necessary for the artist to enter into an almost mystical union with the subject of his painting, and to conceive with all his being a sense of its mass. In the words of Bomberg, the Group aims ‘to make more articulate the spirit in the mass.’ Constructive use of form and colour is not to be neglected, however, as there can be no worthwhile painting that is not founded on design and structure.10[[10]](#endnote-10)

Over the years, Bomberg’s teaching has become the stuff of myth, causing much debate and no small amount of disagreement. Enigmatic phrases like ‘mystical union’ and ‘spirit in the mass’ offered little in the way of guidance to outsiders, and his approach has remained little understood.

Former student and founder of the Borough Group, Cliff Holden (1919-), argues that Bomberg’s work at the Borough was not understood at all: ‘Critics, such as [Andrew] Forge, [David] Sylvester, [John] Berger, [William] Lipke, [Richard] Cork, and [Peter] Fuller,’ he says, ‘have repeatedly shown that they did not understand Bomberg’s teaching.’ One of Holden’s charges is the critics’ use of terms like ‘legendary’ to describe the classes while failing to answer or even ask the question: ‘What was so extraordinary about these classes to merit the term ‘legendary’?11[[11]](#endnote-11) Before his death in 2014, artist and former student, Roy Oxlade (1929-2014), had done much since the sixties to try to explain Bomberg’s approach and what it was like to be instructed by him12[[12]](#endnote-12). Nevertheless, the debate continues, even amongst former students of Bomberg. Holden, for example, extends his criticism of art historians to fellow students: ‘Perhaps even more disappointing to me has been the lack of understanding shown by those painters who had the benefit of direct contact with Bomberg and, yet, who have made a mockery of his practice. And if they did not understand Bomberg’s teaching, how could they [the critics] understand us?’13[[13]](#endnote-13)

**Teaching the Class**

Bomberg’s first public statement relating to what he was trying to achieve with his teaching at the Borough was issued in the First Borough Group Exhibition catalogue (2nd-28th June 1947). ‘OUR APPROACH’, he says ‘is founded on the belief that there is in nature a truth and a realism which the usual contemporary approach to painting is unable to convey’. And he indicts modern teaching as culpable: ‘The very technique and the methods of acquiring that technique seem to be calculated as if on purpose to avoid this deeper and more elemental truth’.14[[14]](#endnote-14) Bomberg spent much of the latter part of his life dedicated not only to the pursuit of ‘truth’ in painting but also, through his teaching, to the task of training the next generation of truth-seekers. And in this it seems he was successful, if not in the public’s view then certainly in his students’ minds. Enrolment records from the Borough Polytechnic, now kept by London South Bank University, provide some insight into how his recruits saw themselves. On registration cards between 1946 and 1953, new students like Frank Auerbach (1931-), Cliff Holden, Dorothy Mead (1928-1975), Roy Oxlade, and Peter Richmond (1922-2008) each self-identify as ‘student’ under the title ‘Occupation’, but after just a year or two under Bomberg’s tuition, all of his young apprentices declare themselves ‘Artist’ or ‘Painter’.15[[15]](#endnote-15) What happened in those classes was clearly something transformative and extraordinary.

Many of the students who attended Bomberg’s Borough classes had already experienced some form of traditional art school training at other institutions and were invariably shocked when they encountered his particular brand of unorthodoxy. Peter Richmond was initially repelled by Bomberg’s ‘wild’ approach to teaching. Joining the Borough classes in 1946 after previously studying at Kingston School of Art, he thought Bomberg ‘a very remarkable teacher’ and ‘quite unlike anybody at Kingston.’ ‘Bomberg was quite different’, he says, ‘I thought he was a charlatan when I first met him because his ideas were so totally miles away from the art school I had been used to’. One marked difference between Bomberg’s method and more traditional ones seems to have been that of a professional versus a personal and intimate approach to the students, as Richmond explains:

At Kingston the staff took a very professional interest, as they saw their profession, and they tried to train their students in the craft, as they understood it. … so you learnt about techniques of oil painting, how to lay ground for an etching, anatomy, and perspective and all those things, which were taught and had always been taught in art school. And they did it very conscientiously; and would show you how to do a thing: how to lay a ground or take a print, how to mix up tempera paint and all those things.16[[16]](#endnote-16)

Bomberg subscribed to none of this. Richmond says that instead he ‘wanted to get to know his students totally. So he didn’t just teach in an art class, he wanted to know our lives, he wanted to meet our parents, he wanted to meet my father’.17[[17]](#endnote-17) And indeed, Bomberg got so involved in Richmond’s artistic life that he successfully petitioned Richmond senior to provide financial support for Peter’s burgeoning career as an artist. Bomberg wrote that he thought Peter had the ability to make a serious contribution to British painting, and that he needed more time to develop and mature. He was evidently very persuasive because from then on Richmond’s father – quite against his principles as someone who thought children should not be spoilt – paid a weekly stipend to his son until the day he died.18[[18]](#endnote-18)

Bomberg made genuine efforts on behalf of his students and worked to mitigate any difficulties that might hinder their development as artists. The *Glossary of Art Terms* describes the Borough group as ‘a brotherhood in a very real sense, each member being prepared to help another in a case of necessity’.19[[19]](#endnote-19) Holden says that ‘Teaching, like painting, was a total activity for Bomberg’, and it seems clear that Bomberg was as much committed to his students’ lives as he was to his art (which in his mind probably amounted to the same thing).20[[20]](#endnote-20) Whatever energy and commitment he invested in their artistic development, his only request was that they show the same level of dedication to art in return. In the classroom this translated to total commitment from all parties for the duration of the session, including Bomberg himself. Rather than sitting back while his students worked away at their easels Bomberg was much more involved and ‘present’ than other art teachers. Leslie Marr, former student and son-in-law (1922-), describes the two to three hour lessons as ‘continuous’ in the sense that Bomberg was working with his students constantly, which was not usual: ‘In the ordinary art school situation,’ he says,

people get on with it themselves usually for quite a long time and then the teacher turns up and walks round, makes a few comments to each person and walks away again. But in Bomberg’s class he was there all the time, and he was just moving slowly from one person to the next, and probably doing a bit of drawing on their drawing; he would pick up their piece of charcoal and make some marks or he would make suggestions. And then he would go on, he was, if you like, he was working all the time.21[[21]](#endnote-21)

The model was also required to ‘work’. Bomberg would pose them with care, talking to them, explaining the dynamics and weight of the pose, ‘so rather than posing like a sack’, Richmond recalls, ‘the model understood what was expected’.22[[22]](#endnote-22) Throughout this process, ‘energy’ was a key concept. Although Bomberg instructed the class to study the model with a great deal of care he would urge that this be done dynamically, with movement. Holden remembers being encouraged to walk around the model and study the subject from a variety of angles and perspectives.23[[23]](#endnote-23) When work commenced, unlike the academic method of ‘correcting’ a drawing, Bomberg’s practice was to get them to engage with the subject to a greater extent; he would walk around the class coaxing them to put more and more ‘energy’ into their work. Richmond says:

One of his constant words he used in the course of his teaching was “Throw yourself in!” – What he meant was throw more energy in. Because although he was concerned with precision, he was also concerned with an exchange of energy between the model and the student. He didn’t believe a drawing could be done in a mechanical fussy way. Unless there was an active exchange of energy there was never going to be a drawing that was alive. … Sometimes at the end of a class he’d say to the model: “Can you hold it another five minutes? Well, make another effort! Make one last effort!24[[24]](#endnote-24)

Holden describes the whole exhausting process as ‘a sort of battle between a trinity of teacher, student and model’. But ‘In this fight’, Holden says, ‘he was anything but restrictive’.25[[25]](#endnote-25)

**Bomberg’s pedagogical philosophy**

The question of restriction is fundamental when thinking about Bomberg in this context. For how is one to teach without the approach being restrictive in at least some sense? If a student is entirely free from restriction then how can one be said to be teaching any kind of intelligently formulated practice? We know that for much of his career Bomberg explored, tested, and often broke the limits of convention. Teaching, however, inevitably involves the instruction in some sort of repeatable method encompassing a set of rules or guidelines – however loosely defined, e.g. ‘avoid convention’. The challenge for Bomberg would have been managing this tension and trying to teach without the approach devolving into a series of precepts and predetermined movements that would ultimately resolve into formulaic expression. The prospect was certainly on his mind at the time. In a draft for a Borough Group press circular in 1948, Bomberg wrote that ‘The [Borough] Group … will not, in fact, wish to preserve itself, if its character changes from one of perpetual exploration and settles down to repetition’.26[[26]](#endnote-26)

Bomberg’s view was that ‘All things said regarding Art are subject to contradiction’, and it is a statement that could very well apply to his teaching.27[[27]](#endnote-27) Holden’s final judgement of Bomberg’s methods is that they were ‘dogmatic and contradictory’. He explains:

If the student was painting in a perpetual gloom he would be shown means of lightening his palette, if he was tentative he would be encouraged to become more engaged with the materials and throw it on in shovelfuls, to walk on it, or attack it with the knife – any means of making the mark was permissible. If the paint was getting thick so that the student couldn’t see the wood for the trees he would be asked to use coloured papers. If he was using thick lines which impeded the flowering of the form he could then experiment with small dots of colour. But if the student were facile, using an aesthetic line, then Bomberg would give him a great lump of charcoal and cite Modigliani and [Augustus] John as examples of men who would tie the tool to the big toe to escape the domination of a facile hand. On the other hand he didn’t allow any student to completely abandon himself to the line, to the paint, the texture, the sensuality of the brush; and he had no respect for the brute force of the blow lamp, the bicycle, or any other medium which savoured of trickery.28[[28]](#endnote-28)

Looking to Bomberg’s *Syllabus* we see early signs of his contradictory methodology. In Part II: ‘Drawing’, under the heading ‘How Drawing can be Taught’, we find that he often asserts a method or practice only to negate it a moment later, thus seeming to empty the instruction of any meaningful pedagogic value. He begins with a list of four methods by which one might approach the teaching of draughtsmanship:

Architectural Construction – the basis of the Classicist Method.

Volume and Mass – the Spontaneous Individual Method.

A third Method – the one actually employed by Walter Sickert, is to build up (two-dimensional conception) shapes made by the pattern of forms and spaces.

A fourth Method – the one used by Gifted Sculptors, is the swift ‘Line’, to embody in a single continuous contour the three dimensions.29[[29]](#endnote-29)

However, seeming to avoid appearing doctrinaire, he immediately adds a proviso that undermines the title of his piece. ‘It would be injurious to teach any of these methods’, he writes, ‘if the artist felt he was not in sympathy with them; it is best to let the Artists find a method to suit themselves’.30[[30]](#endnote-30) Bomberg then contradicts this statement with a restriction of sorts by warning against the use of mechanical aids, ‘such as measuring in any manner’, noting that it ‘considerably hampered and injured my drawing; therefore I do not use it.’ And indeed, this is a practice that he maintained at the Borough some ten years later. Richmond recalls that during class ‘if [Bomberg] found someone making a rather arm’s length drawing with skill and a rather precious handling, he would get rather cross and say “well, you haven’t got into it yet!”’31[[31]](#endnote-31) But in the *Syllabus* even this caution is qualified in his eschewal of dogmatic inflexibility:

But no rule should be made, remembering that Michelangelo dissected the human body in order to obtain a first hand knowledge of its machinery, and he did good drawings. Leonardo da Vinci did the same and worked to a grid of measured proportions and he, too, did good drawings. Albert Durer [*sic*] went to the extent of building a geometrical set, with square and compass, to find the true proportions of the human figure, and built an elaborate “spy hole” arrangement by which to draw true perspectives, and Durer [*sic*] did good drawings. Holbein must have employed some strange Geometrical Aids to obtain the curious forms he used – and Holbein did good drawings.32[[32]](#endnote-32)

In other words – and what we might take such contradictions to imply is that – the means are significantly less important to what Bomberg was trying to achieve than the ends. As Oxlade attests, ‘Bomberg was emphatic about the subordinate part played in art by technical concerns’, above all, he says, ‘he valued the development and expression of the personality of the artist as a unique individual’.33[[33]](#endnote-33) It is unsurprising, then, that one of the only rules espoused without contradiction in Bomberg’s *Syllabus* is that the teacher should not be bound by any: ‘The principle to remember is that the teaching of Drawing must be free’, he says, ‘otherwise the artist in the draughtsman is handicapped’.34[[34]](#endnote-34)

**The ‘Approach’**

In his prescription for total liberation of the teacher Bomberg advocated all methods and stood by none. What this meant for the student is less straightforward because his approach was, as Holden says, ‘essentially empirical’.35[[35]](#endnote-35) That is, each student being different, the attempt to liberate the ‘artist within’ naturally posed a unique problem in every case.

Much like Hudson’s later (Herbert Read derived) theories concerning ‘child art’ and the corrupting influence of ‘sophistications’, Bomberg saw his approach as ‘remedial’ in the sense that students must be rehabilitated and taught to forget any previous academic instruction and what they thought they knew about art in order to acquire what he calls ‘the confidence of their natural inheritance’.36[[36]](#endnote-36) For Bomberg, this ‘natural inheritance’ is a kind of primal percipience that has its origins within prehistoric cave art – ‘examples of a type of draughtsmanship that has never been excelled by any race of mankind’37[[37]](#endnote-37) – and relates to what he calls the habit of ‘Individual Spontaneous Draughtsmanship’ (his second approach to teaching, above). In the *Syllabus*, Bomberg argues that through cumulative periods of conventionalisation this innate faculty lost its spontaneity in its development towards ‘Classicism’.38[[38]](#endnote-38) Surveying the contemporary art scene of the 1930s, he divides practitioners into two groups: ‘those that are not influenced by classicism and those that are’. He puts himself and his approach firmly within the former camp among those whose works ‘endeavour to recapture the “prehistoric vision”’.39[[39]](#endnote-39)

The process through which Bomberg would accomplish his goal of reinvigorating this ‘lost’ primal sense follows from his definition of drawing, which he famously conceives as ‘the representation of form. – Not the representation of appearances of Form, but more the representation of all our feelings about a form’.40[[40]](#endnote-40) The definition is indebted to Bishop Berkeley’s famous theory of optics – presented in *An* *Essay* *Towards a New Theory of Vision* (1709) – which argues that our visual perception is explained not only by physical objects but also by the correlation of ideas and touch. As Bomberg writes: ‘Bishop Berkeley…proving that impression by sight is two-dimensional – that the sense of Touch and associations of Touch produce on sight the illusions of the third dimension’.41[[41]](#endnote-41) In his own work Bomberg explored these sensations and wanted his students to do the same, and in so-doing confront nature with all the senses – unimpeded by measurement or technical trickery – and reclaim for draughtsmanship a spontaneity and energy redolent of prehistoric cave painting.

Thus, Bomberg saw it as the teacher’s task to nurture and guide his novitiates not in the mastery of technique but on an empathetic journey both outward and inward. Elaborating on his liberating pedagogical precept (above), he declares:

The principle of the teaching should be to point out – if such can be the case – the inadequate representation of the forms; not to alter the artist’s drawing, but to encourage the artist to feel more deeply or more generously about it, and the most effective way of demonstrating this is through the medium of the Teacher’s own draughtsmanship.42[[42]](#endnote-42)

What this meant in practice is recorded by Oxlade, who recalls a time when Bomberg came to his easel during a life drawing class. Apparently dissatisfied with the image Oxlade had produced so far, Bomberg proceeded to sketch two small dome shapes on the side of Oxlade’s paper and motioned: ‘the dome of St. Paul’s is like this and not like this’.43[[43]](#endnote-43) Oxlade explains that Bomberg was interested in reality from the ‘student’s point of view’, and that while he was telling him that his drawing did not look enough like the subject, he did not mean it in the academic sense of ‘likeness’. He says:

it is important to recognise that he was telling me that it was not enough like the subject in the terms *I* had elected to use. Also he was not prepared to illustrate what he meant by referring to the model because that would have pre-empted what I might do subsequently.44[[44]](#endnote-44)

Holden provides a similar description of the process, in which he is also at pains to stress the impartiality of Bomberg’s guiding hand. However, Holden’s gloss brings with it an added complication. He says:

Bomberg didn’t try to impose his will on the students. Instead he tried to follow the direction the student was taking and he endeavoured to indicate to the student the character of the idea the student was developing and of which the immature student *had no concept of*.45[[45]](#endnote-45)

Whilst Holden is adamant that Bomberg did not force his vision upon students he admits that as novices they knew not what they were drawing or when or, indeed, if they had captured a ‘vital image’. It was up to Bomberg to signal when they had. The problem apparently lay with the relatively slow development of a student’s critical faculty as against their creative potential. Holden again:

[Bomberg] was able to perceive an idea which was slowly maturing as the student worked and he was able to assist the student to bring it forward to fruition. He was able to do this because he recognised that a student's creative potential and youthful vitality was frustrated and distorted by his inexperience and his immature critical faculty. The student invariably destroyed his vital image in favour of an image he recognised which by definition was banal and academic.46[[46]](#endnote-46)

Oxlade concurs: ‘It was training in judgement’, he says, ‘which formed the basis of Bomberg’s teaching, and which made it a collaborative activity and not mere instruction’.47[[47]](#endnote-47) Despite this, one can well imagine the difficulty a young student might have in trying to assert his or her individuality when faced with a supposedly inadequate drawing now marked with Bomberg’s expressive lines and the exhortation to: ‘make it your own’.48[[48]](#endnote-48) One problem is that Bomberg’s formulation elides the many supervening levels of organisation between the senses and actually setting an image on paper. With no clearer objective for which to strive other than ‘feel more deeply or generously’ about a drawing, and with no technique or method of construction for a student to fall back on, it is unquestionable that Bomberg’s presence during the drawing process was absolutely crucial – this was an approach that could not be learnt from a book (or a syllabus) – and his influence, therefore, difficult to overstate. Former student, Dennis Creffield reveals just how important his presence was when he says that ‘Bomberg’s teaching…was aimed at inspiring complete confidence – and usually succeeded, at least while he himself was around.49[[49]](#endnote-49)

**Power and Influence**

The strong congruities and distinctive similarities throughout the Borough students’ body of work is a feature often remarked upon in the context of Bomberg’s influence. Bomberg accepted and justified such an outcome: ‘A likeness is bound to exist where there is similarity of Purpose’. But he maintained there was still room for the individual, adding: ‘the personality of each work will be the measure of its success’.50[[50]](#endnote-50) His students clearly believed this, too. Creffield thought Bomberg:

believed profoundly in individuality but regarded it as our birthright. No need to strain for it, and falsely contrive a precocious originality. The Individual, given a sound foundation (good draughtsmanship), matured as inevitably and as slowly as a plant. That is why he believed in teaching – why he thought it necessary.51[[51]](#endnote-51)

However, there is also the sense that what took place was not always or necessarily the flowering of individual artistic personality, but group training by a sort of osmosis. Although Bomberg advocated the teacher’s draughtsmanship as the best way to teach: ‘The living touch of the master’s hand often more fascinating and suggestive than an elaborate finished picture’,52[[52]](#endnote-52) according to Oxlade’s experience ‘the example was set not by Bomberg’s own work…but rather through the critical appraisal he gave at the end of a session, of the most successful student performance’.53[[53]](#endnote-53) With Bomberg pitting student against student, it is arguable that a singular aesthetic emerged not because primal artistic impulses were being tapped but rather that an unconscious mimicry was at work through various influencing factors like in-group dynamics and peer-pressure – the desire not only to ‘please teacher’ but to satisfy and continue to be accepted by the group. In this view, Bomberg’s influence is effective at one remove – perhaps through the student(s) most sensitive and susceptible to Bomberg’s powers of suggestion.

At the time Bomberg’s formidable hold over his students was welcomed with fervour but as the years passed some have with hindsight found it less positive. Marr says of his time studying with Bomberg that ‘we were dominated by [him] and his ideas and accepted this and we all thought that this was very special’.54[[54]](#endnote-54) He recalls how students would often visit Bomberg’s house where he held meetings with the class, and would fire them up and tell them that together they were going to change the course of Art in England. Looking back, Marr finds that to force such an idea upon young and impressionable minds was perhaps ‘much too strong’ and somewhat irresponsible. He thinks that though they did not realise it, they were actually being moulded into an image of their master’s likeness, and now believes that Bomberg’s ultimate aim was to create a school for which he might be remembered as a reaction against his own personal rejection.55[[55]](#endnote-55) As an example, Marr describes how at the end of class they would often pile their finished drawings up on top of a cupboard in the classroom, and when the term ended they would lay all the papers on the floor and pick out their work, shouting ‘that’s mine’, ‘that one’s mine’, etc. He remembers that there was quite a dispute on one occasion when there was a drawing that two people had claimed. Both argued ‘no, that’s mine…’ and Bomberg noticed this and went over to them and was delighted. And he said: ‘“Aha! Just like the old apprentice system! The pupils would absorb the style of the old master to such an extent that if they did well then their work would be unrecognisable as anybody’s but ‘The School’s’”’.56[[56]](#endnote-56)

Bomberg’s power could also manifest itself in more sinister ways, as in the following incident in which he not only uses the concept of group solidarity against Marr in an attempt to suppress any latent rebelliousness, but also presupposes and forcefully asserts his dominating influence. Marr says:

In one of the composition classes when we were actually doing oil paintings, not drawing, I had an argument with David about something. He told me something and I said “No, I don’t think so.” He was very surprised that someone had answered him back, I think, and he said “Well, what about that nude you painted recently, the one we all liked; the one we said we’d have in our next exhibition what about that one?” He said “who painted that?” and I said “I painted it.” “No you didn’t,” he said, “I got inside you and painted that”.57[[57]](#endnote-57)

The implication is that any individuality is essentially negated because a successful painting is solely the product of Bomberg’s influence and any work not in agreement is condemned to be not ‘of the group’. Nevertheless, Marr did not at the time feel suitably victimised or manipulated enough to leave Bomberg’s classes, staying with him, as he did, for another four or five years. And despite these reservations and criticisms, he eulogises Bomberg as both artist and teacher.

That Bomberg’s teaching enhanced and developed his students’ potential is evident from their notes of indebtedness and praise. Frank Auerbach, for instance, said that Bomberg ‘was probably the most original, stubborn, radical intelligence that was to be found in art schools’.58[[58]](#endnote-58) Bomberg made his students feel as though they were artists, which is to suggest that there is proven value in what and how Bomberg taught. But it may be that ultimately Bomberg’s influence had a debilitating effect on those most receptive to his teaching. Bomberg once wrote that ‘he who follows someone’s lead will never surpass him’, and when considered in the context of his impact on the group’s work, he might have been right.59[[59]](#endnote-59) After his death in 1957, Creffield, Mann, Marr, Mead, Oxlade, and others all managed to develop their own personal styles. And though Auerbach, perhaps the most successful and renowned of Bomberg’s students, ardently attended classes throughout Bomberg’s tenure at the Borough, he always maintained his independence by concurrently studying at the Slade and remaining outside of the inner circle – never becoming an official member of either the Borough Group or the Borough Bottega.

Bomberg’s place in the history of British art education is yet to be determined. But it is clear that his approach warrants more investigation because his unorthodox methods preempted, by more than ten years, later institutional developments. His rejection of the academic approach, and his insistence on individual creative development through the recuperation of an essential, primitive, mode of percipience are principles echoed in later more systematised approaches to teaching art. And, like many of his artistic discoveries, Bomberg arrived at these innovations in isolation completely independently of the rest of the art world. As his reputation as one of the great British artists is finally and firmly established, might we see a similar reappraisal of his teaching?

Endnotes

1. 1 For more on the developments in British art education, see, for example: David Thistlewood, ed, *Histories of Art and Design Education: Cole to Coldstream*, Harlow, Longman, 1992; and Lisa Tickner, *Hornsey 1968: The Art School Revolution*, London, Francis Lincoln, 2008 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. 2For more on Bomberg’s life and career see Richard Cork’s *David Bomberg*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1987; and William Lipke’s *David Bomberg: A Critical Study of his Life and Work*, London, Evelyn, Adams & Mackay, 1967 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. 3David Bomberg, *Syllabus: Series of Lectures on Drawing & Painting*, *22nd May 1937*, Bomberg Papers, Tate Archive, 878.4.31. Bomberg’s spelling and punctuation was often wayward and unique, as was his inconsistent use of capitalisation for emphasis; I have not corrected these in any of his writings cited herein [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. 4Edric Bayley, *The Borough Road Polytechnic Institute,* *he Borough Road Polytechnic Institute: The Schemes of the Charity Commissioners for the Administration of the Institute, and other Schemes in relation thereto; Lease and Agreements affecting its property*, London, T. Cornell and Sons, 1914, p13-14 [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. 5FT Evans, *Borough Polytechnic: 1892-*1969, London, Borough Polytechnic, 1969, p84 [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. 6quoted in Laurie Stewart, *The Borough Movement and 20th Century Art,* exh cat, London, Laurie Stewart, 1989, p4

   , p4 [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. 7Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. 8Andrew Forge, *NLSC: Artists’ Lives Interview*, 1995, British Library Sound Archive, C466/36/12 F4877, Side B [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. 9The first Borough Group exhibition ran from 2-28 June 1947 at the Archer Gallery. The Borough Group was constitutionally formed with officers elected in February 1948. The Borough Bottega was founded in August 1953 [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. 10John O’Dwyer and Raymond Le Mage, *A Glossary of Art Terms,* London, Peter Nevill Limited, 1950, pp17-18 [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. 11Cliff Holden, *Bomberg’s Teaching – Some Misconceptions*, 2004, <http://www.cliffholden.co.uk/documents_2004_30.shtml> [accessed 14th May 2014], p2 [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. 12See *Art & Instinct: Selected Writings of Roy Oxlade* London, Ziggurat, 2010 [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. 13Holden, 2004, op cit, p2 [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. 14David Bomberg, *First Borough Group Exhibition*, exh cat, Archer Gallery, June 2nd-28th 1947, p118-9 [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. 15London South Bank University, Student Records, Microfiche [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. 16Miles (Peter) Richmond, *NLSC: Artists’ Lives Interview with Hester Westley*, British Library Sound Archive, 2007, track 7 [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. 17Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. 18Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. 19O’Dwyer and Le Mage, op cit, p18 [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. 20Cliff Holden, *Work in Progress*, 1999, <http://www.cliffholden.co.uk/documents_1999_10_02.shtml> [accessed 14th May 2014], p18 [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. 21Leslie Marr, *NLSC: Artists’ Lives Interview with Hester Westley*, British Library Sound Archive, 2009, track 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. 22Miles (Peter) Richmond, Talk given at the Boundary Gallery, 2007 [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. 23Holden, 1999, op cit, p14 [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. 24Richmond, Boundary Gallery, op cit [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. 25Cliff Holden, ‘David Bomberg: An Artist as Teacher’ in *Studio: International Journal of Modern Art*, March 1967, pp136-143, p137 [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. 26David Bomberg, *Borough Group Press Circular*, draft, typed manuscript signed DB, c1948, Tate Gallery Archive, TGA 20057/1/3 [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. 27quoted in Oxlade, op cit, p183 [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. 28Holden, 1967, op cit, p137 [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. 29Bomberg, 1937, op cit, pt2, p3 [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. 30Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. 31Richmond, Boundary Gallery, op cit [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. 32Bomberg, 1937, op cit, pt2, p4 [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. 33Oxlade, op cit, p185 [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. 34Bomberg, 1937, op cit, pt2, p4 [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. 35Holden, 1967, op cit, p137 [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. 36quoted in Oxlade, op cit, p164 [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. 37Bomberg, 1937, op cit, pt2, p1 [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. 38Ibid, pt2, pp1-3 [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. 39Ibid, pt2, p2 [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. 40Ibid, pt2, p3 [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. 41Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. 42Ibid, pt2, p4 [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. 43quoted in Cork, op cit, p290 [↑](#endnote-ref-43)
44. 44Ibid, p290, [emphasis in original] [↑](#endnote-ref-44)
45. 45Holden, 1999, op cit, p16, [emphasis added] [↑](#endnote-ref-45)
46. 46Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-46)
47. 47quoted in Cork, op cit, p288 [↑](#endnote-ref-47)
48. 48Bomberg quoted in Oxlade, op cit, p219 [↑](#endnote-ref-48)
49. 49quoted in Charles Spencer ‘Memories of Bomberg’ in *The London Magazine*, Vol. 6, No. 12, March 1967, pp30-48, p32 [↑](#endnote-ref-49)
50. 50quoted in Oxlade, op cit, p240 [↑](#endnote-ref-50)
51. 51quoted in Cork, op cit, pp270-1 [↑](#endnote-ref-51)
52. 52Bomberg, 1937, op cit, pt2, p5 [↑](#endnote-ref-52)
53. 53Oxlade, op cit, p222 [↑](#endnote-ref-53)
54. 54Marr, op cit, track 14 [↑](#endnote-ref-54)
55. 55Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-55)
56. 56Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-56)
57. 57Ibid [↑](#endnote-ref-57)
58. 58Frank Auerbach, *Frank Auerbach*, exh cat, Hayward Gallery, London, May 4th-July 2nd 1978,London, Arts Council, 1978, p20 [↑](#endnote-ref-58)
59. 59quoted in Oxlade, op cit, p162

    Word Count (including endnotes): 6398 [↑](#endnote-ref-59)