

## Teachers' Notes

*Miriam*, 1963

Jack Bilbo (1907 - 1967)

Gouache on paper, 46.7 x 35 cm

### Content and Ideas

**What is this a painting of?**

It is a portrait of a young woman

**Can you describe the woman in as much detail as possible?**



Bilbo wrote in his autobiography that 'a good painting is painted emotionally. A good painting should be seen emotionally'.

**What emotions do you feel when you look at this picture?**

**What sense do you have of Miriam as a person?**

Bilbo wrote 'If I paint a girl, it doesn't matter two hoots to me how she looks. I don't need a model for her lines, I need a model for the atmosphere.'

**Discuss what Bilbo might have meant by this.**

### Form and Composition

**Describe how the image sits on the paper?**

The portrait fills the paper edge to edge and parts of the hair are off the page.

**Describe the pattern of lights and darks in the painting.**

The background and hair are very dark, with no details and the face is very light.

**Which part of the image are our eyes drawn to?**

The focus is the brightness of the face

**Is the face painted in a symmetrical way?**

It is asymmetrical; which means that if you drew a line down the middle of the face, each side would be different.

**Discuss if faces generally are symmetrical.**

**Use words to describe the general impression of the painting**

e.g. bold, direct, unfussy, clear, vivid

## Materials and Techniques

### What medium is used in this picture?

It is painted with gouache; which is a water-based paint

### What surface is it painted on to?

Paper

### Are you able to guess the true size of this painting?

It is 65cm x 45cm.

### Does this surprise you? Did you expect it to be larger or smaller?

Look for areas of paint that are opaque (opaque means that you cannot see through).

Find areas of paint that are transparent/translucent.

### Bilbo uses black lines in the work. Describe how black lines are used? Is this effective?

Black lines are used to outline the main forms such as eyes.

### Are you able to tell what the texture of Miriam's hair is like? If so, how is this achieved?

The hair looks thick and curly and is achieved with just a few descriptive drawn lines that follow the shape of her curls

### When you look at Miriam's face, does it appear 2-dimensional (flat) or 3-dimensional (like a sculpture)? How does Bilbo achieve this?

It is 3-dimensional like a sculpture and it is achieved by using lights and darks to describe how the light is falling on the face.

### Look at the colours used by Bilbo; are they used to accurately describe the colours of Miriam or does his use of colour have a different intention?

#### If you think that the colour has a different intention, what could this intention be?

It look as if the bright reds and yellows on the face are used in an emotional way; so that it looks right to the artist but does not correspond to literal colours of skin.

### How many different tools were used to make this painting?

#### Spot as many different brush-strokes as possible and discuss

### Do you think this painting took the artist a long time to paint?

It looks fresh and alive as if it was done in one sitting and very quickly.

### Do you like this way of working? What are the advantages and disadvantages?

Possible advantages; alive, arresting, dramatic, straightforward, compelling

Possible disadvantages; lacks specificity, crude, does not capture the complexity of another human being.

Bilbo's work is full of wild energy and violent colour. He once said 'I am a lone wolf in my paintings' and his pictures are often savage and strange.

## About the Artist

Author, art dealer, (self-taught) painter, sculptor and gallery-owner, born in Berlin, Germany. In his youth Bilbo was variously a sailor, tramp, stage designer and reporter.

A founder member of an anti-fascist group in Berlin in 1930, he was arrested in 1933 but escaped and emigrated to France, then Spain.

He reached Britain in 1936 and began painting in 1939.

Interned in Onchan camp for six months in 1940, he then served in the Pioneer Corps (invalided out).

Afterwards he returned to London establishing his Modern Art Gallery (1941–48), which became an important meeting place for artists including Schwitters, Adler and Herman.

He exhibited modern French artists and fellow artists in exile including Bornfriend, Dachinger and Schwitters, as well as Sven Berlin, Eileen Agar and Ceri Richards.

His own work, highly individual, often bizarre, erotic or grotesque, was influenced by Surrealism and was shown in London, Paris and Berlin. He moved to Surrey after the war. In 1949 he returned to France, then to Berlin in 1956, where he opened a bar. A retrospective was held in London (England & Co, 1988).