

Teachers' Notes

Pensive Woman

Käthe Strenitz (b. 1923)

Pencil on paper, 46.5 x 35.5 cm

Content and Ideas

The portrait shows a woman, who is fairly elderly. Her hands are bony and it looks as though she may have had a life of hard work.

Describe an imagined life history of this woman:

Where was she born?

What kind of life has she had?

Where has she worked?



Form and Composition

Is there anything unusual about the composition of this portrait?

The figure is off to one side and there is a large area of unused paper to the right and underneath. The hands are given equal importance to the face.

The artist's training was as an engraver, printmaker and graphic designer.

Can you see any influences from her training in the way she uses lines?

Every mark counts and has a purpose. Here she uses shading to describe form. The marks are very crisp and clean.

Materials and Techniques

How is it made?

It is pencil on paper

Describe the mark making. Is there a large variety of mark making?

Describe the tonal range:

Is there a great contrast between the darkest darks and the lightest lights?

Is the paper used as the lightest tone?

About the Artist

Käthe Strenitz was one of 669 Czech youngsters who arrived in the UK shortly before the war. The group of children were known as the Winton children because Nicholas Winton worked tirelessly for their rescue. She was born in 1923 in the glass-making town of Gablonz in the Sudeten part of Czechoslovakia. Her father, a tobacco importer, sat on committees that served both the Jewish and general community.

The great enthusiasm of her early teenage years was art. In 1938, when her family moved to Prague, she attended the Officina Pragensis, an art college offering courses on engraving, lithography, poster design. Here she imbibed avant-garde ideas and was influenced by a distantly related older student, the poet Peter Kien.

In March 1939 the Germans occupied Prague. Within a matter of weeks Käthe found herself on a Quaker-sponsored children's transport to England. She remembers no detail of the journey other than being put in charge of a compartment occupied by bawling, traumatised toddlers. She arrived at a farm where she was given insufficient food to eat and had to sleep on the landing. When she picked up some fruit that had fallen to the ground she was made to confess to stealing in front of the farmer's children. She became very ill as she caught impetigo from the seasonal fruit-pickers from the East End of London. At that point she packed her bags and took the train to London – a display of initiative she still marvels at 60-odd years later.

Happier days followed at the David Eder Farm in Kent. Here she picked frozen Brussels sprouts and worked in the stone-floor kitchen, but enjoyed the high-spirited company of, among others, the future wife of Ernst Gombrich. When Kent was declared a Protected Area Käthe was sent to a girls' hostel in North Hackney .

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to her, Mrs Winton had sent some of Käthe's drawings to Oskar Kokoschka, on whose recommendation she was awarded a British Council scholarship that took her to Regent Street Polytechnic. This was an important opportunity for Käthe though the scholarship only paid her school fees, and she still had to do chilblain-inducing menial jobs – such as washing bottles for Express Dairy – to earn her keep.

She left the Polytechnic to work full time for the war effort, and moved into Canterbury Hall, a hostel maintained by the Czech Trust Fund. Here she encountered the refugee poet Erich Fried and met her future husband, a Czech-Jewish journalist-turned-entrepreneur. They married during the war, and had a daughter in 1950, after which Käthe returned to the Regent Street Polytechnic to complete her art education. By that time her husband owned a plastics factory north of Kings Cross whose interior – as well as the surrounding industrial landscape – Käthe made the subject of many engravings. In subsequent years she received the Lord Mayor's Award for woodcuts, exhibited regularly at the Bankside gallery, was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Painter-Printmakers, and in 1989 the Greater London Record office acquired her industrial drawings for their permanent collection.