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No. 47 Downshire Hill - Hampstead

No.47 Downshire Hill has had a long and illustrious association with artists throughout the late 19th and 20th centuries. From an Italian model who went on to contribute to mosaics in St Paul's Cathedral, to the home of one of the most prominent early 20th century artist families - the Carlines. It was also at this time that it was associated with many famous artists including Stanley and Gilbert Spencer. However, the artistic connections continue, when in the mid 20th century it was home to the Fred and Diana Uhlman who again made it a haven for artists, including John Heartfield, who is commemorated with a blue plaque and who was responsible for establishing the photomontage art form made famous by the Sex Pistols and Monty Python.

Early Downshire Hill

A large amount of building along Downshire Hill was undertaken by William Woods, between 1813 and 1829. Woods was also responsible for the building of St John's Chapel, on the corner of Keats Grove, completed in 1823. No.47 Downshire Hill was built in around 1820 in the stuccoed classical style, featuring a round arched doorway with fanlight, French windows and continuous cast-iron balcony along the first floor.

Almost as soon as building was completed, Downshire Hill became the home of many prominent residents, and especially artists and writers, including John Constable; Fanny Brawne, the woman, who later gained the heart of poet, Keats (who, at the time, was living around the corner); and Dante Gabriel Rossetti.

Gaetano Meo – model and artist

It was during the late 1880s that No.47 Downshire Hill became the home of Italian artist and mosaicist, Gaetano Meo. Gaetano Meo was first known as one of the most sought after Italian models for well-known artists, such as Dante Gabriel Rossetti, Alma Tadema, Lord Leighton and Edward Burne-Jones. He later went on to paint landscape paintings, and exhibited at the Royal Academy, but it was for his mosaics that he is more remembered. Meo was responsible for a number of significant works, including mosaics in the Dome of St Paul's Cathedral and St Andrew's Chapel in Westminster Cathedral. Gaetano Meo was friends with many prominent late 19th century artists, including Rossetti and Burne-Jones, who both lived a few doors away. It was said that "they and other artists, not to mention literary figures like Samuel Butler, used to meet nearly every Sunday at No.47 to listen to music and play charades".

The Carline Family

It was in the early 20th century that No.47 Downshire Hill became the home of the Carline family. The Carline's moved into the house in around 1915-16 and included George and his wife, Annie and their five children, including most prominently, Sydney, Richard and Hilda. It is possible to write a book on each member of the Carline family, who all achieved great success, especially the children, who were painting at a time of revolution within the art world during the early 20th century. It is in fact for this very reason that the Carline family and the history of No.47 Downshire Hill are so intrinsically linked, as it became an open house for many prominent artists during the inter-war years, who came for the friendship and hospitality, but also for the critical debate and inspiration that was found when they gathered together. The artists became known as 'The Hampstead Circle' and exhibited predominately in the New English Art Club and The London Group.

Not only did No.47 Downshire Hill become a place for artists to gather together, but it was also featured in a number of paintings, including, by Richard Carline, "Gathering on the Terrace at 47 Downshire Hill, Hampstead" which features, Stanley Spencer, James Wood, Kate Foster, Richard Hartley, Henry Lamb, and Annie, Hilda and Sydney Carline, all gathered outside the house.

Sydney Carline

Sydney Carline was the eldest of the Carline children and was the first to attend the Slade School of Fine Art. Sydney later went on to study in Paris at a time of great change in the art world, with new influences such as post-impressionism and cubism. After a period as a pilot in the Royal Flying Corps, Sydney was appointed a war artist in 1918, as well as, designing commemorative medals for soldiers. Along with his brother, Richard, who joined him as a war artist, they sketched and painted battle scenes from the air. Their art work from this time constitutes the most comprehensive collection of paintings from the air in the Imperial War Museum. Sydney had his first exhibition only a few weeks before he prematurely died of pneumonia in February 1929.

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Richard Carline

Richard Carline followed his brother to study in Paris in 1913 but was soon after joining the war effort, also with the Royal Flying Corps. He was also involved in working on experiments with camouflage. He was appointed a war artist in 1918-19 to work along side his brother in recording battle scenes in the Middle East and after the war, the brothers once again partnered for their first exhibition in 1920. Richard later co-founded the International Artists' Association, and become Chairman of the UK committee in 1959 and honorary president from 1968-80. He also co-founded the Hampstead Artists' Council.

Legacy of the Carline's

All the Carline artists regularly held exhibitions across the country and today their artwork is held in the Tate Collection, the Imperial War Museum, The Ashmolean Museum and many other galleries across the country. However, in some ways, it was the gatherings and friendships of those days at No.47 Downshire Hill, described as "a focal centre, combining hospitality with endless discussion on art and its theory", that are most remembered when thinking of the Carline family.

Artists at No. 47 Downshire Hill

The list of visitors that gathered at No.47 Downshire Hill is full of well-known 20th century artists, including most prominently, Sir Stanley Spencer and his brother, Gilbert Spencer. Sir Stanley Spencer was a prolific artist who was much linked with the Carline family, not least because he married Hilda Carline in 1925. He was often at the house and he went on to become a highly successful artist. His paintings appear in many galleries across the world, including the Tate Collection, The Royal Academy and a permanent gallery in his honour, the Stanley Spencer Gallery in Cookham. Gilbert Spencer was also often at No.47 Downshire Hill. His works are displayed in many galleries across the UK and the world, including the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Ashmolean Museum and the Imperial War Museum.

Other prominent and successful artists who gathered at No.47 Downshire Hill included Henry Lamb, James [Jas] Wood, C.R. Nevinson, Paul Nash, Mark Gertler and Robert Bevan, as well as, Bernard and Nora Meninsky, Charles Ginner, Mary Adshead and many more.

Fred and Diana Uhlman

The last connection with artists at No.47 Downshire Hill took place during World War II. After the Carline family moved to Pond Street in 1936 No.47 became the home of Fred and Diana Uhlman. Fred and Diana Uhlman set up the Free German League of Culture and the Artists' Refuge Committee with the prime goal of helping artists to escape Nazi occupied Europe. Fred Uhlman was a German lawyer and artist, whose own work is held in the Victoria & Albert Museum and the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge. He was of Jewish origin and had had to flee from the Nazi's in 1936, arriving in England penniless, and unable to speak English, he understood the value of support for those fleeing Europe. The Artists' Refuge Committee helped many to set up a new life in England, including Oskar Kokoshka, Kurt Schwitters, Martin Bloch and John Heartfield.

John Heartfield

John Heartfield stayed with the Uhlman's at No. 47 Downshire Hill for six years, and was commemorated with a blue plaque on the house in 2004. Heartfield is attributed with creating the photomontage art form that was later made famous by the punk scene in the 1980s. However, it was during the rise of the Nazi's in 1930s Berlin that John Heartfield first used his new art form. Due to his anti-Nazi artworks he faced heavy persecution and escaped Europe in 1938 for the haven of No.47 Downshire Hill and the Uhlman's.

After World War II the Uhlman's continued to open up their home to artist's, including Julian and Mary Trevelyan, Sir Roland Penrose, John Berger, Josef Hermann and Maxwell Fry.