British painter Edward Burra: A neglected chronicler of 20th century society

Until October 19 at Tate Britain, London

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15 October 2025

Tate Britain presents the first major London retrospective in forty years of Edward Burra (1905–1976), one of Britain's most enigmatic and incisive figurative artists.

Born into a middle-class family in Rye, East Sussex, and educated at Chelsea School of Art and the Royal College of Art, Burra suffered all his life from chronic illnesses. Rheumatoid arthritis and pernicious anaemia left him unable to work in oils, yet he transformed watercolour—long considered a delicate or secondary medium—into a vehicle for radical expression. Through layering, bold pigmentation, and intricate detail, Burra achieved a richness often indistinguishable from oil, using it to conjure grotesque satire, surreal horror, and biting social critique.

The exhibition traces Burra's career chronologically, from early satirical urban scenes to surreal wartime imagery and haunting post-war landscapes. Emphasis is placed on his travels: the nightclubs and docks of Paris and Marseille, the cafés and music halls of Europe, and New York during the Harlem Renaissance. It places Burra at the centre of British modernism, from which he was marginalised as abstraction and formalism came to dominate postwar art.

Burra's early work emerged in the wake of revolutionary artistic ferment following the Bolshevik Revolution. He briefly joined Unit One (1933–35), a short-lived British art group that opposed academic tradition and sought to unify abstraction, surrealism, and contemporary design—alongside Paul Nash, Barbara Hepworth, and Henry Moore.

Yet Burra remained a solitary figure, never joining another group or political movement. He avoided public statements and interviews, expressing his opposition to militarism, authoritarianism, and bourgeois values through satire and irony rather than ideological clarity. "Nothing matters," he once remarked—a nihilistic refrain that echoes through his later work.

His early paintings are vivid, cartoonish, and stylised, influenced by Tubism, a Cubist offshoot associated with Fernand Léger. Works like *Hop Pickers Who've Lost Their Mothers* (1924) and *Market Day* (1926) reflect post-World War I poverty and migration yet retain a belief in social progress and interracial solidarity.

Balcony, Toulon (1929) mocks bourgeois superficiality, while *Minuit Chanson* (1931) celebrates the diversity of Parisian nightlife. In *John Deth (Hommage to Conrad Aiken)* (1931), Burra stages a macabre allegory of desire and mortality, with Death seductively gate-crashing a bourgeois orgy.

Though he never publicly identified as gay, Burra's work revels in homoeroticism and camp ambiguity—*Three Sailors at a Bar* (1930) being a prime example.

His visit to the US in the early 1930s was transformative: *Red Peppers* (1934–35) rejects racial stereotypes and captures the musical dynamism of Black urban life, shaped by a desire for interracial collaboration.

Burra's 1933 visit to Spain, drawn by its literature, religious iconography, and the grotesque visions of Goya and Bosch, culminated in a harrowing encounter with the outbreak of civil war in 1936 leading him to leave the country.

He produced a series of works, including after leaving Spain, marked by horror, ambiguity, and

violence—populated by skeletal figures, demons, and cloaked spectres. Burra interpreted the conflict in moral and quasi-religious terms, describing Spain as gripped by a "demonic force" and collective insanity, which conflated the violence of the fascist forces with the Republicans and socialists fighting General Franco's military coup.

Beelzebub (1937) depicts a red demon overseeing the destruction of a church, while *The Watcher* (1937) presents a cloaked skeletal figure amid ruins—a chilling allegory of death, surveillance, and societal collapse.

The National Galleries of Scotland claim Burra was "pro-Franco," citing a single curatorial interpretation of *The Watcher*. No letters, interviews, or affiliations support this view. On the contrary, Burra's correspondence expresses revulsion at Franco's coalition of "priests and generals": "Spain is ghastly now… makes one want to vomit. I'd rather be in Harlem with the jazz and the gin."

Burra's response to the Second World War was complex. Rather than issuing overt political or moral statements, he used surreal, grotesque, and occasionally religious non-doctrinal imagery to counter the sanitized propaganda of British war artists and reflect his horror about the war's impact on society.

Soldiers at Rye (1941) does not glorify the British military but presents its presence as ominous and alien. The figures are stiff, puppet-like, devoid of individuality.

In correspondence with friends, he mocked patriotic fervour, wartime bureaucracy, and the absurdity of civilian life under siege—expressed in flippant comments such as likening blackout drills to "rehearsals for a very dull opera" and complaining that "even the cabbage has to register now."

Burra's postwar letters reveal a blend of satire, wit, and irreverence. To Paul Nash, he wrote: "I loathe all that Empire stuff. It's just pomp and rot—like a Gilbert and Sullivan nightmare with medals." Of the British middle class: "A plague of tweed and teacups. They'd hang a Picasso in the loo if it matched the curtains." Declining Royal Academy membership in 1963, he quipped: "I'd rather paint a corpse in a café than hang with the RA crowd. They're all frightfully clean and frightfully dull."

In later years, Burra became reclusive, turning away from urban life toward eerie landscapes suffused with environmental anxiety. *Cornish Clay Mines* (1970), with its petrol stations and scarred terrain, contrasts sharply with earlier scenes of human vitality. *Valley and River, Northumberland* (1972) offers a pared-down pastoral vision, devoid of figures—a quiet elegy on his former hopes.

Burra's art reveals certain objective social truths. Whatever his ideological failings and ambiguities, his paintings critique fascism, state violence, and bourgeois complicity. And in this light, he emerges not just as a chronicler of twentieth-century society but as one of its more perceptive witnesses.