

1985



Leicester Square
James Boswell 1934

Leicester Square 1934
lithograph, 395 x 323mm
Presented by the artist, 1940

JAMES BOSWELL

1906-1971

Graphic works of the 1930s
from the collection of the
Auckland City Art Gallery

BIB 880961

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JAMES BOSWELL 1906-1971

Graphic works of the 1930s from the collection of the Auckland City Art Gallery

These prints were made in London by James Boswell, a young New Zealander. Born in Westport, Boswell attended Auckland Grammar and Elam School of Art before moving to London in 1925. There he gained a diploma from the Royal College of Art, and settled down to the business of working as an artist. Apart from a brief visit in 1948, he never returned to his native country.

In the early 1930s the economic climate in Britain was worsening, and hunger and unemployment were real concerns for wide sections of the community. Along with many other young artists, Boswell responded by politicizing his work.

By 1932 the Great Depression hung over us. I joined the Communist Party, gave up painting, took to illustration and graphic design and helped found the Artists International Association, which at that time was a mixture of agit-prop body, Marxist discussion group, exhibitions organiser and anti-war, anti-fascist outfit. It did an excellent job at the time in a very wide range of activity.
[Boswell, quoted in Saville, p.15]

Much of Boswell's activity was of a practical nature, from feeding hunger marchers to painting banners for use in anti-Fascist rallies. The launching of *Left Review* in 1934 helped to take Boswell's graphic work to a much wider public, and over its four-year history he was an editor and major contributor. Over this period, he also contributed material to the *Daily Worker*, using the pseudonym of Buchan. His lithographs were produced in cheap editions, on often less-than-ideal paper, but through their mass-publication in journals had an influence that extended far beyond the distribution of original prints.

Boswell's decision to give up painting in favour of mass-reproducible graphics was probably inspired by the example of German communist artists John Heartfield and George Grosz, whose art had been classified as "degenerate" in Hitler's new Germany. Although Boswell lacks the no-holds-barred savagery of Grosz's satirical vision, contemporary reviewers recognised the source of his graphic language. The tense linearity and the propensity for grotesque physiognomy both derive from Grosz.

Yet the prints are far more than doctrinaire derivations from a notorious foreign artist. They represent a struggle to produce social satire that grows out of specifically British conditions and more importantly, addresses a specific British audience at a particular point in its history. *Means Test* 1934 is a fairly straightforward treatment of the implications of contemporary welfare legislation, and in its stark horror is what we'd expect from a left-wing propagandist. But what about *His Majesty's Servants* 1934? This superbly "noir" treatment of three government officers relates to the 1934 Incitement to Disaffection Act, concern over which led to the foundation of the National Council for Civil Liberties.

The basis for much of Boswell's work lies in the subtle exaggeration of observed reality. *West Central* 1935 is a compilation of "types", a synthesising approach also employed in *Leicester Square* 1934. The refutation of conventional perspective in these pictures helps the depiction of the dislocation and characteristic awkwardness of English street encounters, especially those spiced by sexual intrigue. *Soldier, Solider* 1935 is a similarly Grosz-like treatment that links monarchy, military uniform, and sexual potency.

Not all the messages to be read in Boswell's prints are straightforward, but many are still relevant today. Haven't we also seen types analogous to the overprivileged snobs of *You gotta have blue blood?* And what are they planning in the representation of the capitalist *Empire Builders*? Could it be one of our new mirrored glass skyscrapers?

In the later 1930s, Boswell's style loosens up, in keeping with his pictorial interests. His drawings tend more towards the illustrative (street scenes, pub patrons), mostly lacking the sharp satirical edge of his work of the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, works such as *A Visit to the Midwife* 1939 indicate that Boswell occasionally continued his earlier practice of using titles to charge the images with meaning.

In the series of untitled *Spanish Civil War* lithographs, Boswell transforms the horrific news from Spain into theatrical depictions of darkness and death. Years earlier he had made a series illustrating London in ruins, for an unrealised book. Now he reacted to the Spanish war by producing these claustrophobic pictures of chaotic battles within a contemporary ruined city. Boswell and his associates were heavily involved in fundraising for arms and medical supplies to aid the Republican cause, and some also joined the International Brigade. An Artists International Association member, Felicia Browne, died in 1936 – the first British woman killed in action in Spain.

James Boswell's gift

With the exception of the earlier etching and woodcut of bar-room scenes (purchased in 1930), the works on show have been selected from a group of 44 lithographs that the artist presented to the Auckland City Art Gallery in 1940. This was probably in response to the inclusion of three early works in the centennial exhibition of New Zealand art held that year. James Boswell's generosity significantly enriched the gallery's collection of British prints, while also enabling us to know at first hand something of the graphic work of this exceptionally talented expatriate.

Roger Blackley

Curator, Historical New Zealand Art

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Sources: Further reading

James Boswell *The Artist's Dilemma* London 1947

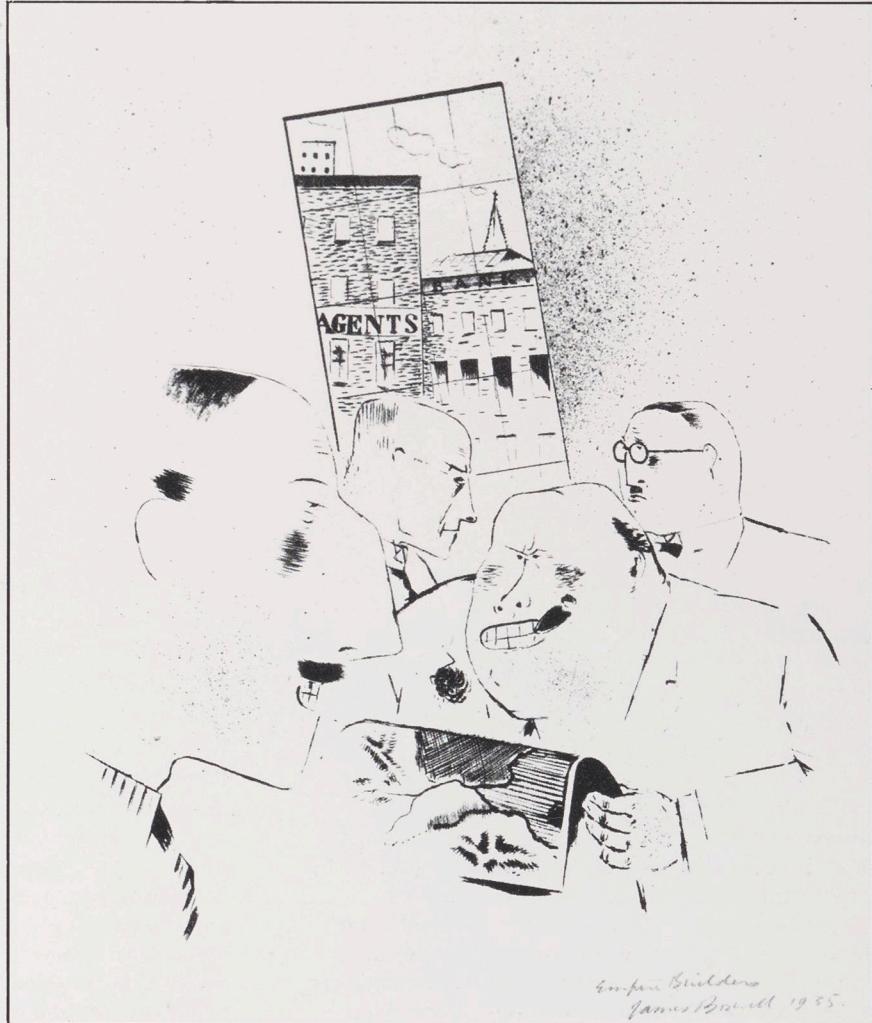
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Herbert Roth "James Boswell: A New Zealand Artist in
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13-19



Empire Builders 1935
two-colour lithograph, 382 x 255mm
Presented by the artist, 1940



Means Test.

Jameson Howell 1934

Means Test 1934
lithograph, 290 x 222mm
Presented by the artist, 1940

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