

Sickert The Visionary



Introducing Walter Sickert

Between 1904 and 1905 a distinct gentleman from London reserves an ample, sunlit room at the Mayer Majestic Hotel in Venice. His name is Walter Sickert, the impressionist painter; at the time already near-to notoriously well-known. Sickert reaches Italy accompanied by an unusually cold wind; a particularly rigid North-eastern winter welcomes him. Evidently Sickert finds his right inspiration immediately because, for six months, he does nothing but paint.

The Two Murders

In December 1904 Venice is afflicted by two absolutely unaccountable crimes. At the beginning of the month, the body of a girl, just sixteen years old, is found afloat in the Rio della Tana canal. The corpse' right hand side flank seems sutured by the expert hand of a professional surgeon.

The Magistrate Alvise Zamboni orders the immediate autopsy which reveals a macabre particularity: the girl's kidney has been removed. Slow investigation continues until it comes to a halt and ceases without any results at all. A crime, without doubt. Heinous *modus operandi*, but where is the motive?

The girl was an orphan; no-one presents themselves at the obituary and, consequentially, a few days later the body is interred under a simple wooden cross, without a name.

On the night of the 31st of December 1904, the second crime. Immediate the hue and cry; a tremendous echo in the press; panic. Young Cecilie Aznam, the daughter of the Turkish ship-owner Hector Aznam is found, horrendously mutilated, in a Suite of the Hotel Des Bains on the Lido.



Doctor Zamboni has another inexplicable murder on his hands; this time though, the victim has the honour of the front page headlines; and further, the assassin leaves a message on site. Zamboni holds it to be raving nonsense, but carefully avoids that this detail is in any way revealed. On a piece of drawing-paper an infantile hand has laboriously written: *Nemo profeta in patria*. The twenty year-old seems bloodless; the body violated and re-stitched up again. A terrifying vision.

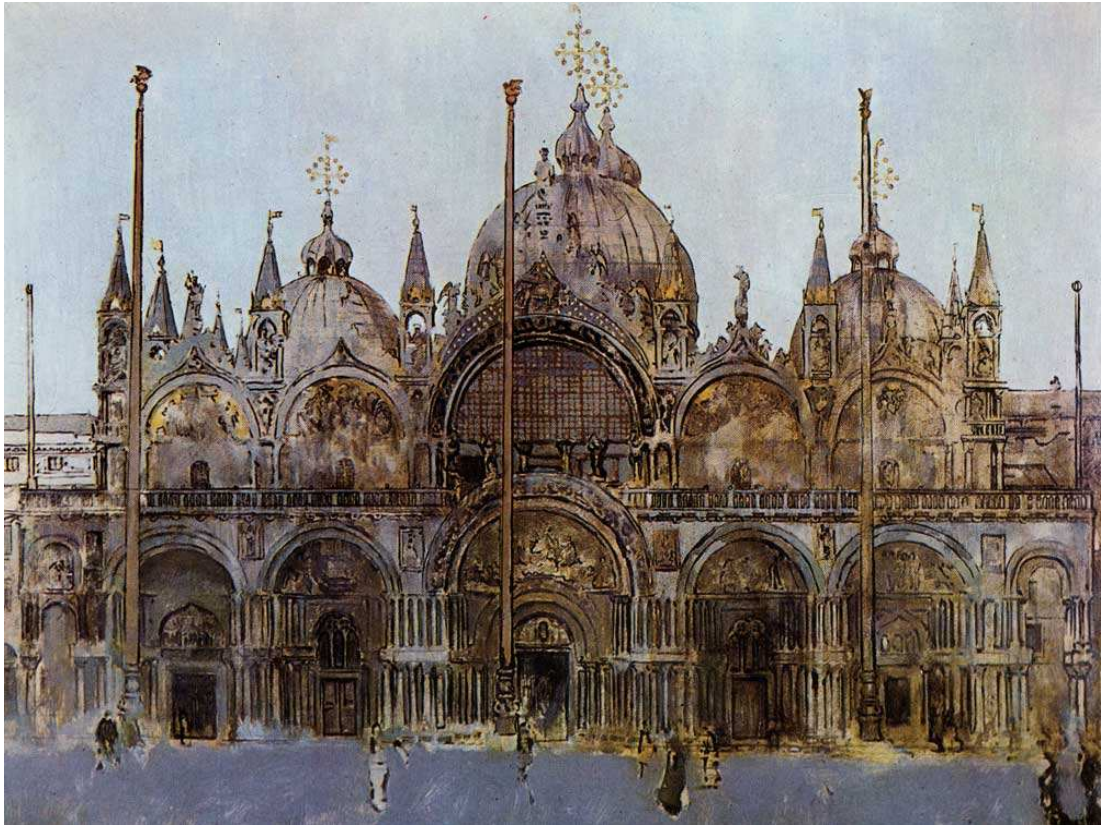
*Seated nude, 1904.
Sickert's portrait of the young Rio della Tana orphan*

Sent from the Capital and following direct orders from the Ministry of the Interior, the famous Maresciallo Cappa of the Corpo dei Carabinieri is detached to join Zamboni in the investigation. But towards the beginning of spring 1905 it becomes evident that they have reached "a dead end"

A season in which there are only very few foreign travellers and tourists in the Lagoon City; Sua Signoria Venezia, bella Venezia Venice, "La Serenissima" ... a period in which Venice is all but serene... the hotels, the Lido, the restaurants, the beaches : mute and useless; a glacial, sad winter...

and no link of any kind to Cecilie Aznam, even less to the poor Ophelia of the Rio della Tana...

Saint Mark's Cathedral, 1905, One of Sickert's most famous watercolours



"The Gordian Knot"

Evidently there is a possible link between the two crimes and the tenebrous figure of Jack the Ripper - the mysterious serial killer who held London breathlessly checkmate between 1880 and 1890;

but, as the Superintendent of Scotland Yard Allen Hughes writes: "... many similar and unresolved crimes have occurred in just as many places on the European Continent that have been *d'emblée* attributed to Jack The Ripper without being able to cut the famous Gordian Knot."

In fact it's precisely the two Venetian crimes that seem to be able to resolve the intricate enigma, yes - a fact that may be more or less surprising - above all, seeing that the solution to the case was right under the Italian polices' nose for the most of two entire years.

Walter Sickert, the english artist's name appears on the list of suspects.

In months of arduous work Sickert produces numerous paintings: one in particular and bearing a French title: "*Les Vénitiennes*".

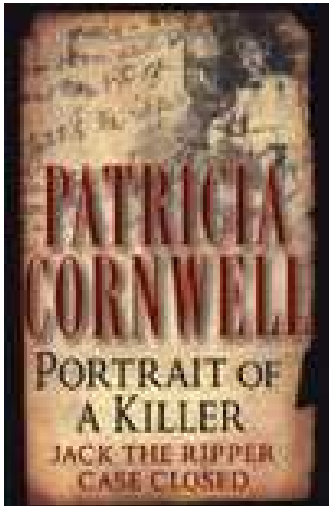


Les Vènitienes, 1905

An interior, portraying two young girls sitting on a "diwan". ... "Les Venetiennes" is exhibited at The Fine Art Society for more than 50 years.....

In the female figure we see on the right hand side of the painting: the girl that seems to be looking straight at the spectator, one perfectly recognizes Cecilie Aznam.

Andrew Patrick, expert at The Fine Art Society, has always insisted on denying the resemblance up to even reaching an exhausting discussion and verbal brawl in doing so with the famous writer Patricia Cornwell who has meanwhile invested a lot of her time (and own money); other than writing a book, she has also bought dozens of Sickert's drawings, paintings, sketches; dissected them, scanned them, forensically analyzed them, searching for approbatory clues....



The life of Walter Sickert itself reveals us a lot more disturbing details:

Sickert, the actor : in 1880 he calls himself: Mr. Nemo.

Exactly as in "the signature" left on the Venice murders site....

(.....)

Further, Sickert has 3 ateliers in the Whitechapel area, where he starts his painting career following in the footsteps of "his Maestro": James McNeill Whistler.

The crimes attributed to Jack the Ripper all occur in that same, limited district.

Purposely left behind on the final London crime scene, Jack's last letter to Allen Hughes tells us how: "...*One day men will look back and realise that I've baptised the XX century.*"

Nemo profeta in patria:
Nobody is prophet in his own country.

Maybe Jack the Ripper had waited 20 years that Hughes, his alter ego, reaches their appointment in, as Jack liked to sign his messages: *(from) Hell.*

Had Jack/Sickert taken his colours, paintbrushes and easel and chosen Venice for a new mise-en-scène of the legendary Ripper?

Patricia Cornwell is absolutely certain. Since 1992 she has collected proof, documents, photographs, effected DNA tests etc. etc. but there's still no decisive or definite proof to charge Walter Sickert, The Visionary.

Still, the Penguin dossier published on-line on the world wide web is extremely interesting; the discussion on the conclusions Cornwell reaches in her book and curiously enough, whereas the art historians recognize the Venetian period as the hinge in Sickert's art between realism and impressionism it seems that she doesn't fully catch the aspects of a mutant mastermind killer.

Jack the Ripper is born into the hovels of the poorest part of London, spying on the whores, stalking them, molesting them.....until 20 years later Jack relinquishes the burden of simply carnal aspects and becomes the pure visionary.... he transforms an orphan beggar into a bleeding Ophelia, modelling the magnificent body of a twenty year old with a scalpel in maniacal surgical sculpture in an insane attempt to reach the androgynous form and ideal of a would-be modern-time Praxiteles.



Cornwell's research indicates that at the time of the murders, Sickert was either in London or holidaying in Dieppe, north-western France - close enough to commute. She also shows that the alleged Ripper letters and some written by Sickert were on paper from the same stationary company. Five of the Ripper letters were signed "Nemo" - Latin for "Nobody" - Sickert's stage name as a young actor had been "Mr Nemo" or "Mr Nobody".

For PC it's: Case Closed, but....

doubt remains...