

Soutine's portraits: Servants but not servile

Soutine's Portraits: Cooks, Waiters and Bellboys at The Courtauld Gallery, Somerset House, 19th October 2017 to 21st January 2018.

History has not been kind to Chaïm Soutine (1893 – 1943). Unlike his contemporaries such as Picasso or Modigliani, the chances are that most people haven't heard of him. But if you did happen to come across an art lover familiar with Soutine, you might hear three things. You might hear about the company he kept - how he was friends with Modigliani and the other émigré artists of post-WW1 Paris, united with them by poverty, ill health and often a shared Jewish faith. You might also hear about his unsavory personal habits – how he and Modigliani took turns sleeping in a flea-ridden bed; how a spectacular lack of personal hygiene allowed bugs to nest in his ear undetected; or how he famously kept the carcass of a dead cow hanging in his studio until it became so rotten and rancid that the neighbours complained. And thirdly you might hear how he was a painter who worked at the borders of expressionism and abstraction, producing swirling landscapes and gruesome still lifes that prioritised form and colour over representation. But portraiture is perhaps the most challengingly representational of all genres of painting. So what then might we make of Soutine the portrait painter?

First, plaudits to the Courtauld Gallery for allowing this question to be answered so convincingly. This is an impressive exhibition. Curatorship is a tough job these days; too light a touch and the show meanders, revealing little of its subject; too intrusive a touch, and we suspect the curator's intentions and assume there's an 'agenda'. This exhibition though is pitch perfect, brave in conception and marvelously well executed. The paintings are hung purposefully and supported by clear and informative texts so that we are able to (re)discover Soutine both as a painter of people and as a man.

The show starts in an ante-room where we are given a taste of Soutine's style and introduced to his sitters – the bellboys, valets and chefs of the show - and then continues into a larger gallery. In truth though, first impressions are not favourable. Soutine repeats the same pictorial formula over and over again. The sitters are mostly cropped half-length at the waist or else three-quarter length at the knees. All are posed square on to us. Their hands are either at their hips, elbows jutting out, or are folded passively in their laps, the cropping accentuating each pose. The faces too initially appear formulaic with the same exaggerated ears, pointed chins, and small dark eyes, mismatched and uneven. In combination with the plain dark colours of the backgrounds, this repetition offers us paintings with no sense of the sitter in context.

But look beyond this repetition and the next thing you notice are the colours. And when Soutine does colour, he really does colour. It starts early in the show with the *Butcher Boy* of 1919. This painting is awash with blood, so much so that the blood-splattered features of the sitter are hard to detect against the blood-soaked curtain of the background. Soutine's red here is the primal colour of the slaughter house. And this mastery of coloration continues into the main room with the colours of his sitters' attire. Each sitter is identified in terms of their role and each wears the appropriate uniform which Soutine imbues with deep rich colours from a primary palette of red, white and black. We blink then as the bright crimson of the bellboys' jackets assails our eyes, while the chefs' whites swirl with the reds, blues and yellows that Soutine has found in them.



Butcher Boy, c. 1919-1920. Private Collection

The sitters might be identified in terms of their roles but on closer acquaintance, you start to notice that they are not solely defined by them. Rather we gradually become aware of Soutine's sympathy with his subjects. For despite the repetition of the poses and the uniforms – or perhaps because of them? – flashes of the person behind the uniform become clear. Take the *Valet* of 1927-8 whose attentive eyes look over your shoulder perhaps eager to help an elderly guest struggling with their luggage. Or the sitter painted four times starting with the *Head Waiter* of 1927 in which his high forehead and boxer's nose bring to mind the hauteur of a true-born Maître d', a man not to be messed with. Or the *Room Service Waiter* of 1928 whose evening dress, slicked back hair and classically handsome jawline suggest that he knows where the best band in town is playing that night.



Head Waiter, c. 1927, Private Collection, Berlin

According to Willem de Koonig, 'Soutine distorted the pictures but not the people'. More accurately perhaps, Soutine distorted the pictures in order to reveal the essence of the people in these paintings. This is best illustrated in the *Pastry Cook of Cagnes* of 1922-3 who Soutine paints with real empathy and pathos. Here is a young chef, innocent and a little naïve, who seems to have just been summoned from the kitchen. Pink from the heat of the ovens, he perches anxiously on a wicker chair, still clutching the red rag he has just used to wipe his pastry board. His over-sized ears and small dark eyes give him a mouse-like quality, and we sense that while he feels obliged to pose for us, he is eager to soon scuttle away to prepare dessert for the paying guests.



Pastry Cook of Cagnes, 1922. Museum of Avant-Guard Mastery of Europe (MAGMA)

The main caveat to the show is perhaps Soutine's treatment of women who feature in only three out of the 21 paintings. Two of these are full length portraits, with the sitters presented in tall narrow frames. The figures though almost seem too large in these paintings, imprisoned by the frames. These constraints magnify their servitude and unlike the male sitters, we get no sense of the dignity of their roles nor of the individuals beneath the uniforms. Perhaps the range of jobs available to men in the hierarchy of Paris's grand hotels and restaurants gave Soutine more to work with, but the women in these three paintings are generic maids and cooks, constrained both in paint and perhaps individually and socially too.

But it would be an injustice to finish on a caveat as the final two pictures on the far wall of the gallery are the most interesting and challenging in the show. Both are bellboys, resplendent again in crimson uniforms with gold buttons, young men perhaps accustomed to being seen and being of service. The first, the *Bellboy* of 1925, stands again hands on hips, elbows angular and jutting. But from the waist down, Soutine shows his sitter with legs splayed wide as if straining for balance. One knee is slightly bent, the other leg stretches straight out to the side as if this young man is limbering up for a foot race. And he clearly is a man. His groin thrusts towards us just below our eye line, his sex obvious and bulging. His fleshy hands provocatively narrow his waist, drawing our attention down the painting into this triangle of hands and groin. The red of his trousers and hat is reflected in the red of his pursed lips but beyond that, his face offers no clues as to what is going on between us and him.



Bellboy, c1925, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, Musée national d art modern/Centre de création industrielle

The second bellboy, *Page Boy at Maxim's* of 1927, is even more unsettling. A rare full-length portrait, this bellboy's right hand is stretched out towards us, palm upwards. This hand is empty but we can see coins visible in his other fist. Perhaps he is asking for a tip but for what? Curiously characterless, his eyes don't show expectation or gratitude but are instead the cold, black eye sockets of a corpse. These two are markedly different to the rural chefs and pastry cooks of the rest of the show – more venal, more urban, more knowing, and an intriguing end to a fine exhibition.

By now, it is also clear where Soutine's sympathies lie. Perhaps as an émigré artist, an outsider himself, he chose not to paint the guests of the grand hotels. Instead he painted those that served them with

respect, affection and insight, endowing his sitters with a dignity and an individuality that transcends their uniforms and station in life. His sitters may be servants but they are not servile.

So go and make the acquaintance of these splendid fellows. Spend some time in their company and you'll get to know them – and Soutine - well.

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