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THE CAMDEN TOWN MURDER SERIES**



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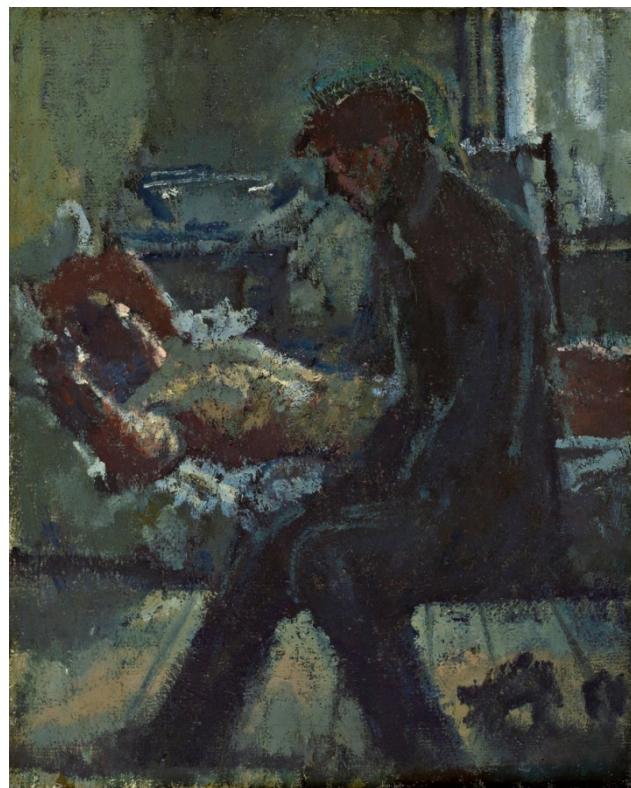
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**THE POWER OF THE TITLE AND THE
CRISIS OF MEANING IN WALTER
SICKERT'S**

THE CAMDEN TOWN MURDER SERIES



**Dissertation submitted for the Degree of B.A. Honours in
History of Art with Study Abroad**

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INTRODUCTION

As linguistic creatures, so-called, can we as viewers of paintings ever do other than read them, turning them into words and attributing to them a verbal source?¹

The extent to which titles contribute to the interpretation of paintings is at the centre of a discussion from the 1980s in which several distinguished aestheticians considered the relationship between the caption and the visual object. The discourse stemmed from the fact that up until around 1860 titles functioned as ‘basic labels’ for recognition purposes,² and so maintained an unambiguous relationship to the artworks they accompanied. From the mid-nineteenth century, Stephen Bann distinguishes a ‘polysemic’ alternative tradition found in the frame-inscribed title of the Pre-Raphaelites and witty word-play of Edouard Manet, as they used the title ‘as a sign of their own transgressive practice.’³ This dissent from tradition, with the newly functioning caption, set into force what John Welchman describes as a ‘crisis of meaning’ between emerging ‘modernism and an already complex field of traditional, academic denominations.’⁴

Furthermore, the early-twentieth century produced a formalist counter-narrative championed by Roger Fry and Clive Bell who asserted that words beyond the picture frame should be immaterial to understanding the visual forms.⁵ However, the aestheticians of the 1980s contended with this formalist doctrine, asserting that:

¹ H. Adams, ‘Titles, Titling, and Entitlement to’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 46, No. 1 (Autumn 1987), 15.

² J. Welchman, *Invisible Colors* (New Haven and London, 1997), 2.

³ S. Bann, ‘The Mythical Conception is the Name: Titles and Names in Modern and Post-Modern Painting’, *Word and Image*, Vol. 1, No. 1 (1985), 176.

⁴ Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, 2.

⁵ See C. Bell, *Art* (London, 1920); R. Fry, *Vision and Design* (London, 1925).

The title of an artwork is an invariably significant part of that work, which helps determine its character, and not just an incidental frill devoid of import, or a mere label whose only purpose is to allow us to refer to the work and distinguish it from its fellows.⁶

These were the words of Jerrold Levinson who, along with others such as John Fisher and Hazard Adams, emphasised the importance of headings as contextual factors at work in the viewing of paintings.⁷ While Levinson argues that a title is ‘as essential’ to an artwork ‘as any of the other constituents that make the work what it is’,⁸ Adams takes it even further. Drawing on W. J. T. Mitchell’s word-image theory he asserts that ‘a painting with a title has to be regarded as a ‘composite’ work.’⁹

In considering a painting as a confluence of pictorial and verbal traditions, this discourse will investigate a particularly engaging example of entitling from the oeuvre of Walter Sickert (1860-1942). As a product of the modern British milieu, it could be argued that Sickert was audacious with his titles, as some provoked shocking responses from contemporary viewers and he also had ‘a habit of changing them when he view[ed] one of his works afresh.’¹⁰ In June 1911 when Sickert exhibited two paintings entitled ‘The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1’ and ‘No. 2’ at the first exhibition of The Camden Town Group at the Carfax Gallery in London, an understanding of the image through its dramatic legend was inescapable. The titles were provocative because they governed two compositions of a clothed man and a naked woman on a bed in a squalid interior and alluded directly to the unresolved murder of the prostitute, Emily Dimmock, in Camden Town in September 1907. However, confusion over the interpretation of these works has since emerged as divergent

⁶ J. Levinson, ‘Titles’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol. 44, No. 1 (Autumn 1985), 29.

⁷ See Levinson, ‘Titles’, 29-39, Adams, ‘Titles’, 7-21, J. Fisher, ‘Entitling’, *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (Dec. 1984), 286-98.

⁸ Levinson, ‘Titles’, 31.

⁹ Adams, ‘Titles’, 13.

¹⁰ *News Chronicle*, 23 October 1930, quoted in W. Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (London, 2006), 143.

alternative titles - ‘What Shall We Do for the Rent?’ and ‘Summer Afternoon’ – were later given. The power of Sickert’s original headings and their substitutes presents the audience with the problem of how to approach and deduce one of his paintings. Wendy Baron wonders whether we should enter the work through the ‘back door’ and analyse his ‘expression of plastic facts’, or instead, ‘accept the invitation’ and tackle the work through its irresistible caption.¹¹ However, the disruption these alternatives cause to the natural framing function of the title represents another ‘crisis of meaning.’

The body of artwork found under the ‘Camden Town Murder’ heading is widely discussed, but more because of the sordid nature of the works than the ambiguity in their titles. Where the variant headings are deliberated, it is through a biographical approach in order to consider Sickert’s agenda, rather than a consideration of their effects on viewer reception. Opinion over how important the titles are to Sickert seems to fall into a tripartite structure; while some believe them to be capricious because the artist was more concerned with the formal elements of his works, others consider them fundamental to the literary purpose of the image, and most commonly, scholars meet in the middle. While Sickert’s first biographer, Robert Emmons, suggests that ‘The Camden Town Murder Series’ title at the 1911 exhibition was ‘no more than a peg on which to hang the study of two related figures under a given fall of light,’¹² Baron also considers the idea that ‘the apt expression of the plastic facts was for Sickert one of the most important aspects of painting’, and therefore that the subject-matter was perhaps ‘no more than a pretext.’¹³ Yet while she wrote in 1973 that Sickert’s titles were arbitrary,¹⁴ by 2006 she reassessed her interpretation of his intentions, now more firmly supporting the possibility that his titles were ‘part of his playful nostalgia

¹¹ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 131.

¹² R. Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London, 1941), 146.

¹³ W. Baron, *Sickert* (London, 1973), 186.

¹⁴ Baron, *Sickert*, 187.

for the Victorian age.’¹⁵ This reconsideration confirms the struggle to define Sickert’s agenda from the available evidence. Stella Tillyard represents the counter-argument to Emmons in her strong belief that Sickert’s headings confirm his literariness as a painter. She describes him as a storyteller and, more boldly, ‘formalism’s antagonist.’¹⁶ Meanwhile scholars such as Lisa Tickner, weigh-up the argument to conclude that both literary content and form were important to him, and so the murder headings – ‘neither totally mischievous nor totally arbitrary’ – had *some* connection to his motives.¹⁷

While there are many interpretations, for the purpose of this project I will assume that Sickert’s titles did have significance to him and as the current literature does not dwell on the predicament the alternatives give rise to, my approach will draw upon the entitling debate of the 1980s to consider whether his titles are fundamental to the way in which they are interpreted. In light of this discussion, this thesis will investigate the extent to which the function of these titles was important to Sickert’s agenda, the effect the original and alternative titles have on the meaning of the works, and how integral the headings are to the display and reception of the paintings today.

Although the boundaries of the ‘Camden Town Murder’ corpus are hazy, critics generally believe it contains four or five paintings, several drawings and some etchings. However, this project will only focus on two of the paintings as they represent the most fitting example for an investigation into titles. The images are the only paintings that were exhibited together under the ‘Series’ heading, they depict an incredibly similar composition, and have the most varying alternative captions. A selection of sources will be used throughout in order to support this investigation. Writings and illustration from Sickert’s

¹⁵ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 131.

¹⁶ S. Tillyard ‘The End of Victorian Art: W. R. Sickert and the Defence of Illustrative Painting’, in B. Allen (ed.), *Towards a Modern Art World* (New Haven and London, 1995), 192.

¹⁷ L. Tickner ‘Walter Sickert and the Camden Town Murder’, in B. Wright (ed.), *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes*, exhibition catalogue, London: Courtauld Gallery, 25 October 2007 – 20 January 2008, 45.

contemporaries, visual comparisons from the popular press, as well as his own writings, will be examined in order to elucidate more about his intentions with the original titles. Exhibition catalogues will be used to trace the entitling changes, and material, such as catalogues and reviews, from the most recent exhibitions of these paintings will be examined to support a museological consideration of the way in which the gallery plays a role in the title-artwork relationship. These varying forms of evidence will be compared and contrasted in order to give an understanding of how and why the titles came about and the extent to which the alterations have affected the paintings and their reception.

While the previous literature on Sickert adopted a social art historical approach which has led to conclusions solely regarding the implications of the contemporary environment on his intentions, my method will be more experimental. At the same time as considering the works from this same viewpoint, a semiotic approach will be adopted in order to explain more about the titles' framing function in relation to the paintings. It is apparent that the two approaches are rarely applied together due to their sometimes opposing nature. Despite this, by interpreting the material with divergent methodologies, I will endeavour to conclude with a more rounded conception of the caption and its worth. The entitling theories previously mentioned will support the investigation throughout. However, as I am conscious that the majority of the conclusions drawn from these discussions are based on opinion rather than fact, the project will also consider a study carried out by psychologists, to provide firmer evidence about the power of the title.

Sickert's *The Camden Town Murder Series* represents a striking example of the relationship between image and lexis which enables an in-depth consideration of the fundamental nature of titles in the art historical and wider public realms. Attention to such a concept is important precisely because it has been largely overlooked by art historians. By considering these renowned paintings in light of this new focus, the discourse will endeavour

to clarify more about the authority of these specific headings and the title in general as a powerful force upon the visual object.

CHAPTER ONE

The Title as a Sign of Sickert's Modernist Agenda

Although Sickert was a valuable member of the New English Art Club (NEAC) between 1888 and 1897 who enjoyed association with other like-minded painters, after a while it became clear that he had different priorities.¹⁸ As Emmons wrote: ‘His gregariousness was but a skin. Always beneath it was the cat that walked by itself.’¹⁹ He soon embarked on the creation of his own artistic agenda concerned with challenging traditional representations of the ‘real’ as well as the ‘dominant and pervasive modes of seeing’,²⁰ at the turn of the century. Thereafter, his work opposed the idealistic art of the Academy, exemplified by the work of Frederick Leighton, in its gritty portrayal of modern urban life. His impasto style which was reliant on the dramatic use of light and brushwork was reminiscent of the French Impressionists, but his work was also pioneering in subject-matter; found in the intimate spaces of London’s working class. In 1910, he urged the artist to follow the model into the bedroom of a ‘shabby little house’ to make her into ‘a Degas or a Renoir, and stuff for the draughtsman’²¹ and this was exactly the essence of his ‘Camden Town Murder’ corpus.

Barnaby Wright considers these paintings to be ‘important statements of his bid to assert his artistic identity in the modern art worlds of Paris and London respectively,’²² and they certainly demonstrate a combination of his unconventional portrayal of the nude with the sensational utilisation of the caption. The result was outrage from contemporaries such as

¹⁸ Emmons, *Life and Opinions*, 95-102.

¹⁹ Emmons, *Life and Opinions*, 102.

²⁰ A. G. Robins, *Walter Sickert: Drawings, Theory and Practice: Image and Word* (Aldershot, 1996), 15.

²¹ W. Sickert, ‘The Study of Drawing’, *The New Age*, 16 June 1910, in Robins (ed.), *Sickert: The Complete Writings on Art* (Oxford, 2008), 247-8.

²² Wright (ed.), *Camden Town Nudes*, 23.

Fred Brown who wrote to Sickert to declare that the ‘sordid’ nature of these paintings ‘made it impossible for there to be any friendship between them.’²³ Brown was Professor of Painting at the Slade School and had been a distinct member of the ‘Impressionist’ core of the NEAC, which suggests that despite the avant-garde intentions of the group, there still remained significant prudence within British art.²⁴ Sickert countered this environment head-on with the display of *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1* (1908-9, Daniel Katz Family Trust) (*fig. 1* and hereafter described as so) and *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2* (1908-9, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, Fife) (*fig. 2* and hereafter described as so, unless the title (rather than painting) is referred to, in which case it will be formatted as ‘The Camden Town Murder Series’) at the first exhibition of The Camden Town Group; Sickert’s brainchild which represented a collection of British artists who focused on the depiction of modern urban life. He would have acknowledged that the critics of 1911 ‘were likely to talk about the content of the paintings’,²⁵ and therefore the murder titles were undoubtedly his collateral to seize their attention.

The pair is believed to have been initially displayed in Paris in 1909 under the French version of the title, ‘L’Affaire de Camden Town’ (see Appendix A), but for the purposes of this essay only the English headings will be investigated. The two paintings are variations of the same composition: *fig. 1* is a cropped, larger version of *fig. 2*. They represent a moody vision of a clothed male sitting on an iron bed next to a reclining nude female; her arms raised either side of her head. A wash-stand is positioned behind the bed and a window can be seen in the top right-hand corner. The light from the window heightens the drama and tension of the scene as rays bathe the woman, emphasising her nudity, while by-passing the man who is cast as a sinister silhouette. Although the two paintings are veritably similar they

²³ Baron, *Sickert*, 109.

²⁴ Baron, *Sickert*, 109.

²⁵ Tillyard, ‘End of Victorian Art’, 195.

do display certain differences. In particular the tones of *fig. 1* are warmer and earthier than the cool blues and greens of *fig. 2*. Nevertheless, in both cases, a restricted and murky palette enhances the feeling of a squalid interior. The slight variance in pose of the clothed man (seen in his arms) enables the figure to look thoughtful or concerned with arms crossed and one hand under his chin in *fig. 1*, in comparison to the more neutral and ambiguous pose in *fig. 2*. Due to the wider viewpoint adopted in *fig. 2* more detail is provided in the form of the woman's shoes and floorboards which draw the viewer into the perspective of the scene. However, the position of the nude female remains identical in both compositions, suggesting that they are a variation of the same moment in time. Therefore, within this discourse, unless a particular painting is stated, the general impression of the two will be considered together in comparison with other examples.

Sickert's provocation of the critics by accompanying this scene with its murder caption had effect. *The Art News* described it, again, as 'sordid'²⁶ while *The Commentator* queried a heading which 'honoured a part of London that one more naturally associates with murders than with art.'²⁷ *The Daily Telegraph* was also taken by the title; commenting on Sickert's 'choice of subjects more worthy of the "Police News" than of a picture gallery of high rank.'²⁸ This allusion to the media-worthy subject is unsurprising considering 'The Camden Town Murder' originated from newspaper headlines about the homicide on 12th September 1907.²⁹ According to Emmons, a 'good deal of ink was spilt by critics in showing

²⁶ M. S., 'Other Exhibitions: The Camden Town Group', *The Art News*, 15 June 1911, 78, in H. Bonett, Y. Holt, J. Mundy (eds.) *The Camden Town Group in Context*, May 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/m-s-other-exhibitions-the-camden-town-group-r1104322>, accessed 3 December 2012.

²⁷ E. Storer, 'Art', *The Commentator*, 12 July 1911, 119, in Bonett, Holt, Mundy (eds.), *The Camden Town Group in Context*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/e-s-edward-storer-art-r1104324>, accessed 3 December 2012

²⁸ Author unknown, 'The Camden Town Group, Interesting Pictures', *Daily Telegraph*, 22 June 1911, 8, in Bonett, Holt, Mundy (eds.) *The Camden Town Group in Context*, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/author-unknown-the-camden-town-group-interesting-pictures-r1104310>, accessed 3 December 2012.

²⁹ Tickner, 'Walter Sickert', 45, n. 3.

that Sickert's style was not adapted to bloody murder,'³⁰ arguably because no paintings found on art gallery walls adopted such a theme. Caught up in his own agenda, Sickert sought sensation through his treatment of not simply a low-life subject, but a real-life event that had not been forgotten in the few years between its occurrence and the 1911 exhibition.

Although he is believed to have been in France when it took place, he was 'gripped by the lurid newspaper reports of the horrific killing and also by its proximity to his lodgings in Camden Town.'³¹ The reports describe how Dimmock was discovered by her partner, the railwayman Bertram Shaw, when he returned home from his nightshift:

... the poor girl lying naked across the bed with a dreadful gash in her throat. The wound, six inches in length, had severed the windpipe, and the injury...had caused instantaneous death. The bed was in disorder and the clothes were flung back. Everything was soaked in blood, and a congealing pool of it lay on the floor.³²

This extract comes from the *Illustrated Police Budget* which also provided a visual representation of the event, with the headline 'Discovery of the Camden Town Horror!' (fig. 3). Although this type of press illustration served a more dramatic and perhaps ironically didactic purpose to Sickert's works, and will have been received differently to a painting in a gallery, a comparison of the two remains interesting. The illustration is of the discovery of the murdered maiden whose flowing locks and out-stretched limbs create a theatrical aspect reminiscent of the romantic painter Henry Fuseli's *The Nightmare* (1782, Detroit Institute of Arts) (fig. 4). Further details such as the scattered blood stains and 'flung back' bed clothes add to the drama shown in the faces of the discoverers and reinforced in the exclamatory caption. Another image from the *Illustrated Police News*, entitled 'Ghastly Tragedy in

³⁰ Emmons, *Life and Opinions*, 146.

³¹ R. Upstone (ed.), *Modern Painters: The Camden Town Group*, exhibition catalogue, London: Tate Britain, 2008, 131.

³² 'The Camden Town Horror', *The Illustrated Police Budget*, 21 September 1907, The National Newspaper Library, Colindale, London, 2.

Camden Town' (*fig. 5*), shows much the same scene, and a generic template for the melodramatic sex-murder of the beautiful female victim becomes evident.

While Sickert also adopts the persona of a reporter in his representation of the factual crime, his drama is created through the indistinctness of the scene. The lack of detail, in contrast to the informative newspaper tableau with its additional illustration of the victim and the house in which the crime took place, throws the viewer into uncertainty. While the press gave as much evidence to the public as possible, Sickert masks the face of the victim with his impasto technique, and any signs of death are unclear. Furthermore, the newspaper headline defines the point in time shown as the exact moment of 'discovery' of Dimmock's body, while the generality in Sickert's title and stillness of the figures makes the moment portrayed ambiguous. As Tickner notes, 'The setting is electric with violence but nothing is happening.'³³ The caption initially leads the viewer to identify these two figures as victim and murderer, but when compared to the press illustrations it is possible to consider Sickert's painting as a representation of the discovery. Is this man actually Shaw, resting beside the body of his partner in an incomprehensive state of despair? Such confusions derive from the clues which Sickert simultaneously gives and holds back in the continuous liaison between image and title.

His headline-style captions allowed the paintings to fall in direct comparison with these press images that embodied the romantic representations of tragic murder, ordinary to public eyes. Despite his impasto technique which prevents intricate detail, the paintings work on a more realistic level than the newspaper illustrations. The scenes are gritty in the revelation of the woman's expansive flesh and bleak interior setting. Their most true-to-life element is the identity of the male figure, Robert Wood, the suspect trialled and eventually

³³ Tickner, 'Walter Sickert', 47.

acquitted for the murder.³⁴ Sickert used Wood as his model, in the same clothes, for all of his compositions associated with the murder, and this point has been highlighted by Tillyard as she argues that the drawings and paintings within the ‘Camden Town Murder’ corpus were all explicitly linked.³⁵ However, Sickert consciously seeking out Wood to be his model more crucially confirms his plain intentions to portray the event before he put paint to canvas, proving that the murder titles cannot have been ‘afterthoughts,’³⁶ as suggested by Baron, but instead that they were fundamentally connected to the paintings.

Tillyard also suggests that Sickert’s allusion to the press headline was a tribute to the graphic illustrators of the nineteenth century, particularly Charles Keene (1823-1891) who he strongly admired.³⁷ In Sickert’s eyes, the *Punch* illustrator was ‘one of the world’s great line draughtsmen,’³⁸ who’s ‘low’ art of illustration was better than the ‘high’ art favoured by the critics:

Pages were written... on such nonsense as Watts’ “Physical Energy” or Millais’ “Speak, Speak”, while the art of the day was being poured out, undiscussed, in the columns of *Punch* over the signature C. K.³⁹

Lou Klepac asserts that Sickert was ‘saturated with Keene’ from a young age,⁴⁰ and therefore it is unsurprising that a debt to the illustrator can be seen in much of his work. Anna Gruetzner Robins highlights an interesting link between ‘Keene’s strong sense of psychological drama, his use of interior space to suggest character and class, and his clever

³⁴ Baron, *Sickert*, 185.

³⁵ Tillyard, ‘End of Victorian Art’, 195.

³⁶ W. Baron (ed.), *Camden Town Recalled*, exhibition catalogue, London: Fine Art Society, 1976, 7.

³⁷ Tillyard, ‘End of Victorian Art’, 196-8.

³⁸ W. Sickert, ‘Black and White Illustration’, *Lecture*, 30 November 1934, in Robins (ed.), *Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 664.

³⁹ Sickert quoted in Tillyard, ‘End of Victorian Art’, 196-8.

⁴⁰ L. Klepac (ed.), *Sickert: Drawings*, exhibition catalogue, Perth: The Art Gallery of Western Australia, 1979, 11.

use of objects to ‘tell a story’,’ and Sickert’s preoccupations,⁴¹ but she does not investigate this further. Although Keene never depicted such sordid scenes as murder, a comparison between a different two-figure, male-female study by Keene, such as ‘*A Woman O’ Business*’ (*fig. 6*), with *fig. 2*, is still revealing. Even when comparing a painting to a drawing, similarities can be found in Sickert’s sketchy facture and Keene’s quick strokes, which both effortlessly render form. The use of interior décor and space to indicate the upper-middle class in Keene’s drawing is adopted by Sickert as the bare floorboards, walls, and limp mattress determine the status of the low-life figures. Ironically, while Keene’s sketches for the commonplace paper were generally of the wealthy classes, Sickert decided to focus on the working class in his art for the galleries.

In fact, several inversions of Keene’s image can be seen in *fig. 2*. While the light coming in through the small window throws the figures into heavy umbra and creates a sense of mystery, the grand window in Keene’s illustration brightens the scene and lightens the tone to humour. The spectator is witnessing a private moment in both cases. Although while that moment is a relatable anecdote in ‘*A Woman O’ Business*’, Sickert’s private moment is one of horror which no one would choose to witness. Keene’s title ‘*A Woman O’ Business*’ is interesting, for although it is meant as ironic satire of the innocent incompetence of the wife with her husband’s money, the caption could also accompany the prostitute who offers her body as a commodity in order to make a living.

The linguistic message of the works in *Punch* was vital to their function as pieces of social satire and Sickert would have been aware of this. As Klepac points out, although nothing is deducted from the visual image without the lexis, a new dimension, one of humour and narrative, is created with its presence.⁴² Equally, the title of Sickert’s painting enriches

⁴¹ Robins, *Walter Sickert*, 14.

⁴² Klepac (ed.), *Sickert*, 12.

the work and enables it to tell a potent story. He preached about ‘the intensity of dramatic truth in the modern conversation piece or genre picture,’⁴³ and arguably this is what he was attempting to create in these paintings.

He believed illustration to be an ‘intrinsic attribute to good painting,’⁴⁴ claiming that ‘all the greater draughtsmen tell a story.’⁴⁵ In 1934 Virginia Woolf quoted a letter the artist had sent her in which he claimed ‘I have always been a literary painter, thank goodness, like all decent painters.’⁴⁶ Woolf advocated the fact that Sickert was a story-teller, labelling him a ‘novelist’ and stating that she struggled to look at his figures and ‘not invent a plot, to hear what they are saying.’⁴⁷ Indeed, from a consideration of contemporary influences, his use of Robert Wood as his model, his opinions on illustration and Woolf’s reading of Sickert’s work, it seems clear that the artist was concerned with subject-matter and the function of the title for solidifying the narrative of his paintings.

However, a counter-debate to Sickert’s literariness, championed by Roger Fry, was also strong within this intellectual milieu. Fry believed that pre-modernist art ‘had become contaminated by rhetoric, by the literary, by the non-visual,’ and the modernism that he boasted was that of formalism; grounded in the notions of pure form and aesthetic emotion.⁴⁸ Interestingly, despite formalism’s demand for images ‘that told no stories and declared that art was timeless, not temporal’, Fry considered Sickert to be an exemplar of this new modernism.⁴⁹ In 1911, just one month after The Camden Town Group exhibition, Fry wrote

⁴³ W. Sickert, ‘A Monthly Chronicle. Maurice Asselin’, *The Burlington Magazine*, December 1915, in Robins (ed.), *Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 398.

⁴⁴ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 130.

⁴⁵ W. Sickert, ‘A Critical Calendar’, *English Review*, March 1912, in Robins (ed.), *Sickert: The Complete Writings*, 300.

⁴⁶ Letter, 26 November 1933 to Q. Bell, quoted in V. Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation* (London, 2005[first published 1934]), 26.

⁴⁷ Woolf, *Walter Sickert: A Conversation*, 13.

⁴⁸ Tillyard, ‘End of Victorian Art’, 189-90.

⁴⁹ Tillyard, ‘End of Victorian Art’, 191-2.

of Sickert's 'purely visual attitude',⁵⁰ suggesting that for him things 'have only their visual values...they contain no key to unlock the secrets of the heart and spirit.'⁵¹ His definition of the artist as a 'modernist pure painter'⁵² was largely supported by Emmons, who believed that 'the chief drama of his pictured world is the drama of light and shade.'⁵³

Although these opinions can be contended, it is significant that Sickert himself supported similar ideas in his 1910 essay 'The Language of Art', when he wrote: 'The real subject of a picture or drawing is the plastic facts it succeeds in expressing.'⁵⁴ If at this moment the 'plastic facts' represented the 'real subject' of the image, the extent to which he was concerned with narrative during this period must be reconsidered. Furthermore, he made specific reference to the use of titles which enhances the predicament:

Pictures, like streets and persons, have to have names to distinguish them. But their names are not definitions of them, or, indeed, anything but the loosest kind of labels that make it possible for us to handle them.⁵⁵

This description of titles is arguably the most beguiling piece of evidence which counteracts a great deal of the information previously discussed, supporting the significance of the murder headings to Sickert's agenda. In light of such a statement it is necessary to question the conclusions made so far and enquire, as Baron has done, whether the murder subject was 'no more than a pretext, or inspiration, for this treatment.'⁵⁶

Nevertheless, in order to believe this, one must force themselves to be ignorant of Sickert's extensive writings on the power of illustration, his self-branding as a 'literary

⁵⁰ R. Fry, 'Mr Walter Sickert's Pictures at the Stafford Gallery', *Nation*, 8 July 1911, in C. Reed (ed.), *A Roger Fry Reader* (Chicago, 1996), 142.

⁵¹ Fry, 'Mr Walter Sickert's Pictures at the Stafford Gallery', 142.

⁵² D. Corbett, *Walter Sickert* (London, 2001), 37.

⁵³ Quoted in Corbett, *Walter Sickert*, 37.

⁵⁴ W. Sickert, 'The Language of Art', *The New Age*, 28 July 1910, 300.

⁵⁵ Sickert, 'Language of Art', 300.

⁵⁶ Baron, *Sickert*, 186.

painter', his influence from Keene, his awareness of the press headlines and the likely reaction of his contemporary critics to his titles, as well as his intentions in using Wood as his model. Although the application of paint, facture and form are clearly essential to his work, he was not an 'Impressionist' in the sense that he caught his subject matter in a fleeting moment. He painted from drawings in his studio⁵⁷ and evidently showed concern with the identity of his models. Sickert's disquieting comment about titles as loose labels exemplifies just how difficult he is to define: 'we think we have him placed, he slips away as we remember facts, paintings, writings, which contradict our hard-won interpretations.'⁵⁸ Regardless, without a caption, these two paintings are highly ambiguous. If Sickert had wanted to retain such ambiguity, he could have simply 'labelled' them with an unspecific heading such as 'Two Figures in a Room'. The fact that he did not, along with all the above evidence endorsing his concern with subject-matter, confirms that the murder title was central to Sickert's artistic agenda in which he boldly brought the high art world down to bitter reality by telling a real-life story of homicide.

⁵⁷ Baron, *Sickert*, 106.

⁵⁸ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 132.

CHAPTER TWO

An Investigation into the Origins of the Alternative Titles and their Effect on the Paintings

In January 1936 *The Sunday Times* presented Sickert as an art historian's nightmare in his constant quests to create bewilderment, particularly through 'a playful habit of suddenly altering the titles of works [he had] previously exhibited.'⁵⁹ The effects of this tendency are exemplified in *figs. 1* and *2* which, today, come with a choice of alternative headings. Both paintings have been entitled 'The Camden Town Murder Series' and 'Summer Afternoon', and *fig. 2* is more commonly known today as 'What Shall we do for the Rent?' These divergent changes encourage an investigation of how alternative headings affect the 'composite' work of painting and title.⁶⁰

It is possible to trace the changes up to a certain point (see Appendix A). The heading 'Summer Afternoon' can be traced as far back as 1950 when one of these paintings (it is presumed to be *fig. 1*) was exhibited under this title at the Leicester Galleries show *Paintings and Drawings by W. R. Sickert from the Collection of Dr. Robert Emmons*. Of course it seems curious that the first time this painting was exhibited with the alternative title was some eight years after the artist's death in January 1942. The fact that Emmons was Sickert's biographer and former pupil could suggest that the two had a considerable relationship making it feasible that Sickert, perhaps laconically, communicated with Emmons about the re-entitlement before his death (see Appendix B).⁶¹ This is the only explanation which would see Sickert as

⁵⁹ *The Sunday Times*, 19 January 1936, quoted in Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 143.

⁶⁰ Adams, 'Titles', 13.

⁶¹ Baron (ed.), *Camden Town Recalled*, 49.

the source of the alternative caption. As Ronald Simon bought this painting from the 1950 exhibition under ‘Summer Afternoon’ it was thereafter exhibited as so for some time.

Such a strikingly different title seems peculiar, and encourages a consideration of Sickert’s thought process. Baron believes that through the device of changing the title, he ‘deliberately orchestrated our response to his subject matter.’⁶² Indeed, perhaps much like the sensation he sought with his original murder heading, he was again toying with audience reaction. By choosing a title such as ‘Summer Afternoon’ which, in Sickert’s period, would arguably have evoked visions of idyllic landscapes or middle-class excursions like Georges Seurat’s *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (1884-6, The Art Institute of Chicago) (fig. 7), he would have, again, been challenging tradition with a private working-class bedroom scene that seems incongruous to the caption.

The question is, are we supposed to see this scene as ‘The Camden Town Murder Series’ simultaneously with ‘Summer Afternoon’, or was Sickert reinventing the image by giving it a new context? Robins believes that ‘Summer Afternoon’ simply refers to the September afternoon when the murder took place, suggesting that the same context is present irrelevant of which title is considered (see Appendix B). Nevertheless, I would argue that the titles seem inconsistent with each other, and question the motivation to change the title if the new caption still referred to the old context. Furthermore, Levinson contends that when a title is revised, ‘though we may not have a metaphysically distinct artwork, we have one which is importantly different from what it was before.’⁶³ It is difficult to deny that the new heading invades the composite work of the painting and original title. While it cannot physically alter the plastic facts, it makes the viewer receive the image differently, indicating that spectators at the Leicester Galleries in 1950 would have interpreted fig. 1 in an opposing way to the

⁶² Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 131.

⁶³ Levinson, ‘Titles’, 38.

critics of 1911. The connotations that accompany the heading ‘Summer Afternoon’ are more positive than those of morbidity attached to ‘The Camden Town Murder Series’. It could even be argued that the painting seems warmer in tone and the pose of the woman is now one of relaxation as the gentleman sitting beside her looks at her amorously. Such divergent readings help to confirm the power of the linguistic message over meaning.

David Corbett believes that, with his captions, Sickert is simply teasing his audience ‘inclined to take the narrative too seriously,’ and suggests that he was so concerned with the ‘visual character’ of his paintings ‘that titles become irrelevant.’⁶⁴ Certainly there seems to be an element of mischief here, but if we consider the thought that is believed to have gone into the murder title and subject-matter, it seems inconsistent that he would suddenly disregard his headings. In Levinson’s terms no titles can ever become immaterial. He argues against an analysis like that of Corbett, stating that we ‘cannot as objective critics pick and choose among the fixed ingredients of an artwork, just acknowledging those we wish.’⁶⁵ Moreover, he considers the notion that an artist, ‘having given his work a title, might subsequently say that it has no significance,’ to be irrelevant, for the title still ‘contributes to the reading of a work.’⁶⁶ If an ‘artist cannot negate this by ancillary declarations while still making use of titling as an artistic prerogative,’⁶⁷ it would not have made sense for Sickert to claim irrelevance. Instead, if he was responsible for the re-entitlement, I would suggest that he sought to reinstate his position in a milieu of the avant-garde title by providing a variance in headings that calls attention to the straight-forward caption-to-image relationship that it denies. However, if he was not, and instead a scholar is to blame for this dramatic re-naming, it provokes a consideration of unprincipled disruption of the paintings’ meaning.

⁶⁴ Corbett, *Walter Sickert*, 37.

⁶⁵ Levinson, ‘Titles’, 33.

⁶⁶ Levinson, ‘Titles’, 33.

⁶⁷ Levinson, ‘Titles’, 33.

Although it is commonly thought that Sickert re-entitled these paintings, the evidence suggests the opposite. In particular, the caption ‘What Shall We Do for the Rent?’ is more likely to be the product of scholars. According to the frame in which *fig. 2* currently hangs in the Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery which has the alternatives ‘What Shall We Do for the Rent?’ and ‘The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2’ physically imprinted on it (see *fig. 8*), I would advocate that this new title has been attached since 1964 when they acquired it and Baron proposes the same (see Appendix B). There is no evidence to suggest that *fig. 2* had ‘What Shall we do for the Rent?’ as an optional title until then. Although this phrase is believed to have come from Sickert himself, there is nothing to indicate that it was meant for this painting. The caption derives from various drawings of a similar, but ultimately different, composition which are related to another painting within the ‘Camden Town Murder’ corpus (*fig. 9*). The illustrations depict a nude female lying on a bed facing away from the viewer as a clothed male sits with his back to her; hands clasped together and head hung low. The question ‘What Shall we do for the Rent?’ was inscribed around 1924/5 on a number of these drawings, which were believed to have been produced around 1909, at the same time as the painting.⁶⁸ From a consideration of dates and the evidence outlined above, it is most likely that scholars or owners, rather than the artist himself, were responsible for this re-entitlement.

The scholars’ justification for the use of this heading is one of suitability. Richard Shone considers ‘What Shall we do for the Rent?’ to be ‘more appropriate to the inert, despondent mood Sickert conveys’ in the painting, as he interprets the scene as a domestic discussion.⁶⁹ Yet, due to the abnormal nudity of the woman juxtaposed against the clothed man, the relationship is seemingly more illicit. The mood is difficult to distinguish when neither of the faces is revealed in enough detail to make out features, let alone expressions.

⁶⁸ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 367.

⁶⁹ R. Shone, *Walter Sickert* (Oxford, 1988), 45.

Indeed one could argue that the blue tones and darkness suggest an air of gloom, but they could equally suggest grievance, remorse, or something more sinister.

Baron proposes that because the paintings ‘have no illustrative relationship to the circumstances of Dimmock’s death’ the other titles become acceptable alternatives.⁷⁰ However, from the investigation in Chapter One which highlighted that Wood was used as the model, the paintings do, in fact, have a significant link to the event. By ignoring the facts, scholars have offhandedly renamed these paintings - an action which has resulted in a distortion of Sickert’s intentions and the viewer’s interpretation of meaning. The issue of authenticity is a significant one. Levinson and Adams in their rhetoric on titles are only concerned with ‘*true titles*’, proven to be given by the artist.⁷¹ They are not concerned with labels affixed through another agency as ‘they have no claim to determining artistic meaning’ and therefore have ‘no inviolable right to interpretive consideration.’⁷² If a title tells us ‘how to look at a work’,⁷³ then it figures that we must be cautious of being guided by a heading which has no concrete attachment to it. Due to insufficient evidence about the roots of the alternative titles, Adams and Levinson would agree that only the murder headings can truly be considered in order to determine the artistic meaning of the work.

Although the alternatives are certainly hazardous to the meaning of the image, it remains beneficial to investigate their effects on the artwork and the audience. In order to consider these it is necessary to adopt a method which avoids consideration of the artist and instead focuses on the receiver. The semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Pierce (1834-1914) which describes the process of signification (‘semiosis’), ‘provides a logical basis for a

⁷⁰ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 74.

⁷¹ Levinson, ‘Titles’, 33.

⁷² Levinson, ‘Titles’, 33.

⁷³ Fisher, ‘Entitling’, 292.

reader- or reception-oriented theory of art,⁷⁴ because it considers both the production and interpretation of signs to be of equal importance. In Peirce's philosophy, semiosis works from three positions:

A perceptible or virtually perceptible item - the sign or *representamen* – that stands in for something else; the mental image, called the *interpretant*, that the recipient forms of the object; and the thing for which the sign stands – the *object* or *referent*.⁷⁵

In these terms, the image of the clothed-male and nude-female in the seedy interior functions as a sign of something else. The viewer is responsible for shaping the idea of that something (the interpretant) in his or her mind. This interpretant then points to a real object which will often be different for every viewer. To one, the object may be a prostitute and her client, to another, a husband and wife, to another, an empty figural composition, and so on. Peirce's theory clarifies that the 'object for which the painting stands is therefore fundamentally subjective and reception-determined.'⁷⁶

If the meaning of a painting is found in the mind of the spectator and is therefore subjective, it can be deduced that the visual sign, for example *fig. 1*, has varying signifieds – it is polysemous. The French semiologist Roland Barthes (1915-1980), in his consideration of the advertising image, noted that the polysemic nature of an image can lead to a 'terror of uncertain signs.'⁷⁷ He proposes that the linguistic message is utilised within this context in order 'to fix the floating chain of signifieds'; therefore countering the possible 'terror' of polysemy.⁷⁸ At the most elementary level, the title provides a response to the question 'what is it?' This function, Barthes describes as 'anchorage': 'the text directs the reader through the

⁷⁴ M. Bal and N. Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 73, No. 2 (Jun. 1991), 188.

⁷⁵ Bal and Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', 188.

⁷⁶ Bal and Bryson, 'Semiotics and Art History', 188.

⁷⁷ R. Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', *Image, Music, Text*, ed. and trans. S. Heath (New York, 1977), 39.

⁷⁸ Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', 39.

signifieds of the image, causing him to avoid some and receive others'.⁷⁹ While the resultant object of the sign is reception-determined, the 'repressive value'⁸⁰ of the title restricts the liberty and variance of interpretants and objects. Of course Barthes is referring to the advertisement within his discourse but there is no reason why the same psychological effects are not created in the mind of a viewer of an artwork. Therefore, in the case of Sickert, if each caption represses the possible interpretants, and thus channels the readings of the image, it can be anticipated that divergent titles encourage contradictory interpretations.

In 1993, psychologists Margery Franklin, Robert Becklen and Charlotte Doyle carried out a study on real-life viewers to attempt to prove this theory that a changing title reworks the meaning of the visual object.⁸¹ Their exploratory experiment used thirty-one college students, who were shown two paintings, Monet's *Terrace at Ste. Adresse* (1867, The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) and Arshile Gorky's *Agony* (1947, The Museum of Modern Art, New York), twice - 'on one occasion with their original titles and on another occasion with fabricated titles.'⁸² Through quantitative and qualitative analysis, they deduced that the most prevalent orientations of response to the title when interpreting the image were 'framing by title' and 'dialoguing with title',⁸³ and the readings of the paintings varied in direct correlation to the changing caption. For example, when responding to *Agony*, a participant exclaimed: 'This is freaky. It's a painting of a girl screaming.'⁸⁴ Whereas responding to the same painting under its fabricated heading 'Carnival', the reading was as follows: 'This is a clown-shaped figure here, dancing like a court jester...'.⁸⁵ Essentially the results supported the general thesis advanced by intellectuals such as Levinson and Fisher

⁷⁹ Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', 40.

⁸⁰ Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', 40.

⁸¹ See M. Franklin, R. Becklen and C. Doyle, 'The Influence of Titles on How Paintings are Seen', *Leonardo*, Vol. 26, No. 2 (1993), 103-8.

⁸² Franklin, Becklen, Doyle, 'The Influence of Titles', 103.

⁸³ Franklin, Becklen, Doyle, 'The Influence of Titles', 106.

⁸⁴ Franklin, Becklen, Doyle, 'The Influence of Titles', 103.

⁸⁵ Franklin, Becklen, Doyle, 'The Influence of Titles', 103.

that titles are important guides to interpretation, as they revealed that images ‘are described differently when presented with different titles.’⁸⁶ There were arguably weaknesses with the experiment in the extent to which thirty-one college students represent the average art viewer and in the fact that the participants were asked to say the title aloud upon viewing the painting⁸⁷ which will have automatically encouraged them to make a connection between image and word. Additionally, the paintings used were not the same as those studied within this project. However, there is no evidence to suggest that the results of this study could not be extrapolated and applied to those works of art being considered here. The response to the change in caption allows me to presume that the reaction would be similar in the case of Sickert’s works.

The results largely proved that the thesis about the fundamental nature of title to image, proposed by the aestheticians of the 1980s, is accurate. Welchman’s idea that titles ‘are both the testing ground and the point of issuance for all that is dangerous and supplementary to the true speech of vision,’⁸⁸ has a certain resonance here. While the headings of Sickert’s works add interesting levels of interpretation, by forcing us in through the front door, they also threaten the paintings’ intended meanings and possibly detract from an appreciation of the plastic facts. As Adams suggests, we are ‘linguistic creatures,’⁸⁹ so the lexis attached to a visual object is naturally difficult to avoid. Thus, whenever a new title was issued to these paintings, it will have been responsible for applying it with new signifieds, removing old ones, and fundamentally altering the way it is received by the viewer. The power of the image will have changed over time through the governing force of the title, influenced by agencies other than that of the artist.

⁸⁶ Franklin, Becklen, Doyle, ‘The Influence of Titles’, 108.

⁸⁷ Franklin, Becklen, Doyle, ‘The Influence of Titles’, 105.

⁸⁸ Welchman, *Invisible Colors*, 5.

⁸⁹ Adams, ‘Titles’, 15.

CHAPTER THREE

An Investigation into the Effects of the Alternative Titles on Present-Day Reception and Display

While the single ‘Camden Town Murder Series’ title in the 1911 exhibition explicitly anchored the meaning for the viewers and defined their response, it is interesting to consider the effects of the alternative captions on the display and reception of the two paintings more recently. In the words of Christopher Whitehead, museums ‘construct art and art history’,⁹⁰ and the most ‘explicitly discursive media’⁹¹ to aid our learning within the exhibition environment is text. It can therefore be postulated that the title of, and written information on, a visual object will be integral to the viewer’s understanding. Despite this, Eilean Hooper-Greenhill calls attention to the unconsidered power of the linguistic message in museums:

We must acknowledge the power of words. Words do more than merely name; words summon up associations, shape perceptions, indicate value and create desire.⁹²

She notes that ‘words used in museums are rarely seen in this context’⁹³ and therefore highlights a disparity between the public’s reliance on the title in the museum space and an underestimation of the importance of the caption by the museums themselves.

This disparity was exemplified in the display of these two paintings within the *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* exhibition at the Courtauld Gallery in London between October 2007 and January 2008. Interestingly, this was the first time that *fig. 1* and *fig. 2* had been exhibited together since the 1911 Carfax show when they represented two versions of

⁹⁰ C. Whitehead, *Museums and the Construction of Disciplines* (London, 2009), 21.

⁹¹ Whitehead, *Museums*, 30.

⁹² E. Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums and their Visitors* (Oxford and New York, 1994), 118.

⁹³ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 118.

The Camden Town Murder Series. The display method within the Courtauld, where the pair was mounted on a screen projected forward into the viewing space separate from the other paintings that hung on the walls behind (see *fig. 10*), highlighted that these two works should be considered together in this respect. In light of Germain Bazin's observation that within the modern exhibition 'only one object at a time should appear in the field of vision',⁹⁴ the fact that these two works are presented in such close proximity and share an information plaque (unlike any other painting in the exhibit) suggest, not only, that the spectator is expected to compare the works, but also, that they should perhaps consider them as a single artwork. In terms of consistency, the fact that these two paintings are seemingly two versions of the same scene and were displayed together for the first time since 1911 in this type of spatial setting, means it would have been appropriate for the titles '*The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1*' and '*No. 2*' to be given. However, this was not the case.

In the catalogue and exhibition their captions were as follows:

13. What shall we do for the Rent? (*Also known as* The Camden Town Murder Series No.1 or No. 2 *and* Summer Afternoon)...(*fig. 2*)

14. The Camden Town Murder (*also known as* The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1 or No. 2 *and* Summer Afternoon)...⁹⁵ (*fig. 1*)

It is striking, in this case, that the 'main' headings used for the pair refer to different contexts. The result is a conflict between the proximity and visual similarity of the two, and a difference in their headings, which could create a crisis of meaning for the spectator, who would assume that the paintings represent the same scene until they read the titles. What is more, for the first time in their display history, the viewer has been presented with all the

⁹⁴ Quoted in C. Duncan, 'The Art Museum as Ritual', in G. Corsane (ed.), *Heritage, Museums and Galleries: An Introductory Reader* (Oxford, 2005), 86.

⁹⁵ Wright (ed.), *Camden Town Nudes*, 82.

titles simultaneously which, in keeping with Barthes' notion of the 'terror of uncertain signs,'⁹⁶ could result in another crisis as the spectator struggles to interpret the works.

On reviewing this exhibition, Pat Hardy, after being provided with the choice of captions, came away with the understanding that 'care must be taken with Sickert's titles' for 'the exhibition made it clear that he used them interchangeably.'⁹⁷ This response indicates that Hardy understood the variant titles as a warning about how reliant on one, or another, the spectator should be. Additionally, the knowledge which Hardy gained from the exhibition was that Sickert *himself* was responsible for all of the headings, and that it was *he* who used them 'interchangeably.' Chapter Two clarified the unlikelihood that Sickert was responsible for all, if any, of the alternatives, and he did not personally use them interchangeably as the first time either of the paintings was displayed under one of the later headings was after his death. This confirms the significance of the curator in choosing the linguistic framework and the 'intellectual structure within which the objects are placed,'⁹⁸ and therefore in determining the consequent knowledge of the visitor. Ultimately, museums and galleries have the responsibility of legitimating knowledge,⁹⁹ and the authoritative status of the institution and definitive presentation of text allows visitors to believe what they read.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, Wright asserted in the catalogue that Sickert was responsible for the title change to 'Summer Afternoon',¹⁰¹ but upon asking him where he had found evidence to support this claim he admitted that after revising his notes it looked unlikely to be true, and that he was possibly 'mistaken' (see Appendix B). Therefore, by offering a choice of titles and authenticating them as the products of Sickert without substantive evidence, Wright was responsible for distorting the reception of the paintings.

⁹⁶ Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', 39.

⁹⁷ P. Hardy, 'Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes' Courtauld Gallery, London, 'Modern Painters: The Camden Town Group' Tate Britain, London', *British Art Journal*, Vol. 9, No. 2 (Autumn 2008), 89.

⁹⁸ Hooper-Greenhill, *Museums*, 116.

⁹⁹ Whitehead, *Museums*, 25.

¹⁰⁰ Whitehead, *Museums*, 30-1.

¹⁰¹ Wright (ed.), *Camden Town Nudes*, 25.

Another reaction to these works and their numerous titles was a realisation of polysemy. Antoine Capet, in his review of the exhibition noted that, in the case of paintings with alternative titles, ‘all interpretations remain possible.’¹⁰² Aware of the choice of headings, he concluded that ‘the polysemy remains therefore total’,¹⁰³ suggesting that it was not easy to know the correct way of interpreting the image, thus forcing acceptance that there is no distinct meaning. Of course, this differs considerably from the reviews of 1911, in which the critics – presented with a single provocative title - struggled to ignore the murder context and forced themselves to look for it in the painting, so much so that one wrote ‘for murder studies they are not nearly murderous enough.’¹⁰⁴ However, in both cases, the inability to ignore the titles is reminiscent of Jacques Derrida’s (1930-2004) deconstructive investigation of Kant’s ‘parergon’ (all that is inessential in art),¹⁰⁵ in which he contends that ‘the ‘inside’ of any work is already inhabited by that which might have been bracketed as its ‘outside’ – signatures, verbal discourse, frames, institutional stagecraft, and so forth.’¹⁰⁶ Although the title is not mentioned as one of his *parerga*, Derrida questions the *topos* of the title and where it acts; from ‘a place outside the work’ or from ‘inside the space of the “work”, inscribing the legend, with its definitional pretension’?¹⁰⁷ While his enquiry evades conclusion, the consideration of where the title functions in relation to the *parerga* is relevant. If it was deduced that the caption is intrinsic to the work, then it is inseparable from the visual object. If it was realised that the caption was supplementary to the work, then it would naturally fall into the realm of *parerga*. Either way, if one agrees with Derrida’s philosophy that the ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ of an artwork cannot be removed from one another,

¹⁰² A. Capet, ‘Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes’, *The Art Tribune*, Monday 26 November 2007, <http://www.thearttribune.com/Walter-Sickert-The-Camden-Town.html>, accessed January 18 2013.

¹⁰³ Capet, ‘Walter Sickert’, <http://www.thearttribune.com/Walter-Sickert-The-Camden-Town.html>

¹⁰⁴ Storer, ‘Art’, 119.

¹⁰⁵ See I. Kant, *The Critique of Judgement*, trans. J. C. Meredith (Oxford, 1952).

¹⁰⁶ D. Preziosi, ‘Deconstruction and the Limits of Interpretation’, in *The Art of Art History: A Critical Anthology* (Oxford, 1998), 272.

¹⁰⁷ J. Derrida, *The Truth in Painting*, trans. G. Bennington and I. Mcleod (Chicago, 1987), 24.

then, whether intrinsic or extrinsic, the heading cannot be detached from the visual object. This is exactly the notion that is supported by the theory of Levinson and Adams, the results of Franklin, Becklen and Doyle's experiment, and the reviews of both the 1911 and the 2007 exhibition - repeatedly, the title proves to be integral to an understanding of the visual object.

From the reviews of the Courtauld exhibition, it becomes evident that the alternative titles *had* to be provided due to their place in the rhetoric on these paintings. Whether intentionally or not, instead of being responsible for anchoring the meaning of these works and ignoring other possible interpretations, which, although unlikely, may still have been the product of Sickert himself, Wright offered the viewer the freedom of choice. As Klepac pointed out, although nothing is taken away from the visual image without the lexis, a new dimension is created with its presence.¹⁰⁸ Consequently, as more headings are given, further dimensions are created in these paintings. With the alternatives provided, the visitor was able to be cautious of relying on a particular caption and therefore ignoring the multiple layers of meaning.

However, in 2008, quite the contrary entitling method was used in the display of these paintings in the *Modern Painters: The Camden Town Group* exhibition at the Tate Britain. Within this exhibit, not only was the choice of captions removed, but the meanings of the paintings were anchored by inaccurate titles. *Fig. 1* was exhibited as 'The Camden Town Murder',¹⁰⁹ which although still suggestive of the original connotations, was not the *exact* title assigned by Sickert. Most significantly, the curator Robert Upstone decided to entitle *fig. 2* as 'What Shall we do for the Rent?'¹¹⁰ Presumably this caption was given to the second painting because it was that which had been used by the lenders, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery. This was also the reason Wright gave for choosing the 'Rent' option as the main

¹⁰⁸ Klepac (ed.), *Sickert*, 12.

¹⁰⁹ Upstone (ed.), *Modern Painters*, 132.

¹¹⁰ Upstone (ed.), *Modern Painters*, 133.

heading for *fig. 2* in the Courtauld show (see Appendix B). Nevertheless, in Levinson's and Adams' terms, 'What Shall we do for the Rent?' cannot be considered a *true* title because nothing proves that Sickert assigned it to the painting. Within the authoritative context of the museum, by entitling *fig. 2* as 'What Shall we do for the Rent?' Upstone was legitimizing it, when in fact the caption is unable to determine the artistic meaning of the work and instead it guides the spectator towards an unauthorised interpretation. This example reveals how the distorted linguistic message of the museum can be the result of acquisitions or scholarly interruption to the original image-text relationship, which may result in a transformation of the visual work.

As Fisher suggests, 'manipulating interpretation by contrived titles sounds slightly unethical,'¹¹¹ and indeed, although alternatives headings are now available, should it be tolerable that the most fallible of the options is affixed to a work which, in turn, changes the meaning of the image? Arguably it would have been more logical to entitle both the works with their 'Camden Town Murder Series' headings in order to convey that they were originally displayed as a pair and because those titles are unmistakably the product of the artist, followed by the subsequent captions in chronological order. This would have been the most didactic way of informing the viewer of the initial titles, Sickert's original intentions, and the fact that the additional headings add new dimensions to the works while simultaneously encouraging us to be wary of a reliance on them.

However, such clarity was not provided. In fact, yet another dichotomy is found in the 2008 catalogue between the title, 'What Shall we do for the Rent?', and the description of the image which is focused on the idea of murder. Phrases such as 'is he shortly to murder her?' and 'many recalled from the apparent subject matter',¹¹² conflict with the theme Upstone has

¹¹¹ Fisher, 'Entitling', 294.

¹¹² Upstone (ed.), *Modern Painters*, 133.

affixed to the painting through the new heading. Such a conflict of information is again likely to provoke a crisis of meaning as the connotations of the painting are anchored by the ‘Rent’ title, but this is disrupted by divergent connotations produced by the prose. This is further confirmation of the discord between a certain level of nonchalance towards the use of language within a gallery space, and the reliance on that same language by the visitor. The result is a continuous disturbance to the meaning of these paintings through the varying use of captions and lexis which guide the viewer in opposite directions, arguably creating bewilderment about how to receive the work.

Both examples of recent display techniques of these paintings encourage a consideration of dependency on the title. When offered many headings, one may feel confused, liberated, or cautious of interpretation. While when offered just one, there may be a chance that unintended analyses is encouraged, and the original connotations are lost. Although quite different, both these curatorial methods have been responsible for setting the paintings (particularly *fig. 2*) on a path of evolution away from their originally intended meaning. Through them, it becomes even more apparent just how powerful the use of titles can be in completely altering the connotations of the image and thus leading the viewer to different understandings.

CONCLUSION

After extensive consideration, it is evident that Sickert's 'Camden Town Murder Series' paintings, as examples of the relationship between title and image, are noteworthy in a number of respects. They signify the common desire to enter a work of art straight through the provocative 'front door'¹¹³ of the heading. This is initially confirmed by the 1911 murder titles which enabled the paintings to be impressively received by contemporary viewers. Despite former opinions on the arbitrary nature of the captions and contradictory statements from the artist himself, in-depth analysis has substantiated that the titles were careful constructions of Sickert's artistic agenda. Aware of press headlines and the work of his contemporaries, Sickert used his headings to provoke controversial responses and to enable the literary power of his paintings.

However, the function of the title for these paintings becomes curious as alternative headings come into association with them. The new, divergent titles act as a conscious interruption to the original significance of the works created with the murder captions. A consideration of titular authenticity arises here, as the origins of the new headings remain uncertain. Subsequently Sickert's possible intentions with this re-entitlement can only be speculated at, for it seems unlikely that he was the true source. Within this framework it becomes clear that despite the paramount importance of the lexis as proposed by aestheticians such as Levinson and Adams, scholars have been careless in meddling with meaning by choosing supposedly 'more appropriate'¹¹⁴ titles for the images. These fallible captions cause a significant predicament for the understanding of the works, as in Barthes' terms, every time a title is affixed to an image, the chain of possible signifieds is anchored.¹¹⁵ Therefore,

¹¹³ Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings*, 131.

¹¹⁴ Shone, *Walter Sickert*, 45.

¹¹⁵ Barthes, 'Rhetoric of the Image', 39-40.

through the uncertain titles ‘Summer Afternoon’ and ‘What Shall we do for the Rent?’ a possibly illegitimate framing of the work is created. The 1993 psychological study considered in Chapter Two evidenced the notion that viewers are most likely to read an image in direct correlation with the title assigned to it. If the headings of the paintings are divergent then different moods are seen, new contexts are formed and the whole meaning of the work may change.

As a result of the variant titles, certain crises have occurred within the exhibition environment in terms of which captions are provided for, or held back from, the viewer. Due to a disparity between the power of language to guide meaning and certain imprecision in its use within the gallery space, the affixation of infallible titles or multiple titles to the paintings has occurred. Essentially, the impact of what may have originally seemed like minor changes or discrepancies has been fundamental to the reception of the paintings. Both curators of the two most recent exhibitions of the paintings were responsible for suggesting the authenticity of ‘untrue’ captions by applying them to the works, indicating that the power of the linguistic message within the museum can readily be overlooked by the curator. They were subsequently responsible for encouraging an unintended interpretation of one of the works and thus setting it on a path of evolution away from its original connotations. Wright also provided the divergent headings simultaneously in the Courtauld exhibition, which led to further misconception that Sickert had used the titles interchangeably from the paintings’ creation or a possible confusion over which title to choose in order to read the works.

Nevertheless, the provision of all the alternatives for today’s spectator is more appropriate because over time they have added new dimensions to the images. With an option of titles, the spectator is at liberty to select which context they wish to associate with the image but at the same time realise that a reliance on just one is perhaps precarious. While the

risk of the ‘terror of uncertain signs’,¹¹⁶ still remains, there is an element of freedom of interpretation and the encouragement of subjectivity ingrained in these works today due to their re-entitlement methods.

Even the consideration of this specific example highlights the development of entitling methods since the mid-nineteenth century. The modern art world has gone through a transience of rigidly describing a work for cataloguing purposes, to toying with the viewer by guiding or misleading them, to leaving them to feel in the work whatever they so desire. Essentially the power of the title is embedded in its ability to change connotations and thus the significance of a work of art, despite its visual elements remaining the same. Furthermore, in terms of the habitual way in which we, as ‘linguistic creatures’,¹¹⁷ *read* paintings, our reliance on the heading to provide some of those initial words, is natural. From an awareness of this, the case study offers the possibility to engage with the, often disregarded, function of the heading and opens a forum of discussion about the effects of changing titles and ‘untrue’ titles on artworks which have occurred repeatedly throughout history. Art will always be a subjective discipline to the extent that one is at liberty to deduce from a painting any meaning at all. However, this project has encouraged a more critical consideration of the reliance on the title and the changeable effect it can have on the way in which the visual object is received.

¹¹⁶ Barthes, ‘Rhetoric of the Image’, 39.

¹¹⁷ Adams, ‘Titles’, 15.

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2. Sickert, Walter, *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2*, also known as *Summer Afternoon* and *What Shall we do for the Rent?*, c. 1908-9, Oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, Fife
3. ‘Discovery of the Camden Town Horror!’, 21st September 1907, *The Illustrated Police Budget*, British Newspaper Library, Colindale, London
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10. Installation photograph of the exhibition *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (25 October 2007 – 20 January 2008), The Courtauld Gallery, London, Courtesy of The Courtauld Gallery, London

ILLUSTRATIONS



Fig. 1: Sickert, Walter

The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1

Also known as *The Camden Town Murder* and *Summer Afternoon*

c. 1908-9

Oil on canvas

61 x 40.6 cm

Daniel Katz Family Trust



Fig. 2: Sickert, Walter

The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2

Also known as *Summer Afternoon* and *What Shall We Do for the Rent?*

c. 1908-9

Oil on canvas

51 x 41 cm

Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, Fife

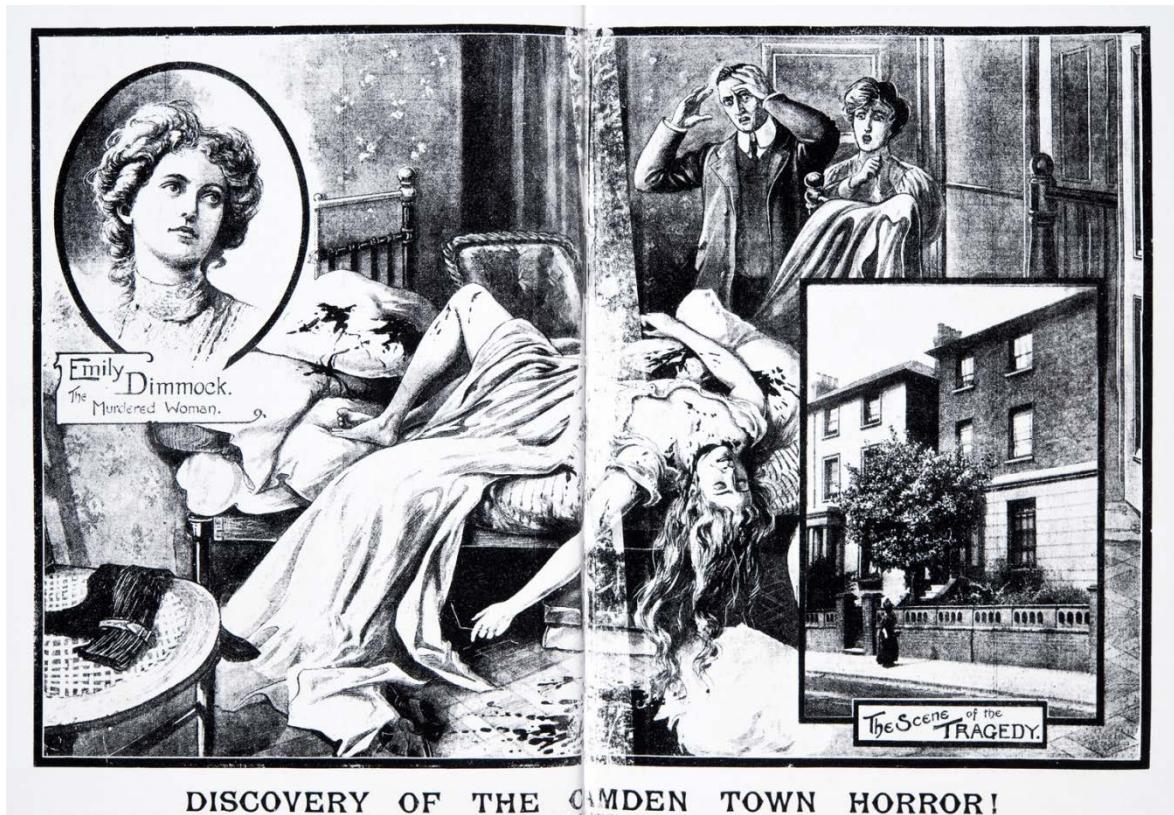


Fig. 3: 'Discovery of the Camden Town Horror!', 21st September 1907, *The Illustrated Police Budget*, British Newspaper Library, Colindale, London

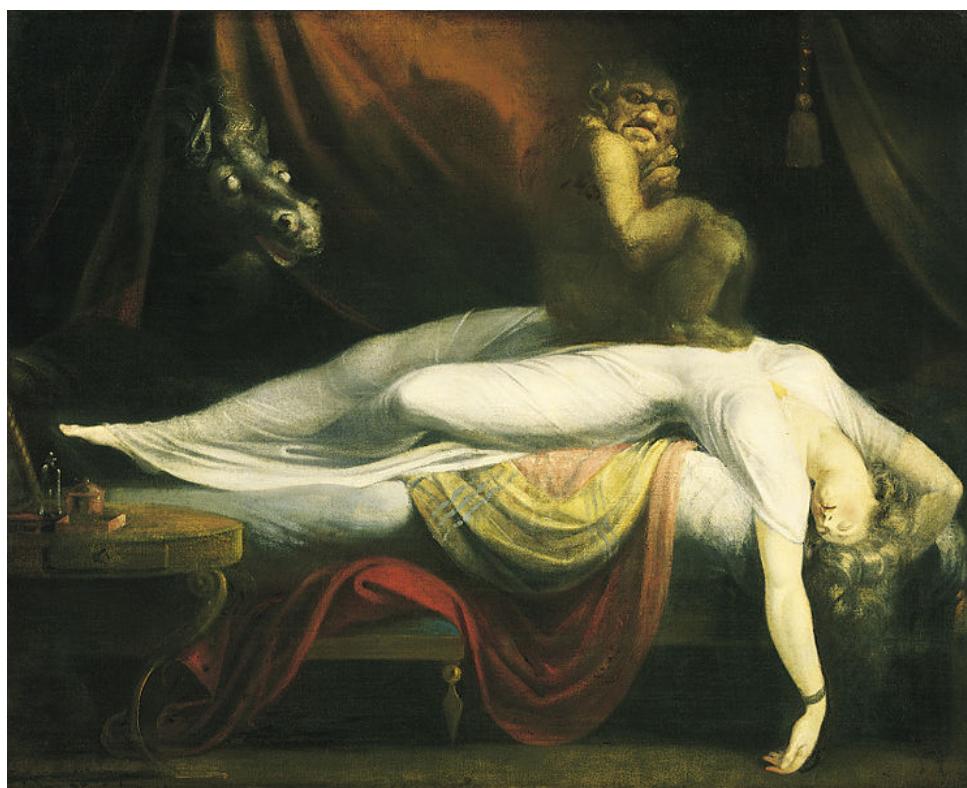


Fig. 4: Fuseli, Henry, *The Nightmare*, 1782, Oil on canvas, 101.6 cm x 127 cm, Detroit Institute of Arts



Fig. 5: ‘Ghastly Tragedy in Camden Town’, 21st September 1907, *The Illustrated Police News*, British Newspaper Library, Colindale, London

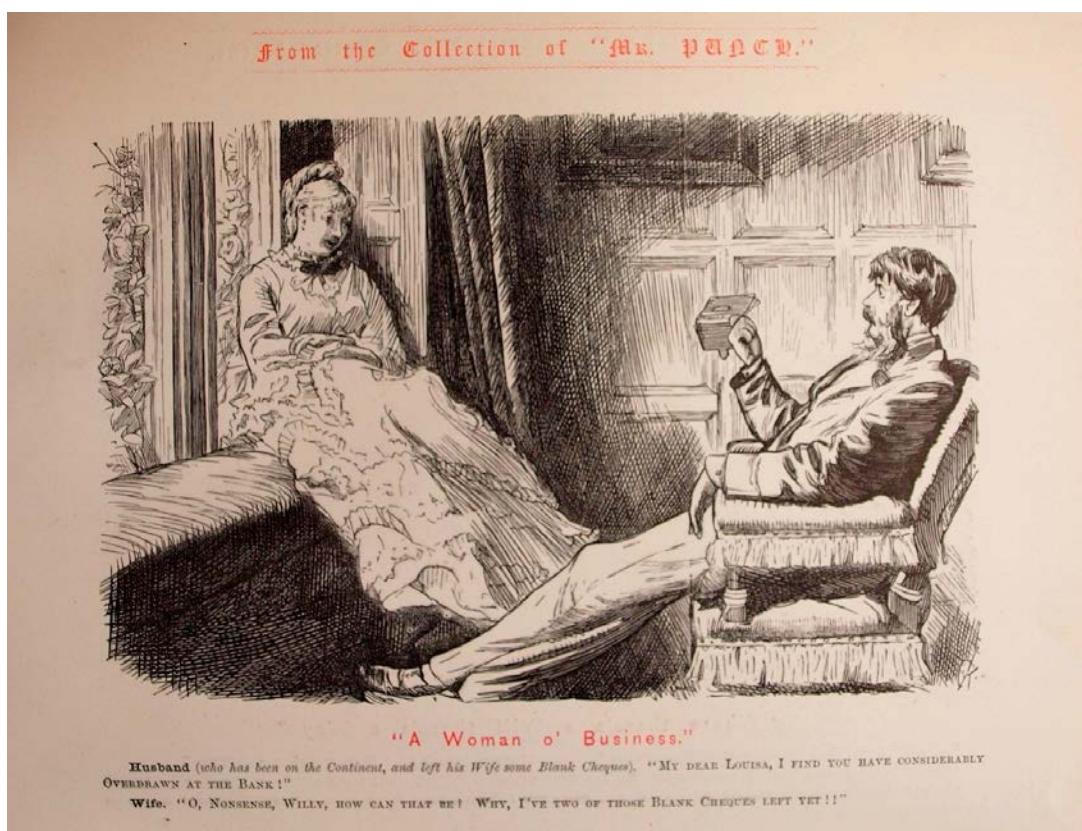


Fig. 6: Keene, Charles, ‘A Woman O’ Business’ (**Husband**: (who has been on the Continent, and left his Wife some Blank Cheques), ‘My dear Louisa, I find you have considerably overdrawn at the bank!’ **Wife**: ‘O, nonsense Willy, how can that be? Why, I’ve two or those blank cheques left yet!!’), published in C. Keene and J. Swain (eds.), *400 Pictures of our People: Sketches from ‘Punch’* (London, 1881)



Fig. 7: Seurat, Georges, *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte*, 1884-6, Oil on canvas, 207.6 x 308 cm, The Art Institute of Chicago



Fig. 8: Sickert, Walter, *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2*, also known as *Summer Afternoon* and *What Shall we do for the Rent?*, c. 1908-9, Oil on canvas, 51 x 41 cm, Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, Fife

Photograph of the painting in its frame at Kirkcaldy Museum and Art Gallery, taken from The Witt Library Archive, The Courtauld Institute of Art, London



Fig. 9: Sickert, Walter, *What shall we do for the Rent?*, 1909, Black and white chalk drawing, Private Collection, USA (printed in Emmons, *The Life and Opinions of Walter Richard Sickert* (London, 1941))



Fig. 10: Installation photograph of the exhibition *Walter Sickert: The Camden Town Nudes* (25 October 2007 – 20 January 2008), The Courtauld Gallery, London. Courtesy of The Courtauld Gallery, London

APPENDIX A

A Record of Exhibitions of *The Camden Town Murder*

Series No. 1 and No. 2

Below is the most comprehensive record of exhibitions I could create using the catalogue in Baron, *Sickert: Paintings and Drawings* (London, 2006) and other catalogues (recorded in the Bibliography). It details the titles under which the paintings were displayed.

Fig. 1

Probably Paris, Salon d'Automne 1909, no. 1582 or no. 1583 as *L'Affaire de Camden Town*; Carfax June 1911, 'Camden Town Group' as (10) *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1* or (12) *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2*; Leicester Galleries 1950 (4) as *Summer Afternoon*; Arts Council of Great Britain 1960 (118) as *Summer Afternoon* lent by Simon; Hampstead Festival 1965 (64) as *Summer Afternoon* lent by Simon; Fine Art Society 1976 (141) as *Summer Afternoon*; The Courtauld Gallery 2007 (14) as *The Camden Town Murder* (Also known as *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1 or No. 2* and *Summer Afternoon*); Tate Britain 2008 (65) as *The Camden Town Murder*

Fig. 2

Probably Paris, Salon d'Automne 1909, no. 1582 or no. 1583 as *L'Affaire de Camden Town*; Carfax June 1911, 'Camden Town Group' as (10) *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1* or (12) *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 2*; Edinburgh 1953 (12) as *The Camden Town Murder* lent by Reid & Lefevre; Fine Art Society 1973 (65) as *Summer Afternoon*; The Royal Academy 1992-3 (68) colour reproduction and Kendal 2004 (19) colour reproduction as *Summer Afternoon* or *What Shall we do for the Rent?*; The Courtauld Gallery 2007 (13) as *What Shall we do for the Rent?* (Also known as *The Camden Town Murder Series No. 1 or No. 2* and *Summer Afternoon*), Tate Britain 2008 (66) as *What Shall we do for the Rent?*

APPENDIX B

Correspondence with Scholars

Below are the emails in chronological order from scholars cited in the text and recorded in the Bibliography (personal details have been removed for privacy/anonymity purposes):

Correspondence with B. Wright, ‘RE: An important question about Sickert’s Camden Town Murder’, email, 9 January 2013, 3:59 pm

Subject: RE: An important question about Sickert’s Camden Town Murder

From: “Wright, Barnaby” [REDACTED]

Date: Wed, January 9, 2013 3:59 pm

To: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

Many thanks for your email. You raise a very important issue. I have been back through my notes and I am sorry to say that I can't find evidence upon which I based my assertion that Sickert himself changed the title of the Kirkcaldy painting at different exhibitions from Camden Town Murder to Summer Afternoon. Without this evidence I think you should not base an argument upon my assertion here - it is possible that I was mistaken. I will keep digging. Looking over the exhibition history for the Kirkcaldy picture that Wendy Baron published in her large 2006 catalogue it appears that the first time the canvas is exhibited with the Summer Afternoon title is at the Fine Art Society in 1973 (long after Sickert's death). This further suggests that I was mistaken.

Your research question is very interesting and interrogating the evidence for Sickert changing titles himself is crucial. Your conclusion may be that scholars (including myself) have been too fast and loose with asserting the change of titles issue. One of the ways scholars understand the title changes to have taken place is through the related drawings for various works - which he inscribed with titles that differ from those he gave for paintings at exhibition. But this is not the same thing as him renaming a painting. Have you found any evidence at all of Sickert exhibiting works at different shows with radically different titles? I'd be interested to know. Also, have you been in touch with Wendy Baron about all this?

All best,

Barney

Correspondence with A. G. Robins, ‘RE: Query: Walter Sickert’s Change in Titles’, email, 11 January 2013, 1:31 pm

Subject: RE: Query: Walter Sickert’s Change in Titles

From: “Anna E. Gruetzner Robins” [REDACTED]

Date: Fri, January 11, 2013 1:31 pm

To: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

The question of Sickert's titles is an interesting one and although I have no concrete proof, I feel certain that Sickert was responsible for the change in titles partly because in part at least, they make reference to the events of the murder - it probably took place on a summer afternoon, the body was discovered at dawn, Emily Dimmock was working as a clandestine prostitute to substitute her partner's meagre income so in other words to pay the rent. The narrative spin offs are very interesting. Best of luck with your research.

Best wishes,

Anna

Correspondence with B. Wright, 'RE: A final question re: dissertation on Sickert's use of titles', email, 7 March 2013, 3:41 pm

Subject: RE: A final question re: dissertation on Sickert's use of titles

From: "Wright, Barnaby" [REDACTED]

Date: Thu, March 7, 2013 3:41 pm

To: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

I hope you are progressing well with your project.

We titled the Kirkcaldy picture 'What shall we do for the Rent' (as well as giving the two alternatives) because that was the title that Kirkcaldy Museum used for the painting and it was also the title that Wendy Baron used in her 2006 catalogue so we felt it was important to be consistent whilst also giving the alternatives. However, I think there is a strong case to be made for reverting to Sickert's own first 'murder' title as the primary one given that there is fairly solid ground for assuming he did indeed title it that way.

Did you manage to speak to Wendy about your project?

All best,

Barney

Correspondence with W. Baron, 'RE: Walter Sickert Dissertation – some questions for you', email, 11 March 2013, 5:21 pm

Subject: RE: Walter Sickert Dissertation – some questions for you

From: "Wendy Baron" [REDACTED]

Date: Mon, March 11, 2013 5:21 pm

To: [REDACTED]

Dear [REDACTED],

What an interesting dissertation subject and a good list of questions. I will not be able to answer the latter as clearly as you would like, but I will do my best to further your enquiry a little.

The titles of the two closely related compositions (344 and 344.1) have been confused over the years since Sickert's death, with *The Camden Town Murder*, 'What shall we do for the Rent?' and *Summer Afternoon* used interchangeably. Perhaps, because Sickert himself changed the titles of his paintings so frequently, the titles of his paintings in general have come to be seen more as identification labels than as having much inherent meaning. If an owner, public or private, wishes to call a particular painting by a particular title, even if it has little contemporary authenticity, that becomes the title. In the Kirkcaldy catalogue, printed in 1965 following the purchase of much of the collection of J W Blyth in 1964, the title was given as 'What shall we do for the Rent?' (*Camden Town Murder Series*). The official photograph which Lillian Browne acquired from Kirkcaldy gave the title as *Summer Afternoon*. I suppose the titles were drawn from Blyth's papers, but if this is so I do not know when or why Blyth adopted these titles. I may have misremembered, but I believe the assumption that the two versions of this composition were exhibited in the first Camden Town Group exhibition did not antedate the publication of my 1973 book on Sickert when I quoted press reports which served to identify the paintings.

We can take the title *Summer Afternoon* back to 1950 rather than 1960. When the painting was exhibited at the Leicester Galleries, May-June 1950, 'Paintings and Drawings by W. R. Sickert from the Collection of Dr. Robert Emmons' (4) it was under the title *Summer Afternoon*. Ronald Simon later bought the painting from the Leicester Galleries. Given Emmons's relationship to Sickert, as his biographer and former pupil, it is possible that the title came, perhaps laconically, from a Sickert communication. It has a ring of truth about it, parallel with the original authentic Sickert title for the murky painting now known as *Dawn, Camden Town* having been the *Summer in Naples*.

Your last question: I think if you study an artist over a period of half a century you do change your mind not only about fact, but about interpretation. I still think Sickert was hugely concerned with form, but I underestimated how fascinated he was by drama. He told stories through his manipulation of the components of a composition. Because the story was not real, because he was not illustrating finite events, the paintings which emerged were capable of being interpreted in different ways. I think he used titles as pointers to encourage particular - but often wildly inconsistent - interpretations. I believe he relished ambiguity, and if we as scholars muddy the water from time to time, Sickert would probably have approved. His titles were arbitrary, in so far as they sprang from his imagination at a particular moment, when the painting was finished, when he saw it in a new context, and so forth.

I hope this has been of some help.

With best wishes,
Wendy Baron