

JOHN ALLIN



JOHN ALLIN (1934-1991)

Memories of the East End

Dedicated to Stephen Schama
an early admirer of the artist

JOHN ALLIN

John Allin was born into a Jewish family in Hackney, in 1934, in the heart of London's bustling East End. The 'London Lowry' or 'Pied Painter of Hackney', as he was affectionately known in the press, showed natural artistic flair as a child, it was however during a brief stint in prison, for a minor offence receiving stolen shirts, that he attended art classes and began painting in earnest. His mentor, the artist Sotirakis Charalambou, remarked that after prison John was keen to continue with his painting, and that he supported him in this endeavour, with the pair often painting side-by-side: "I never taught him because I don't believe in teaching but I encouraged him, I thought he was extremely talented and it was just a question of finding the confidence in his talent"¹.

Initially Allin followed a more traditional path, painting landscapes, or even copying the Old Masters, such as Rembrandt. However, he soon felt an "urge to say and do something of my own"², turning to personal subjects informed by his own experience of the social life and political reality of his native Hackney. Allin did not merely record his surroundings, he sought to express his emotional response to his subjects: "I don't particularly like accuracy in my paintings, I try to get something inside me - the mood, the feeling of the thing. The joy, or sadness, this quality"³. He was deeply inspired by his recollections of the East End of his childhood, and often worked from memory, he lamented: "When I was a kid, life was more friendly - but that's all changed it's gone"⁴. Allin deplored the desecration of the East London he used to know, he mused, "In my painting it's a bit like a dream to me...how I would like to see it...making everything as I wish to see it"⁵. Painting became a way to keep hold of the Hackney of his youth, he explained, "I feel sure they will tear it down one day, but it will never be lost because it's there in my painting"⁶.

John Allin debuted publicly at Mayfair's Portal Gallery in 1969, this was the first of several exhibitions he enjoyed there. He achieved considerable success with his work in the sixties and seventies, and in 1979 he became the first British artist to win the International Prix Suisse Du Peinture Naïve award. He was featured in several television documentaries about his life and the East End, and appeared in various books of his own and by other authors, several of which are noted in the sources at the end of this catalogue.

The following twelve paintings have remained in the same collection for over fifty years. The owner bought them from the artist in the seventies, perhaps via the Portal Gallery who represented him, after seeing Allin on television. He came to know the artist well and became a fervent admirer of his work, attending several of his exhibitions at the Portal gallery at the artist's invitation. We are delighted to have the opportunity to offer this important group of paintings, and we hope this catalogue will help bring Allin's work to the attention of an even wider audience. The paintings are all oil on canvas from 1972, and signed 'Allin Road' - a reference to Allin's past as a long-distance lorry driver.

1. The Gentle Author, interview with Sotirakis Charalambou on the 'Spitalfields Life' website, 17 July 2017

2. 'Self portrait of Painter John Allin', Best of Aquarius (04/09/71), ITV documentary, 1971

3. 'Self portrait of Painter John Allin', Best of Aquarius (04/09/71), ITV documentary, 1971

4. 'Self portrait of Painter John Allin', Best of Aquarius (04/09/71), ITV documentary, 1971

5. 'Self portrait of Painter John Allin', Best of Aquarius (04/09/71), ITV documentary, 1971

6. 'John Allin and George Innes', Pebble Mill at One, BBC documentary, 1976

“What I like about
living in the East End,
was that I was born
and bred here -
and it's like an animal
that was born in the jungle,
take him out of his jungle
and he hates it.”

-John Allin, 1971



BUTCHER, 1972

Oil on canvas
53 x 73.5 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

Allin is especially celebrated for his paintings of East End shop fronts. Butcher shops, such as this one with its characteristic tiled exterior and neatly laid out window display, were a familiar sight in Hackney. Here we see the butchers trimming and cutting the meat for the waiting customers.



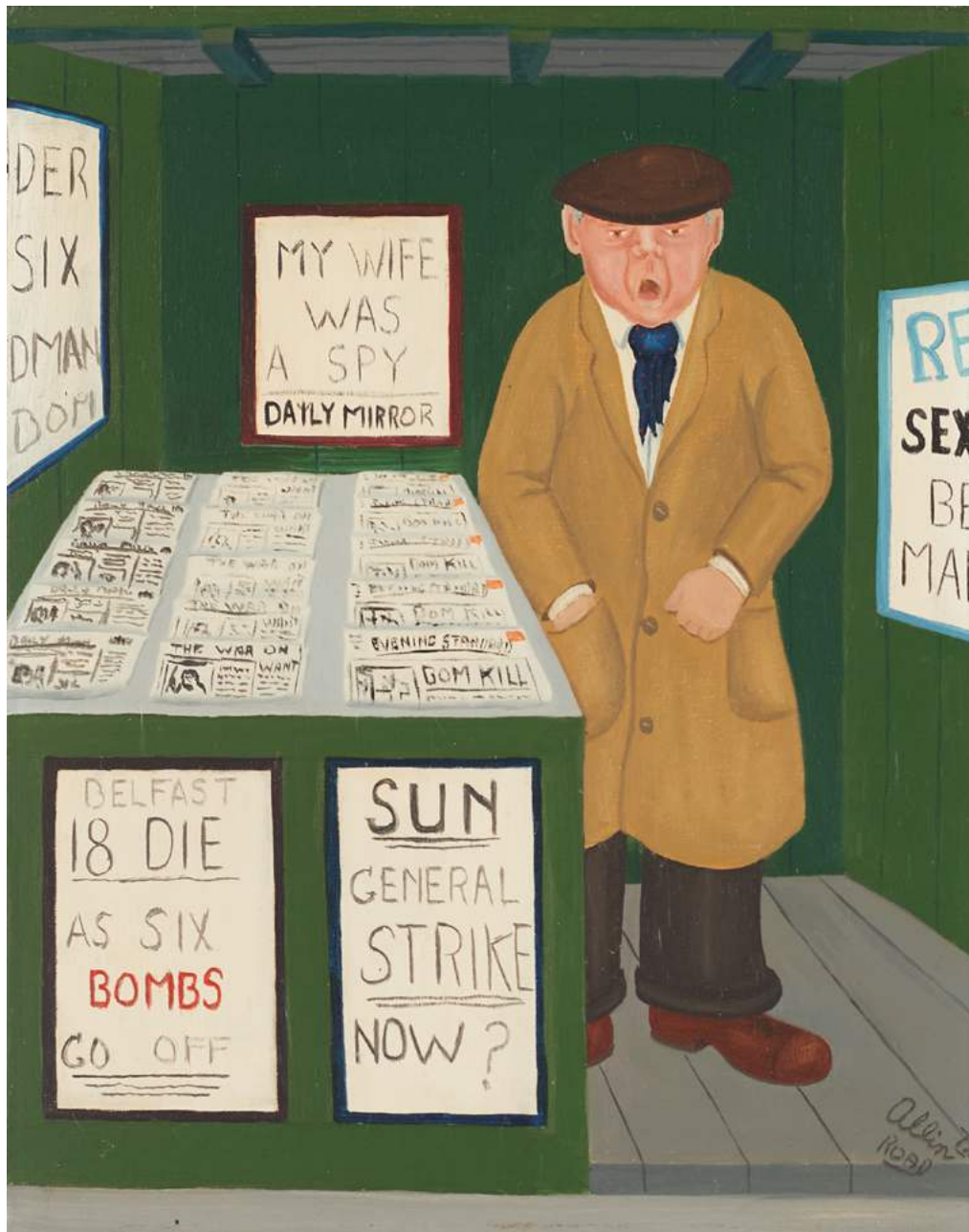
BAG WASH, 1972

Oil on canvas

53 x 54 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

John Allin lived above Maxwell's bag wash on Churchill Walk in Hackney; it had a personal significance for him as his mother worked there. This premises features in another of his paintings, as well as the Aquarius documentary on the artist. The bag wash was the forerunner of the modern-day laundrette, customers could drop off their whites in a bag, and they'd be washed and returned in the same bag, still damp, to be dried and ironed at home. Here we see the children dropping-off and picking-up the bags and playfully ferrying them home to their parents.



NEWSPAPER SELLER, 1972

Oil on canvas
35 x 27.5 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.



FLOWER SELLER, 1972

Oil on canvas
35 x 28 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.



INFANT SCHOOL, 1972

Oil on canvas
99 x 122 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

In his book 'Say Goodbye', John Allin wistfully recalled, "Kids!... Warm, sunny days... doing all the things kids did when they played in the street. Having seasons. One of conkers, one of bows-and-arrows, one of building your own scooter with ball-bearing wheels, you know? Everything that cost nothing, you did! - that cost your parents nothing, you did to "amuse" yourself. Bicycle wheels, using them as hoops, remember that? And marbles, cigarette-cards, flicking them up against the wall, and pitch and toss, with halfpennies...idyllic days. And romantic. They were romantic... entertaining yourself, being inventive..."



PARK, 1972

Oil on canvas
85 x 86 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

John Allin worked as a parks attendant in his early days, before becoming an artist. For him, the park was a welcome escape from “the claustrophobic atmosphere of the (East End), the way it’s been built up”. He often punctuated his days in the studio with walks through the local green spaces accompanied by his dog Morgan.



POCKET MONEY, 1972

Oil on canvas
35.5 x 28 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

In the seventies the Jewish community was gradually being forced out of their East End home, and their culture was rapidly disappearing from the streets. In a 1976 short film, Allin mused, "I'm really glad that I painted this area...because this is where lots of very famous Jewish people grew up and came and worshipped...the old East End Jewish culture grew up here".



WARMING UP, 1972

Oil on canvas
35.5 x 28 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

Allin was a warm man, and cared deeply about the plight of the people of the East End. In an interview with the Gentle Author, Allin's mentor Sotirakis Charalambou recalled, "He loved the people he painted. He treated everybody equally and he wanted to say, 'Here we are!'"



BOWLS, 1972

Oil on canvas
54 x 76.5 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.

Allin painted several pictures of sporting events, from football to cricket and bowls.



CRICKET, 1972

Oil on canvas
68 x 70 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin Road 72'.



WORK- MEN, 1972

Oil on canvas
35.5 x 28 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin
Road 72'.



JUDGE, 1972

Oil on canvas
35.5 x 28 cm

Signed and dated 'Allin
Road 72'.

“I want my art to be pure,
I want it to remain pure.
I want to be unrestricted,
I don't want no tie-ups,
no hang-ups with it.
I want to be left to be,
to paint exactly
what I want to do.”

-John Allin, 1971

MY WIFE
WAS
A SPY
DAYLY MIRROR



LEAST
DIE
SIX
OMBS
OFF

SUN
GENERAL
STRIKE
NOW?



STEPNEY STREETS, 1976


THE STAGE THE REVIEW AND TELEVISION YEARLY, May 28, 1976 - 7

Petticoat Lane
The Great Synagogue - Brick Lane
Hessel Street Market
Gardener's Corner - 1936

STEPNEY STREETS

Soup Kitchen for the Jewish Poor - Brune Street
Poltava Synagogue - Heneage Street
Curly's Cafe - Whitechapel Road
Spitalfields Fruit Exchange

A FOLIO OF EIGHT PRINTS ABOUT LONDON'S EAST END
Signed, numbered and limited to 250 sets
Original paintings by JOHN ALLIN Words by ARNOLD WESKER



Petticoat Lane

STEPNEY STREETS
Most East Enders pride themselves on their origins which have been immortalised by writers and performers for stage and screen to take their place in the world along with the Bowery, the Gorbals, and Montmartre. Now John Allin has lovingly added these fast vanishing East End scenes to the world of printmaking.

The ARTIST
John Allin's paintings have been exhibited and sold in Paris, Zurich, Hong Kong, Japan and London. In 1974 he collaborated, with Arnold Wesker, the much acclaimed book, SAY GOODBYE, YOU MAY NEVER SEE THEM AGAIN, published by Jonathan Cape.

EARLY PURCHASERS
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THE PRINTS
The edition is limited to 250 folios, each containing eight (8) hand printed images, signed, numbered and dated by the artist. Additionally there is a signed text by Arnold Wesker. Early price requests 300 + 50poin (22 + 50poin) and the edition is sold in a hand made book in traditional style.

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A folio costs £287 (VAT inc) and a minimum deposit of £100 will secure your set. Any outstanding balance will become due with delivery. For those wishing to spread the load, the set may be paid for in six monthly instalments, interest free. Please note: as some values are already allocated, some subjects prove to be hard.

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The following four prints were created for the 'Stepney Streets' portfolio of 1976. This folio of eight screenprints, from paintings by John Allin, was accompanied with words by Stepney-born Jewish playwright and author, Arthur Wesker. The pair had previously collaborated on a 1974 book, 'Say Goodbye, You May Never See Them Again'. The screenprints were hand-printed by Bernard Cook, from whose collection these proofs are from. The portfolio was published by Heritage Prints, in January 1976, in an edition of 250.

An advert for the portfolio, which appeared in an issue of 'The Stage', noted: "*Most East Enders pride themselves on their origins which have been immortalised by writers and performers for stage and screen to take their place in the world along with the Bowery, the Gorbals, and Montmartre. Now John Allin has lovingly added these fast vanishing East End scenes to the world of printmaking.*"

The eight prints comprised: 'Petticoat Lane', 'Poltava Synagogue - Heneage Street', 'Hessel Street Market', 'Spitalfields Fruit Exchange', 'Curly's Cafe - Whitechapel Road', 'The Great Synagogue - Brick Lane', 'Soup Kitchen For The Jewish Poor - Brune Street' and Gardiner's Corner - 1936'.



POLTAVA SYNAGOGUE - HENEAGE STREET, 1976

Screenprint
56 x 76 cm

Signed and dated by the artist in pencil. Proof, aside from the edition of 250.

The Poltava Synagogue, named after a town in Ukraine, was at 2 Heneage Street from about 1935, when it moved there from Spital Square, until it closed in 1972. Allin captures the wonderful diversity of the streets around Brick Lane, with the synogogue rubbing shoulders with Pandora Fashions, and a delivery man on a horse and cart.



CURLY'S CAFE - WHITECHAPEL ROAD, 1976

Screenprint
56 x 76 cm

Signed and dated by the artist in pencil. Numbered from the edition of 250.
(Unsigned proof also available).

Sue Bloom, the grand-daughter of Curly, kindly wrote to me about the history of the cafe celebrated in this print. I am delighted that she has permitted me to share her memories here:

"Morris 'Curly' Kirsch was born in Poland in 1894 or '95... At the age of about 6 he was brought...to London by his Mother, Mildred, to escape the pogroms, which were

rife in Eastern Europe at that time...The family settled in the East End of London. In 1915 Morris married Rose Schneider, and they had four children, Sidney, Eddie, Harry (my father) and a daughter, Rita. The family was living in Cable Street which became notorious, in 1936, for the Battle of Cable Street, the resistance to Oswald Mosley's fascist march. Needless to say, all the Kirsch kids were in the thick of the melee. All of the children were musical, and Rita was a hugely talented singer, whose career in music began when she was a child, recording from the age of 9 and singing with big bands. The name Kirsch was thought to be perhaps a little too 'foreign', so she was known professionally as 'Baby Rita Carr' and eventually the whole family adopted the new, anglicised name of Carr.

We don't know when Morris began to be known as Curly, but many people in the East End in those days had nicknames related to their appearance, so his curly hair made him an obvious candidate for his sobriquet. Curly and Rose were enterprising people, and had a number of businesses including drinking clubs, and Curly was also deeply involved in the world of boxing, promoting fights and was often in the ring as a 'second'. There were very many Jewish boxers from the East End then, and Curly knew them all. His closest friend was Ted 'Kid' Lewis one of the most successful British boxers of all the time.

The first cafe that he and Rosie opened was in Osborne Street... This cafe was bombed during the blitz. The new cafe, the one I remember, was much bigger and certainly featured all the pictures of boxers around the wall... We don't remember there being booths, just tables and chairs, but realise that this was an impression of what the cafe might have been like, as it was long gone by the time John Allin created these prints in the 70s. However, it really captures the atmosphere, and, as depicted, there were the most extraordinarily colourful characters in there at all times. It was the haunt of artists, musicians, boxers, writers, local gangsters, ladies of the night and a constant stream of local 'faces'. Interestingly, it's noted that at the bottom of the menu on the wall it states, 'chips with everything'. This is authentic, and Arnold Wesker took the phrase for his famous play of the same name from the menu at Curly's Cafe... We don't remember exactly when the cafe was finally closed, but it must have been in the early 1960s when Curly was no longer in the best of health. He and my Nana Rosie continued to live in Osborne Street until his death in 1964."

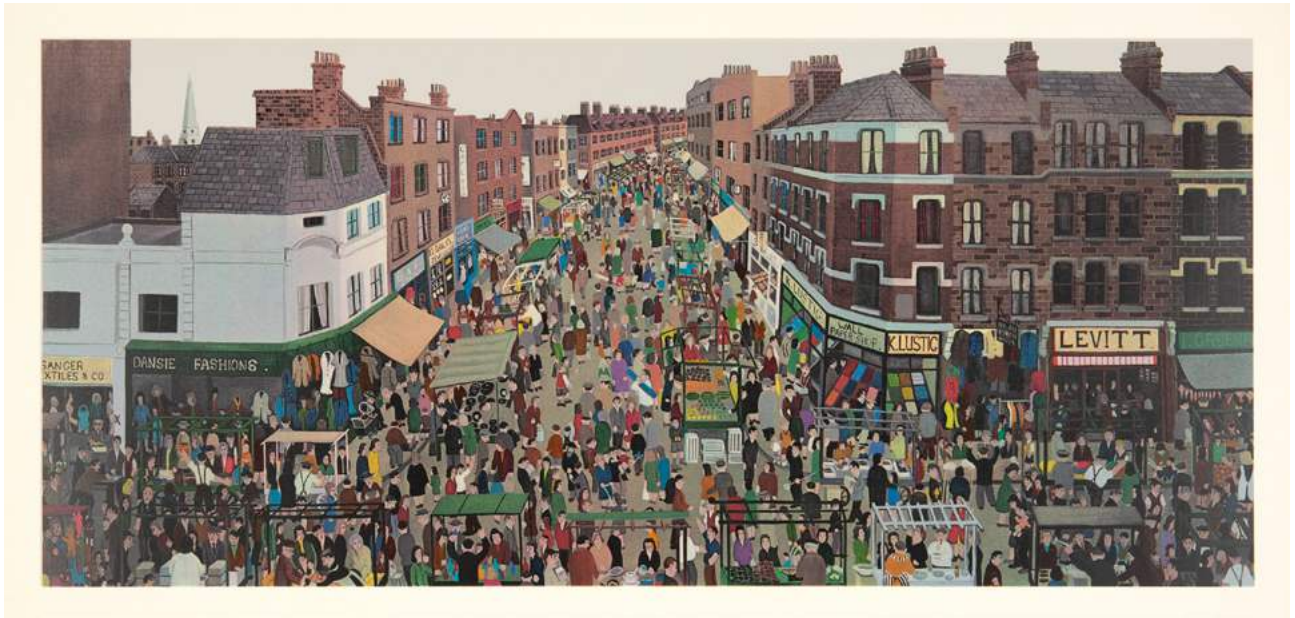


GARDINER'S CORNER - 1936, 1976

Screenprint
56 x 76 cm

Signed and dated by the artist in pencil. Proof, aside from the edition of 250.
(Unsigned proof also available).

This print re-imagines the famous 'Battle of Cable Street'. On the 4th of October 1936, the local East End community banded together to demonstrate against anti-Semitism, and stop the British Union of Fascists, 3000 Blackshirts, led by Oswald Mosley, from marching through the heartland of London's Jewish community. Allin shows the protest at Gardiner's Corner, with the boisterous crowd brandishing their banners, barricaded behind old furniture. This was a significant historical moment for East London's Jewish community, and one Allin wanted to commemorate.



PETTICOAT LANE, 1976

Screenprint
56 x 76 cm

Unsigned proof, aside from the edition of 250.

This print depicts the vibrant Petticoat Lane market, positioned on Wentworth and Middlesex Street in Spitalfields. Allin loved his local East End markets, and the bustling community of traders and locals.

“What they’ve done with
the East End is diabolical!
They’ve just scuppered it,
built and built, and torn down
and torn out, and took lots
of identity away...just made it
into a concrete nothing...
But people go on, don’t they?
Eating their eels, and giving
their custom where they’ve
always given their custom...
Funny how people go on
and take everything
and anything.”

-John Allin, 1974

SOURCES

BOOKS

- 1974 Allin, John & Wesker, Arnold, 'Say Goodbye: You May Never See Them Again', Jonathan Cape
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- 1982 Allin, John, 'Circus Life', Viking Penguin
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- 2017 The Gentle Author, 'East End Vernacular: Artists Who Painted London's East End Streets in the 20th Century', Spitalfields Life Books

TV & FILM DOCUMENTARIES

- 1970 'Second Chance', 30 April, ITV
- 1971 'Self portrait of Painter John Allin', Best of Aquarius (04/09/71), ITV
- 1975 'Noted Eel and Pie Houses', directed by David Furnham
- 1976 'John Allin and George Innes', Pebble Mill at One, BBC
- 1982 'Circus Life with John Allin', produced by Geoffrey Baines for the BBC
- 1983 'John Allin's Hopping', directed by David Furnham

NEWSPAPERS

- 1975 Birmingham Daily Post, 15 February
- 1976 The Stage, May 20
- 1978 Westminster & Pimlico News, 21 April

ONLINE

- 2017 The Gentle Author, interview with John Allin's mentor, the artist Sotirakis Charalambou on the 'Spitalfields Life' website, 17 July

SALES

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