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A home at last for Borchard's collection of 21-guinea portraits

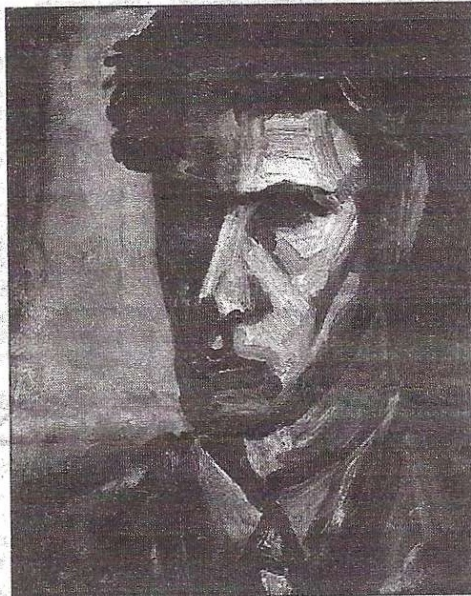
By John Russell Taylor

THE National Portrait Gallery may not be in need of competition, but there are certainly areas where its collections could do with a little supplementation. Occasionally today a self-portrait by a distinguished contemporary may be purchased, but often, by the time the painter concerned has achieved the requisite stature, his work will have become so expensive that any such purchase would need very careful consideration.

It does not seem that Ruth Borchard had possible gaps in the gallery's collection in mind when she began commissioning young artists of whom she approved to make portraits of themselves. She set herself — or her economic situation set it for her — the limitation that none of her commissions (or sometimes purchases of pre-existing work) should cost more than 21 guineas.

Of course, that was back in the 1950s, so the limited budget was not quite so much of an obstacle as it would seem today, though even by the early Sixties David Hockney was already too expensive. And in any case Ruth Borchard was clearly a determined person.

Not to say persuasive. Over about ten years she managed to tot up a hundred pieces for her collection, including almost everyone who was anyone on the art scene of the time, from Michael Ayrton to Patrick Prockter, Anne Redpath to Ithell Colquhoun, Roger Hilton to Carel Weight.



Leslie Marr's self-portrait in oils (1946)

Though her taste was amazingly catholic, it is noticeable that she particularly favoured the look of David Bomberg, who died at just about the time that she started commissioning. Fortunately many of his circle of pupils and disciples were very much around, and so we find that the likes of Dennis Creffield, Keith Critchlow and Dorothy Mead figure prominently.

For some years the Borchard Collection was a well-kept secret, glimpsed only occasionally when works in it were lent in ones and twos to gallery exhibitions. But last year it emerged in part at an art fair, and now a book has appeared documenting the whole thing and prefiguring

the opening next year of a permanent public display of all 100 works in the new Arts Centre (now being built) in the Kings Place complex at Kings Cross.

The book, *Face to Face*, by Philip Vann (Sansom & Company, £45 hardback, £29.95 paperback) puts the collection in context, by prefacing a detailed account of the Borchard pictures with a summary treatment of the artist's self-portrait in Britain throughout the 20th century.

Apart from bringing back to notice an extraordinary number of almost unknown paintings and drawings, it evokes forcefully the atmosphere of the London art world shortly after the Festival of

Britain. Not only is there a lot of information about half-forgotten painters like Clifford Hall and F. N. Souza who are only just coming back into the collector's sights again, but one has to be impressed by Borchard's perspicacity in her choice of very young painters.

As she herself proudly wrote in 1968, when she started haunting contemporary art shows in the early 1950s: "Often I bought one of the first paintings the young artist ever sold: Donald Hamilton Fraser, Michael Fussell, Evelyn Williams, Michael Noakes, Geoffrey White; Hugo Powell's sculpture."

And among those she discovered when they were still in the midst of or barely past their student years may be added Patrick Prockter, Euan Uglow, Peter Coker, Anthony Green, David Tindle and Peter Phillips. Nor was she snobbish when it came to artists who were known primarily as illustrators: Feliks Topolski, Lynton Lamb, Brian Robb and Gerald Rose are all represented by splendidly unexpected paintings.

Would any of the above make it into the National Portrait Gallery, even today? With a bit of luck, we shall not have to bother our heads about that. Not only is the Borchard Collection to have its permanent home near Kings Cross, but it will also be instituting an annual self-portrait prize to go with it, so that the collection will continue to grow in the spirit of the original.