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Independence

When I was a small child, I had no personal relationship with photographs. They might have been taken by the orphanage for their archive, I suppose, but not for a personal album. Photography didn't mean much to me at all. I liked stories, serious literature, rather than picture books. I liked the hands-on activities like sewing and rug-making. I wished I could draw well, and I often tried. I used to draw people, but I'd never shown my pictures to anyone. And then, after Bloomsbury Tech, I got a scholarship to Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts on the strength of some charcoal portraits that I'd made.

Camberwell was my first encounter with the bohemian world of artists. I was only fifteen or sixteen, a very impressionable age, and I'd won a scholarship to this prestigious school of art. There were artists there who were very well known at the time: Victor Pasmore, Michael Ayrton and particularly John Minton who was only about twenty-six years of age. John was a dedicated teacher, very gentle and sensitive. I think what impressed me about him was that he cared about you as a student, whereas Michael Ayrton was an egotist. If you asked John a question he gave you time; and if you hesitated and weren't very good, he would show you how to do things.

I also loved the other students. There were ten to fifteen students in the classes, and we'd do life class, painting from the antique, learning

Photographer unknown,
*Martha and Anne
Gordon*, c. mid-1940s

how to use oils. We knew that very few of us would become artists by profession – I think we had been chosen for the scholarship because of our background, which wasn't privileged. But we all had the same enthusiasm. None of the students became great artists, but when I lived and worked in Kensington later I used to see John Minton in the high street. I often wanted to go up to him and say how much I appreciated him as a teacher. I didn't, and I regret that, because later I learned from the newspaper that he had committed suicide. He was gay, and he lived at a time when it was very difficult to be gay.

I admired the artists who were teaching me, but I very much wanted to travel to Europe to visit galleries and see the work of international artists. At that time, I couldn't afford to. When I started at Camberwell School of Arts and Crafts, I was living in a home run by the after-care committee of the orphanage, continuing my cloistered upbringing. It was only when I left the care of the orphanage and the art school and went to work that the whole world opened up for me.

Getting my first bedsit was the breakthrough for real freedom. I loved bedsits; I used to call them my 'kibbutz rooms', because there was never anything except a bed, a chair, a small table and a gas ring. That's all I needed for physical comfort. I couldn't afford art in those days, but I'd put drawings I had made on the walls. And then, when I could afford it, I started buying prints. The first one was Picasso's *Leaning Harlequin*, which was printed by the Leningrad Museum, as it was then. I vowed one day to visit the Hermitage so I could see it in person – and when I eventually did, I couldn't find the painting anywhere.

I remember thinking at this time, how lucky I am to be me. From age sixteen onwards, nobody told me what to do. I had no parents. I had to make decisions about myself and my direction and my interests without anyone to dissuade or encourage me. The world really was my oyster.

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In this photograph I do truly see something of Anne Frank. Isn't that an expression of such optimism and hope? That's what I was like: the upward look and the mouth, loving the world, inquisitive.

At this time, I had the absurd dream that one day I would marry an artist and be his muse. I knew a little about Modigliani, and dreamed I would marry that sort of artist and look after him so he could produce great works of art. I don't know where it came from – I wasn't even someone who thought that one had to get married. But I believed that art was very important, even then.

When I look at the photograph, I recognise that person. There are a few regrets. I'm not as sweet as I was then, obviously, although 'sweet' is not a good word to use about anyone. It's empty. Gerrard said to me the other day, you had such moral certitude when I met you, darling. And I said yes, but no longer. Experience undermines certitude.

I never saw myself as a pretty child. But at Camberwell a lot of the other painters wanted to paint me. They'd say, your face is quite unusual. I didn't think it was that unusual, but on looking back, it does look interesting. Striking. Innocence is the word.

I think, too, that being a sick child, in constant pain during the early years of my life, had taught me a kind of poise. You're coping with pain that you don't want to reveal because you don't want to solicit sympathy, so you learn how to hold yourself. You either coped or you went under. There was nobody to protect you.

It was commonly thought back then that if you grew up in an orphanage you were somehow worthless, and I suspect that attitude still lingers in places. Both my sister and I suffered from that a lot



Photographer unknown,
Martha Gordon,
mid-1940s

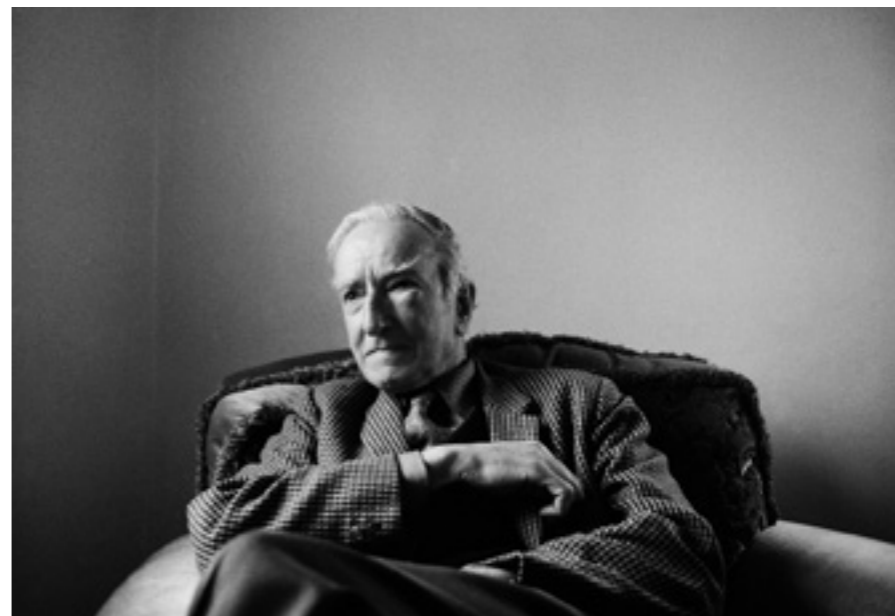
when we were young. I remember when one of my first boyfriends took me home to meet his parents and their first question was, What school did you go to? I said, I went to an orphanage – and you could see immediately that they didn't want their son to be involved with someone like me.

So I hesitated to tell people about my background. First of all, I didn't want to solicit sympathy. It's very easy to say, 'I am an orphan', but I never did, because although I was in an orphanage, I wasn't an orphan. Secondly, I didn't want to have to go through an explanation of the situation. I didn't want to get into the complications of the past; I wanted to get on with life. I didn't even keep in touch with other children from the orphanage because after we had been evacuated from London, we lost track of one other.

I say to friends who have degrees that the one thing I really wish is that I had gone to university. When they answer, but Marti you didn't need to go to university, I say, 'Yes, but you're talking from a point of privilege. *You* went to university.' I'd like to have had the opportunity, not because I think it would have made me more interesting, but because it teaches you to analyse and research.

Instead, at seventeen, I was fortunate to find a job with the photographer Douglas Glass, an expatriate New Zealander. He had advertised in the *British Journal of Photography* for someone to do enlargements. As a test, he asked me to print his portrait of Rosa Lewis, who was rumoured to have been the mistress of Edward VII, and he was so impressed with my printing that he employed me on the spot. At that time, he was the portrait photographer for the *Sunday Times*. He was also very eccentric, and told me proudly that he'd once been a sheep shearer, but never ever wanted to return to New Zealand. Douglas Glass shared his studio in Wrights Lane, Kensington, with Gordon Crocker – a leading fashion photographer of the day – and when Douglas left after two years, in 1949, I continued working for Crocker, as I called him.

The job hardly paid – I was effectively on minimum wage and was shy about asking for a raise, but the work gave me much more pleasure



Gordon Crocker, c. 1954

than money. And I had just enough to afford a bedsitting-room of my own. Anne, my sister, was working and living fairly close by. We used to meet at the Express Dairy, a food chain, and we would bring our own sandwiches because we couldn't afford to eat there. At lunch we would take out our sandwiches and furtively eat them.

Those sandwiches saved my life. Every day I ate pilchard sandwiches. All that fish oil must have been good for my poor stomach.

I thought life was terrific – there were ways of coping with not having money. I would go to the Albert Hall and queue for tickets to sit right up in the top for the concerts. It cost almost nothing. I sat up in the gods and thought I was in heaven. The possibilities of life were infinite and it was a wonderful feeling to be able to go to extraordinary concerts and plays in spite of having no money. I took advantage of any access I got to the galleries, the ballet, the opera, all that was going on.

The work as print-spotter and general assistant for Gordon Crocker was very satisfying. I'd get up every morning and think, aren't I lucky,

I'm going to work! Crock did the Harrods catalogues, so there was a lot of retouching of prints of furs and other things, which I was very skilled at. I was quite happy to work overtime, and never thought to ask for extra pay.

Gordon Crocker was the kindest man. He was very shy, perhaps because he stammered badly, and he was a bachelor. Over time he became almost like a father to me. Crock was devoutly Christian and he would love to have converted me to Christianity, but that didn't offend me. I understood that it was something he genuinely felt. He would always say that if ever I was in danger he would like me to pray to Jesus Christ. And I'd say, but you see, Crock whenever I'm in danger I *do* go 'Oh, Jesus Christ!' No, he'd say, I want it to be a little bit more serious than that.

When I met Gerrard in 1956 and we were thinking we might get married, I said to Gerrard, I can't, darling, I just can't let Gordon Crocker down. I felt that he couldn't manage without me. Then a friend said, Marti, the graveyard is full of indispensable people. I love that kind of humour. So I told Crock that Gerrard and I were getting engaged, and of course he was charming and a gentleman and very sweet about it – but I know it was very hard for him.

Crock photographed the top models of the day, people like Barbara Goalen and Fiona von Thyssen. They came to the studio and they were so graceful.

And he photographed me.

Gordon Crocker, *Martha Gordon*, late 1940s

