

# Austin Osman Spare – occultist, avant-gardist and ‘Britain’s first pop artist’

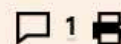
The London painter’s works have become spookily popular of late



ve/Getty Images



Mark C O’Flaherty SEPTEMBER 28 2023



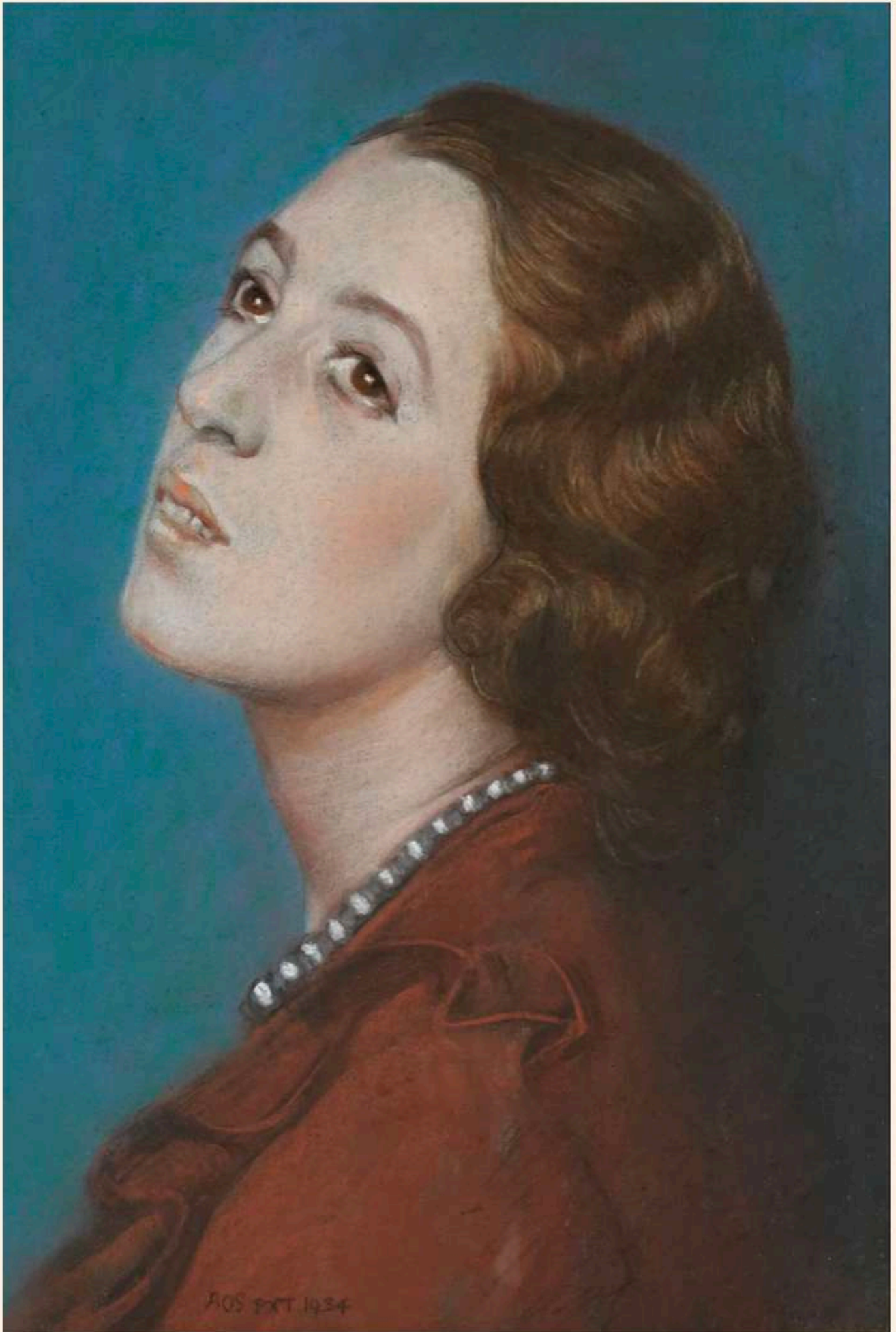
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Collectors of the work of early 20th-century English artist and occultist Austin Osman Spare have, up until now, been of a type. Jimmy Page of Led Zeppelin has a notable number of paintings, as did the late Genesis P-Orridge – founder of industrial sound provocateurs Throbbing Gristle. In his memoir, Orridge describes an acquaintance shaking and shouting: “Those paintings, cover them, they’re alive!” One particular work, *The Ides*, depicting two aggressive-looking self-portraits of Spare flanked by Romanian prostitutes, was turned to face the wall. Months later, after touring overseas, Orridge returned to discover house-sitters had turned the painting around and vanished, leaving rooms splattered with red paint. Spooked, Orridge sold the painting to Chris Stein of Blondie.

Born in east London in 1886, the son of a policeman, Spare launched his career to a fanfare of critical acclaim with a solo show at the Bruton Gallery in 1907, which saw his distinctive black line compared to Aubrey Beardsley. He is often lazily lumped in with the pantomime shenanigans of fellow fin de siècle oddball Aleister Crowley. The two crossed paths many times and both developed their own alternative belief systems, incorporating sigils, grimoires and spells. The definitive biography of Spare by Phil Baker, *Austin Osman Spare, The Life and Legend of London’s Lost Artist*, also recalls Hitler inviting Spare to come to Berlin to paint his portrait (Spare refused), and Spare’s obsession with Ovaltine as an aphrodisiac.



Portrait of Charlotte Elizabeth Newman, 1934, sold at Bonhams for £3,825 © Bonhams

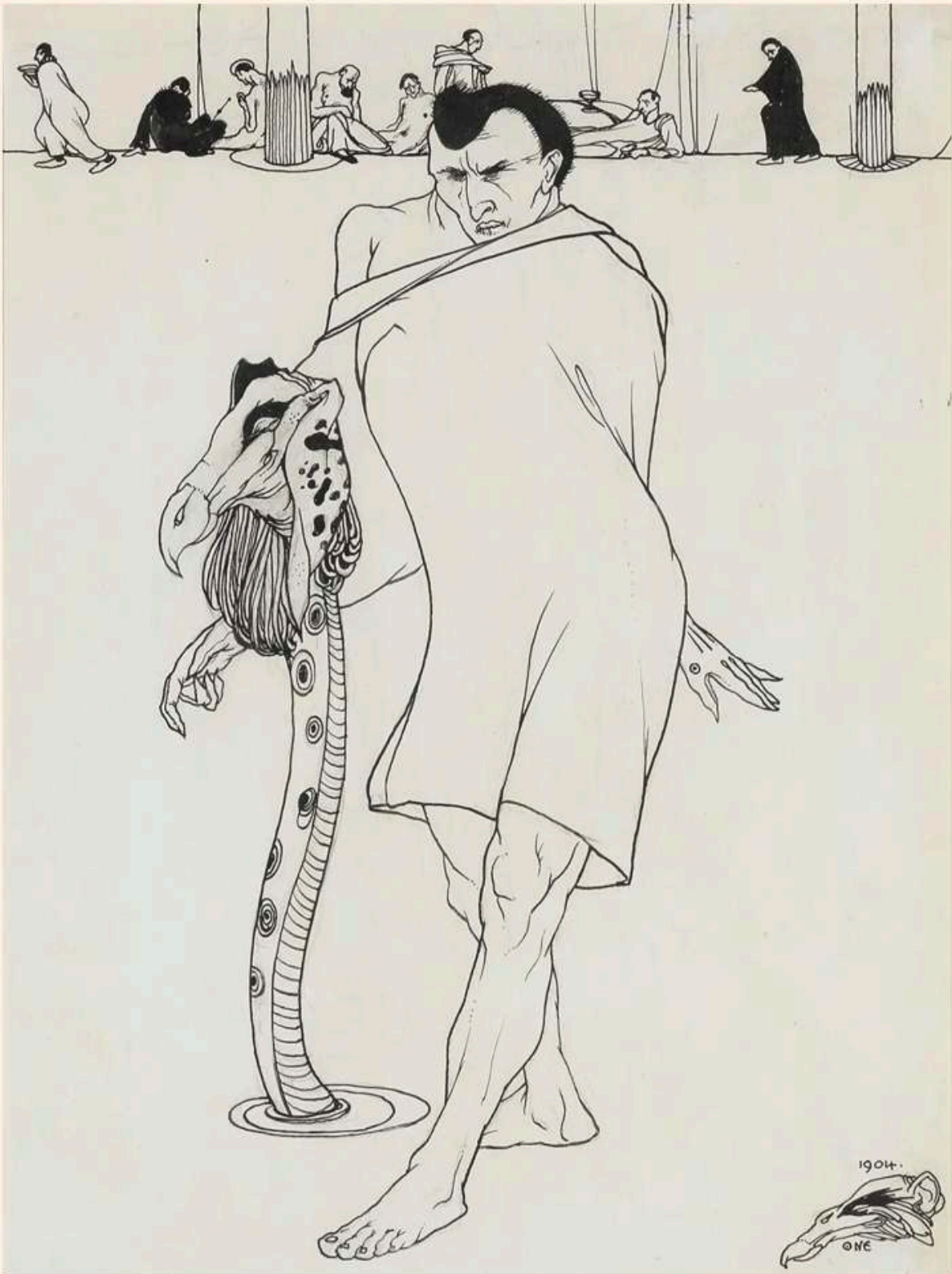


Figure Dancing with a "KIA", 1904, sold at Bonhams for £5,737 © Bonhams

It's easy to see why such a character would attract the avant-garde, but the pictures are much more than macabre souvenirs, and their aesthetic appeal has driven desirability as much as his legend. Twenty years ago, you could pick up works by Spare for under £1,000, while today the more traditionally beautiful works require a rock-star budget. In 2015, a nude of Charlotte Newman came to auction at Christie's in London. It had a low-end estimate of £3,000 but bidding rapidly sailed over £40,000.

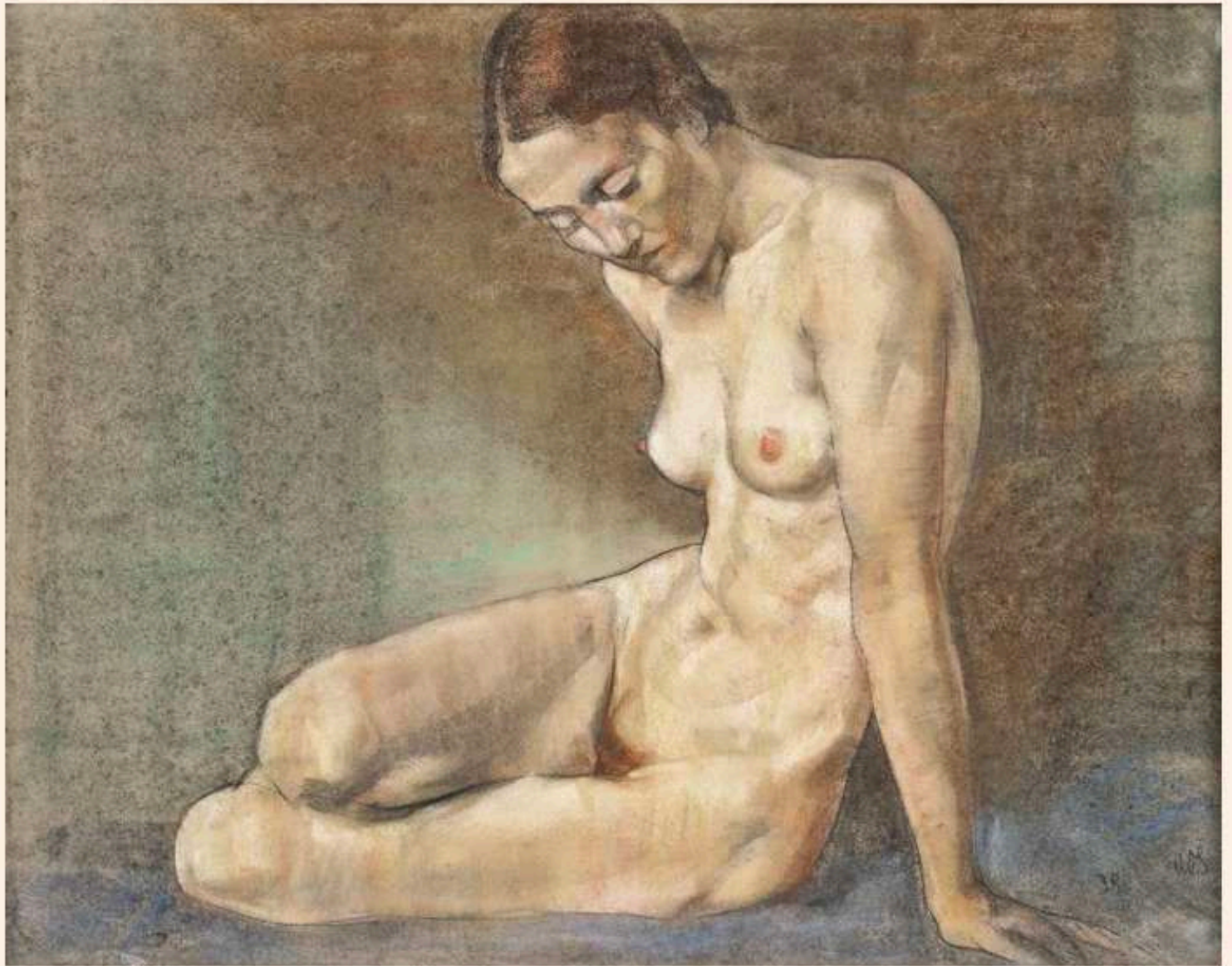


Bette Davis, 1933, at The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities © Courtesy of The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, Fine Art & Unnatural History

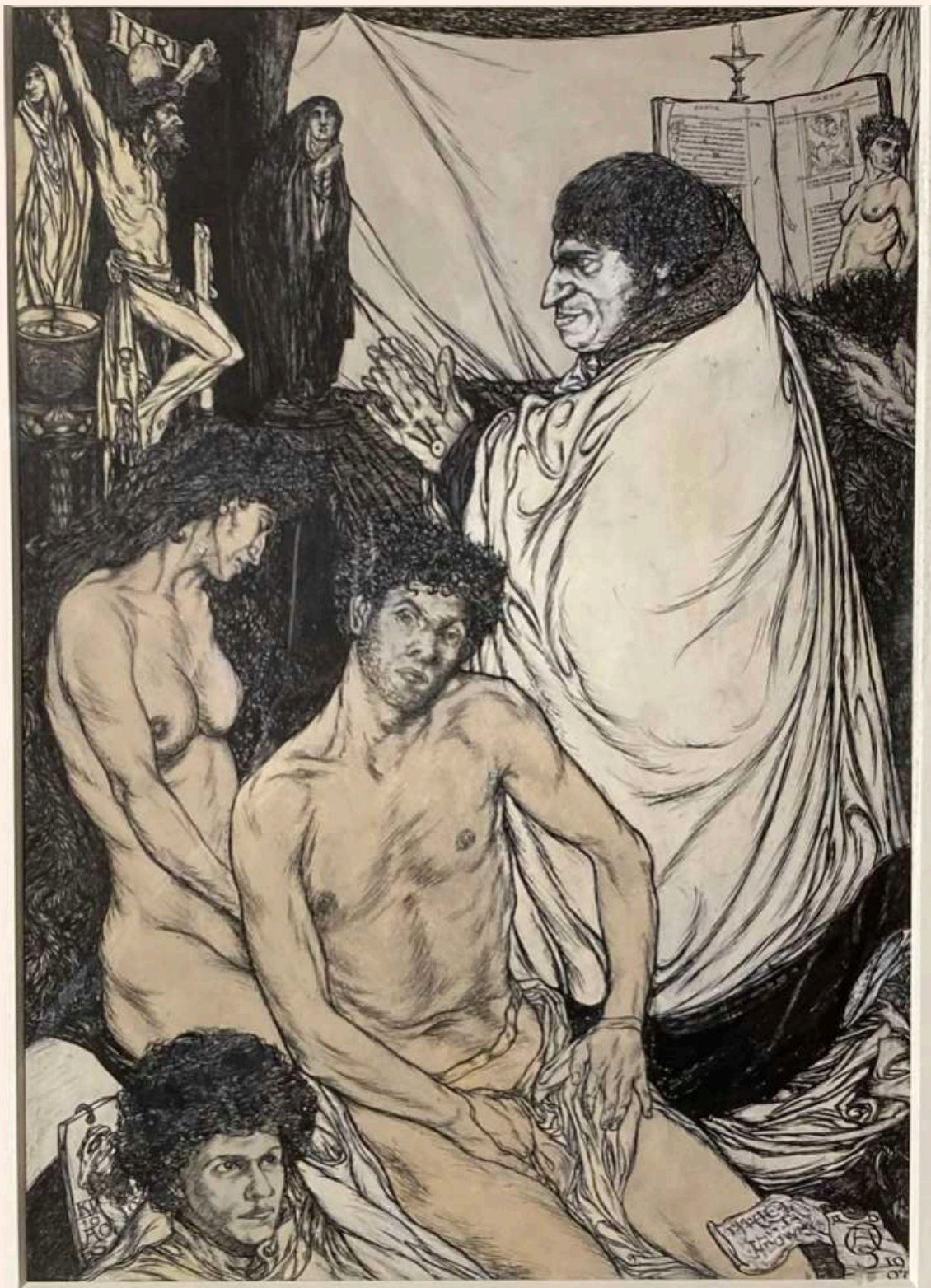
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**Hitler invited Spare to paint his portrait. Spare refused**

In the main, Spare’s works remain relatively accessible. This July, a series of chalk and pencil pieces went for between £1,920 and £4,096 each at Bonhams, and most works at the house’s regular Modern British and Irish Art sales (and their counterparts at Christie’s) reach between £3,000 and £10,000. Most sales, however, are carried out through a closed circle of collectors who connect via The Austin Osman Spare Society on Facebook, although pieces also appear at niche galleries, including Henry Boxer in Richmond, The Gallery of Everything in London, and Ottocento in Petworth.

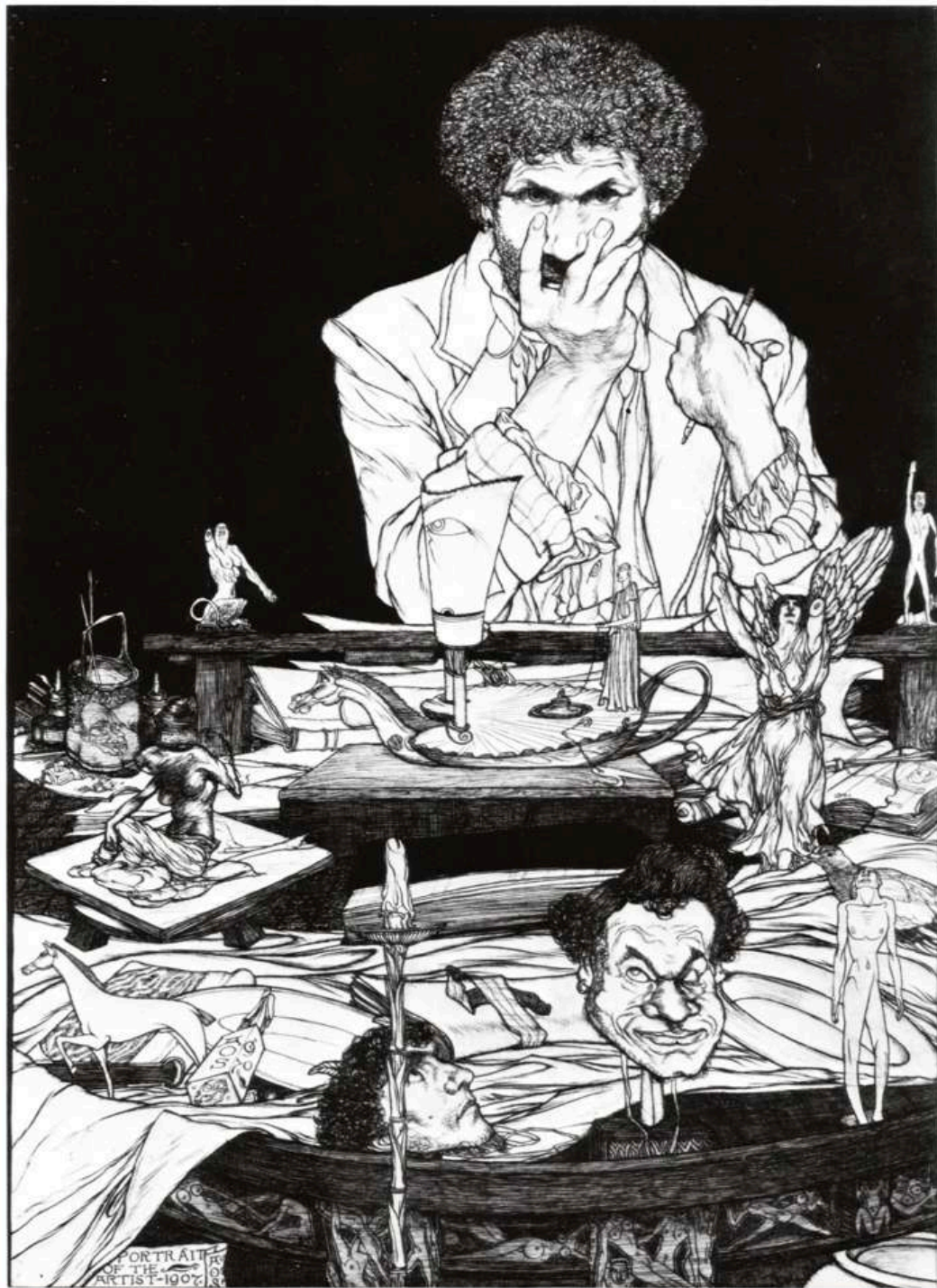


Nude, Charlotte Newman, 1938, sold at Christie's for £43,750 © Christie's Images Limited 2023



Sacred & Profane, 1907, at Henry Boxer Gallery © Henry Boxer Gallery

There are many strands to the Spare story. There are the early witchy illustrations (a copy of the introduction from *A Book of Satyrs* from 1906 sold in 2014 for £13,750); and the anamorphic images of the likes of Joan Crawford, distorted as if viewed from the front row of a cinema with an extremely large screen. “His later portraits have attracted strong interest in recent years,” says Pippa Jacomb, head of day sale for modern British and Irish art at Christie’s. “They include his depictions of film stars, which he referred to as his ‘sidereal’ portraits, and his realist portrayals of ordinary people from London, which demonstrate his highly skilled draughtsmanship.”



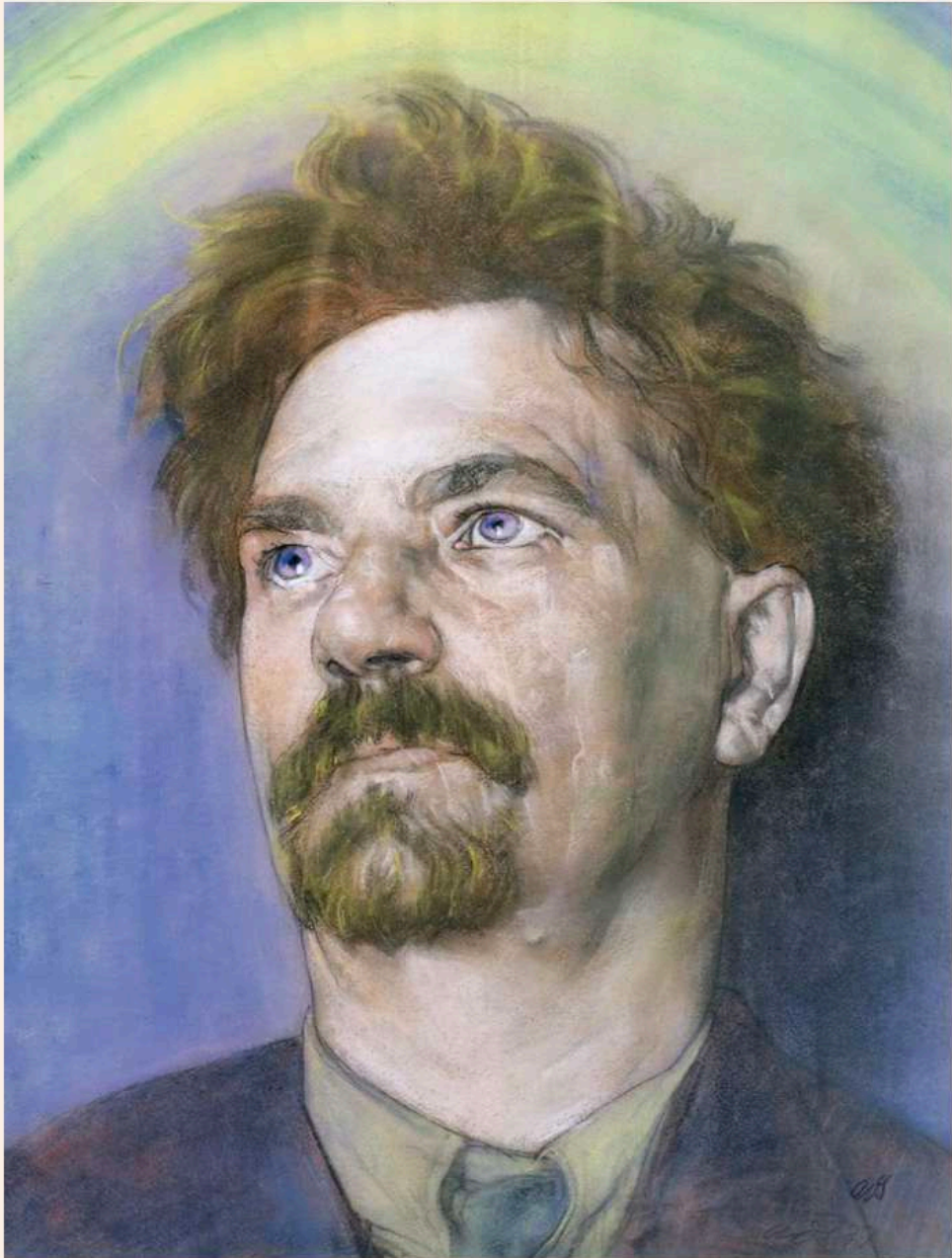
Portrait of the Artist, 1907 © Austin Osman Spare (Revised and Expanded) – The Life and Legend of London's Lost Artist, by Phil Baker

Tragically, hundreds of his pictures of working-class Cockneys were destroyed during the Blitz in 1941, after a bomb hit his studio, also leaving him in dire straits. But the bulk of his “sidereal” work survives. Artist Shezad Dawood has several pieces: “I feel there is something compelling about them that actually gets under the skin of reality and appearance – perhaps the very substrate of glamour and magic.”

While Spare died in obscurity in 1956 there's a growing obsession with his work. [Strange Attractor Press](#), which published Baker's biography on Spare, was recently involved in a [Kickstarter campaign](#), raising more than £140,000 to produce the artist's tarot deck (£25, available this October).



Faun and Satyr, 1947 © Courtesy of The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities, Fine Art and Unnatural History



Self Portrait: Dream Content, 1937 © Bridgeman Images



Spare's art is curiously absent from most major institutions. The National Portrait Gallery has just one work catalogued. The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities in Hackney is one of the few places you can see a permanent display of pieces. Limited edition prints are available to buy (from £30).

Wynd likens his own collecting of Spare to an addiction. "The self-portraits from the '30s are extraordinary," he says. "And then you go back to the start of the 20th century with those strange, grotesque, surreal drawings, then forward to the film stars who make him, effectively, the first British pop artist."

#### WHERE TO BUY

**Austin Osman Spare Prints** [austinosmanspareprints.com](http://austinosmanspareprints.com)

**Bonhams** [bonhams.com](http://bonhams.com)

**Christie's** [christies.com](http://christies.com)

**The Gallery of Everything** [gallevery.com](http://gallevery.com)

**Henry Boxer** [outsiderart.co.uk](http://outsiderart.co.uk)

**Ottocento** [ottocento.co.uk](http://ottocento.co.uk)

#### WHAT TO READ

***Austin Osman Spare (Revised and Expanded) - The Life and Legend of London's Lost Artist***

by Phil Baker (Strange Attractor)

***Lost Envoy - The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare*** by Jonathan Allen (Strange Attractor). To

be reprinted alongside the tarot deck this autumn

#### WHERE TO SEE

**The Viktor Wynd Museum of Curiosities** 11 Mare Street, London E8 4RP,

[thelasttuesdaysociety.org](http://thelasttuesdaysociety.org)