Lucian Freud's death marks the end of an era

It was not just his skill as a painter that marked out Lucian Freud, but his surprisingly unfashionable focus on the human form.

It was shortly after being appointed as director of the National Portrait Gallery, in the early Nineties, that I had my first real encounter with Lucian Freud's work. I had mentioned in an article – rather rashly, in retrospect – that I regretted that the work of a painter of such extraordinary talent was not better represented in the gallery's collection. I was immediately contacted by Simon Dickinson, the Jermyn Street dealer, who said that, as it happened, he had in stock a Freud portrait of John Craxton, painted in 1946.

It was incredibly beautiful – painted in his early quattrocento style, it depicted Craxton, a close friend, large-eyed and mustachioed, who had lived with Freud in St John's Wood during the Second World War. Unfortunately, the gallery had recently acquired one of Craxton's self-portraits, so it was always going to be hard to justify acquiring another image of him, however beautiful. But it remains one of my greatest regrets that we didn't.

By that time, Freud was already regarded by nearly everyone – except possibly himself – as Britain's greatest living artist. Yet he was still surprisingly sensitive to the fact that, early in his career, his work hadn't been much collected by the art world's great institutions (including the National Portrait Gallery). Indeed, it is hard now to remember that there was a long period during the Sixties when his work was not nearly so highly regarded, and that his dominance only emerged in the mid-Seventies, following an exhibition at the Hayward Gallery.

I used to run into Freud every so often at the Wolseley, where he was a regular, and at Clarke's, the restaurant in Kensington Church Street where he is said to have eaten nearly every day. I admired him immensely – tall, thin, angular, always very faintly unshaven and slightly raffish, normally with a loose neck-scarf. And his death last week has brought home just how unusual his career was, and how the art world changed during the course of it.

At the time that Freud was born, it was perfectly natural for someone of his class to devote themselves to drawing and painting. When he was at school at Bryanston, he joined the oil painting club – an organisation which it's hard to believe would exist today. He briefly attended the Central School of Art in Holborn (soon to move to King's Cross), before studying painting at the East Anglian School of Drawing and Painting, which had been established in Dedham in Essex by Cedric Morris and Arthur Lett-Haines.

Living in London during the Second World War, Freud, along with Craxton, took lodgings with Peter Watson, a wealthy collector whose family had made a fortune in margarine, and was able to attend life classes at Goldsmith's College. In 1944, when he was still only 21, he held his first exhibition, at the Lefevre Gallery. It was reviewed by Michael Ayrton, who complained: "The human form defeats him because he does not observe it as he does dead birds."

In fact, it was precisely the observation of the human form that obsessed Freud over the next 67 years – even if it may sometimes be felt that he depicted it with the descriptive dispassion of a dead bird. Yet now that he is gone, it is as though the figurative tradition has gone with him. There are others still

alive who maintain it, but none have remotely the same kudos as Freud, Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff, the three friends who were lumped together, somewhat factitiously, as the “School of London” in the early Eighties.

Some other names do spring to mind – John Wonnacott is a figurative painter who is able to handle portraiture with confidence. And there are a small number of younger artists who carry on the tradition, such as James Lloyd, whose work has recently been shown in Germany, and Stuart Pearson Wright, whose early work, painted on small blocks of wood, had some of the same observational qualities as the work of the young Freud.

But it is hard to argue that these artists are part of the mainstream. Pearson Wright’s work, for example, was dismissed by his tutors at the Slade as mere illustration, as if skill in painting was meretricious and to be distrusted. Then there is Leonard McComb, the last surviving member of the Royal Academy to have been elected as a draughtsman. I am a great admirer of his work. But when he was Keeper of the Royal Academy Schools, and tried to maintain the requirement to learn life drawing, the students rebelled, regarding it as unnecessary. Only the Prince of Wales’s drawing school in Shoreditch keeps alive the idea, which for hundreds of years was central to the practice of art, that to be an artist, it is essential to learn to draw the human figure.

The death of Freud, then, marks the end of an era: not just the death of a great artist, who had an extraordinary career in the single-minded pursuit of the observation of human form; but the death of the idea that it was felt to be perfectly natural for an artist to concentrate day after day, right up until the time of his death, on the demanding task of portraiture, requiring his models to make themselves available for long hours of sittings, sometimes far into the night. Whether a young girl or fat lady sprawled on a couch, or the Duke of Devonshire, or even the Queen, his subjects were all subjected to the same merciless, and sometimes faintly cruel, gaze.

I remember one Royal Academician telling me how pleased he was that our Summer Exhibition no longer contains a single portrait. It is not quite true this year: there are three quick observational oil sketches by Humphrey Ocean (including one of my son). But I am not totally convinced it is a good thing that we have so completely eradicated the ancient expectation that one of the tasks of art should be the depiction – and, in Freud’s case, the dissection – of the human form.

The Sunday Telegraph, 23 Jul 2011