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A most interesting oil painting on wooden panel has recently been acquired by John Bennett and one which, based on his experience of the art world for approaching forty years, is almost unique.

It depicts a group of people in a room, in positions of rapt attention, gathered round an old valve radio. Apart from the interest of this now outdated means of broadcasting, the style of dress and hairstyles of the women present which are clearly 1940s, there is little to mark it out from other finely painted interior genre scenes of the period. It is not until one sees the title: "Iciâ€¦Londres" and looks closely at the labels in French attached to the back of the painting, that one can appreciate that there is something a lot more interesting going on.

On a piece of paper browning with age and clearly torn from an exercise book there is a positional key of the dramatis personae and beneath that is written: "During the occupation, the painter, 3 times a war volunteer, and his family, would gather in the evening with a few friends and get out the radio from its hiding place to listen to the good and dear sound of the BBC, a source of inexhaustible courage.

The painter in question is Jose Storie, a Belgian artist who was born in Bruges in 1899 and was known for the skilful depiction of figures, in particular ballerinas and nudes, portraits and still-lifes, initially in the academic style. However, as his career evolved, he became more fluid, displaying a subtle grace showing his reverence for great painters such as Manet, Velasquez and the major Impressionists.

This painting is highly atmospheric with the characters captured in tense, concentrated poses with strong light and shade and centred round the glowing dial of the radio. Present are the chief of the group, J van Zuglen, Joseph Verhenneman an artist and head of the atelier where Josie Storie trained, C Legenhoeck a picture restorer, J Gits political prisoner adviser for Paul van Zeeland, the Belgian Minister of Foreign Affairs and Mme van Belle. Also depicted are the artist's wife shown centrally and prominently lit and to the left side, the artist's father - of whom Storie has written on the label: "asks if it is the end of the Second World War". Just discernible in the shadows to right of the painting, but skilfully attracting the viewer's gaze by the light gleaming on a single pearl earring, is the artist's mother, "Praying in the fireplace for the end of the war and victory for the allies.

The passage of time means that one can look back at that period and only see historical facts, details of military campaigns won and lost and it can be hard to appreciate the effects and experiences at a human level. The danger that this group of people put themselves in just to listen to the BBC broadcast and the instillation of hope that the voice of Britain, a beacon of hope and freedom in a continent of oppression, gave to these people and thousands like them, is heart warming. The artist almost certainly made a rapid sketch at the time in 1945 and produced the finished painting after the war. It was exhibited first at Le Salon Quadriennal in Brussels in 1948 and then at the Royal Academy in London in 1953. The RA exhibition label on the back reads: "Iciâ€¦Londres. Il ecoute des messages personnel pendant la guerre"

John Bennett is probably best known for sporting, marine and still life paintings from the 17th to 19th centuries rather than genre subjects. However this painting, apart from the technical ability of the artist which is clearly evident, is more than just a well-executed painting; it is a historical document. He will be exhibiting it for the first time at the Olympia Fine Art Fair in June but on the Turner Bennett stand, a joint venture between himself and Nigel Turner of Los Angeles Fine Art Gallery

where they show interesting and unusual Modernist paintings from 1920 to 1970.

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John Bennett - About Author:
a John Bennett â€“ We are London based art dealer and have 30 years experience of selling oil paintings and decorative oil paintings. Our Paintings mainly include English paintings, British paintings and European paintings.

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