



A Free Course on the History of Western Art

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- Welcome. I have finished the History of Western Art but I had some lectures that I gave many years ago and I thought I could use AI systems to convert them to my new design, improve the text and use a clone of my voice to give them.

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52-08a BRITISH FIGURATIVE ART (PART 1): 1900-1950

DR. LAURENCE SHAFE

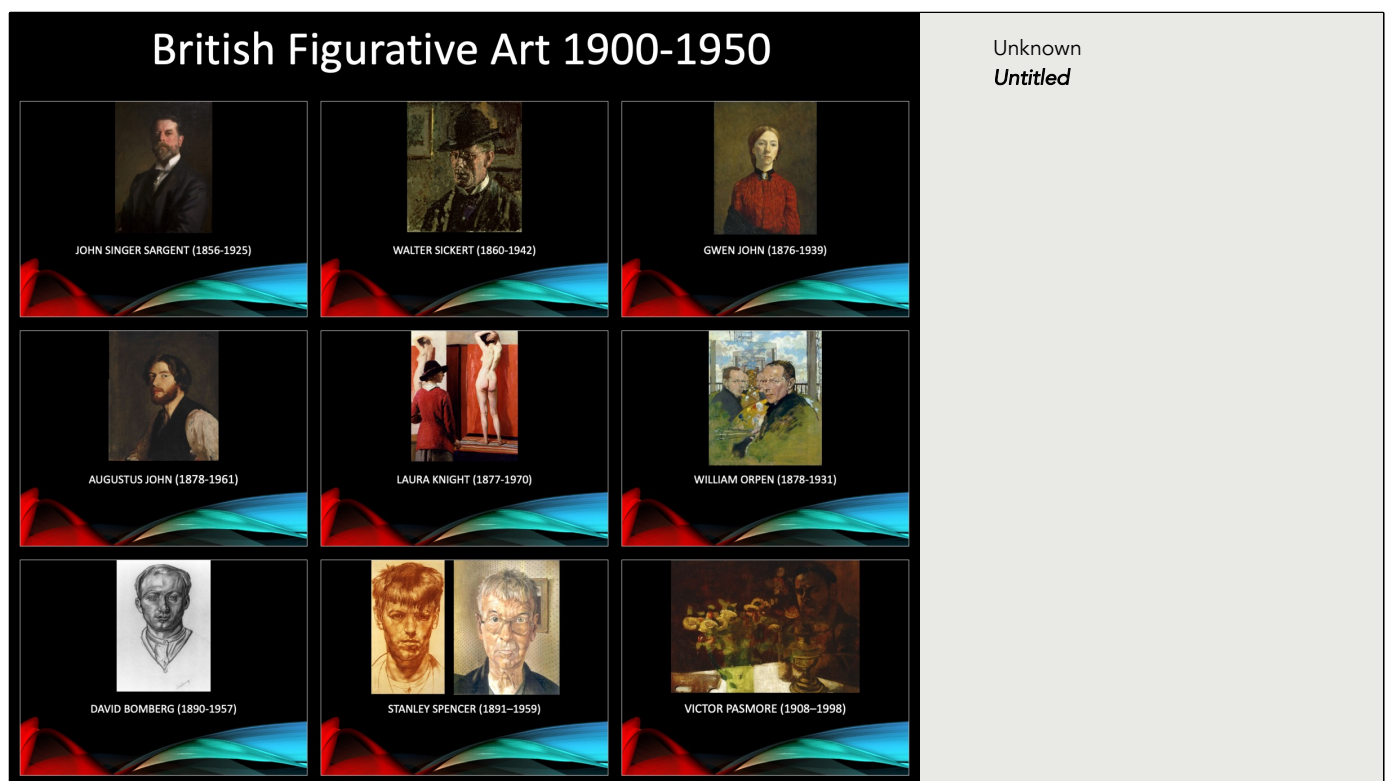
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John Singer Sargent
***Madame X (Madame
Pierre Gautreau)***
1884
Metropolitan Museum
of Art, New York



British figurative painting is not a retreat from modernism — it is the central tradition of British art across the twentieth century. This talk traces that tradition through nine artists: Sargent, Sickert, Gwen John, Augustus John, Laura Knight, Orpen, Bomberg, Spencer, and Pasmore. Together they span portraiture, war, social upheaval, and one of the most dramatic individual transformations in British art history — from committed figurative painter to abstract sculptor.



British Figurative Art 1900-1950

The Fry Art Gallery's artists remind us that figurative painting is not a provincial retreat from modernism but the central tradition of British art. Selecting from it means leaving out dozens of equally compelling figures, and for this talk nine artists have been chosen to trace that tradition across roughly a century. This is Part 1 and covers **John Singer Sargent**, American-born but London-based for most of his working life, became the defining portrait painter of the Edwardian era. **Walter Sickert**, shaped by both Whistler and Degas, became the most influential painter's painter of his generation. **Gwen John** worked in quiet isolation in Paris; her brother **Augustus John** famously conceded she was the greater artist. Augustus himself was the glamorous face of society portraiture in Edwardian Britain. And finally **Laura Knight** matched that popularity with formidable staying power, becoming the first woman elected to the **Royal Academy** since its foundation in **1768**. Part 2 covers **William Orpen**, Irish-born and London-trained, was the most prolific official artist on the Western Front. **David Bomberg**, one of the Whitechapel Boys and a Slade-trained radical, fell from favour

and was only seriously reassessed decades after his death. **Stanley Spencer**, discussed four weeks ago, is included here to keep his vision in view. Finally, **Victor Pasmore** bridges our story: a committed figurative painter who crossed entirely into abstraction.

Notes

The great tradition of British art is figurative painting and it has therefore been difficult to select a few artists. I have chosen nine artists:

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), an American artist who worked in Britain and became the leading portrait painter of his generation.

Walter Sickert (1860-1942), a painter's painter and one of the most influential British artists of the twentieth century.

Gwen John (1876-1939). Gwen John, was an intense and solitary artist who was described by her brother Augustus John as the better artist.

Augustus John (1878-1961) Augustus John was one of the most popular society portrait artists at the beginning of the twentieth century.

Laura Knight (1877-1970) Knight was a painter in the figurative, realist tradition who was among the most successful and popular painters in Britain. In 1929 she was created a Dame, and in 1936 became the first woman elected to the Royal Academy since its foundation in 1768.

William Orpen (1878-1931) an Irish artist who worked mainly in London.

William Orpen was a fine draughtsman and a popular, commercially successful, painter of portraits for the well-to-do in Edwardian society. During the First World War, he was the most prolific of the official artists sent by Britain to the Western Front and as a Major he was allowed to stay longer. He donated most of this work to the British government.

David Bomberg (1890-1957) was an English painter, and one of the Whitechapel Boys. Bomberg was one of the most audacious of the exceptional generation of artists who studied at the Slade School of Art. He fell out of favour and has only recently been re-evaluated.

Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) is one of the great early figurative artists in Britain and his life was covered four weeks ago. I have included him here to remind you of his work.

Victor Pasmore (1908-1998), who went from figurative to abstract and so creates a link to next term's artists.

A self-portrait of John Singer Sargent, showing a man with a full, dark beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit and a white shirt with a dark bow tie. He is looking slightly to the left of the viewer. The background is dark and indistinct.

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)
Self-Portrait
1906
70 × 53 cm
Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), Self-Portrait, 1906, 70 × 53 cm, Uffizi Gallery, Florence, Italy

Nine artists, then, spanning roughly a century — and we begin at the threshold of that period with **John Singer Sargent**, whose 1906 self-portrait opens the story. Sargent was born in **Florence** in **1856** to American parents who spent their lives moving through Europe — Paris, Rome, Florence, the German cities, Switzerland. He had no formal schooling, yet grew up fluent in four languages and deeply versed in music and literature. The biographer Stanley Olsen described the young Sargent as wilful, curious, and determined after his mother, yet shy, generous, and modest after his father — a productive tension that runs straight through his career. A contemporary put it memorably: he was "an American born in Italy, educated in France, who looks like a German, speaks like an Englishman, and paints like a Spaniard." That last clause points to his reverence for **Velázquez**, the touchstone of his entire technique. Between **1886** and **1907** he produced around 350 commissioned portraits before declaring an end to what he called "a pimp's profession." The Uffizi self-portrait was the

final obligation — and it is telling that he hides his hands entirely, suppressing every sign that he is a painter. Relief, for Sargent, meant escaping the sitter: "Painting a portrait would be quite amusing," he said, "if one were not forced to talk while working."

Notes

I am dealing with twentieth century artists and so John Singer Sargent almost did not make it. However, he was the leading portrait painter in late Victorian and Edwardian England and so I thought he would provide a good introduction to the fifty year period 1900-1950. I start with a self-portrait he painted in 1906...

He travelled extensively as a child-Paris, Germany, Italy, Switzerland and had no formal education but was highly literate. He was described as 'an American born in Italy, educated in France, who looks like a German, speaks like an Englishman and paints like a Spaniard.' The last point refers to his veneration for Velazquez.

Sargent hated his portrait painted. He painted 150 portraits of his artist friends but almost never allowed his own portrait to be painted although he did permit photographs. There are three exceptions which he painted from necessity. This painting was requested by the Uffizi gallery in Florence. The practice of British artists sending their portrait to the Uffizi was revived in middle of the nineteenth century when the Uffizi director requested Lord Leighton, President of the Royal Academy, to send a portrait. He recommended George Frederic Watts and John Everett Millais also send portraits. This portrait by Sargent is modest and serious and he hides any evidence that he is a painter, even his hands are hidden.

Between 1886 and 1907 Sargent painted 350 portraits when he declared an end to this 'pimp's profession' by completing this self-portrait that he owed the Uffizi. Relieved, he stated, "Painting a portrait would be quite amusing if one were not forced to talk while working...What a nuisance having to entertain the sitter and to look happy when one feels wretched."

Sargent was a shy and private man and some have seen his famous painting, *Carnation, Lily, Lily, Rose* as a form of self-portrait with himself replaced by the two girls.

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)

His father was an eye surgeon but after his older sister dies at the age of two his mother suffered a breakdown and they spent the rest of their lives travelling. They were based in Paris but travelled to Germany, Italy and Switzerland. They stopped in Florence, where Sargent was born in 1856. His parents lived modestly on a small inheritance and avoided society. Although he had no formal education he grew up to be a highly literate and cosmopolitan young man, accomplished in art, music, and literature. He was fluent in English, French, Italian, and German. At seventeen, Sargent was described by Stanley Olsen in his book *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait*, 1986 as 'wilful, curious, determined and strong' (after his mother) yet 'shy, generous, and modest' (after his father).

John Singer Sargent (1856-1925)
**Madame X (Madame Pierre
Gautreau)**

1884

Metropolitan Museum of Art, New
York



John Singer Sargent (1856-1925), *Madame X (Madame Pierre Gautreau)*, 1884, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

That escape from portraiture Sargent craved was still years away in **1884**, when he submitted **Madame X** to the **Paris Salon** — the work he later called "the best thing I have ever done." The sitter was **Virginie Gautreau**, an American-born socialite living in Paris, and crucially, she did not commission the portrait. Sargent pursued her, writing to their mutual friend Ben del Castillo: "I have a great desire to paint her portrait and have reason to think she would allow it and is waiting for someone to propose this homage to her beauty — you might tell her that I am a man of prodigious talent." She was celebrated for her pale, powdered skin — lavender tinted, deliberately theatrical — her henna-dyed hair, and an hourglass silhouette. Sargent painted her with one shoulder strap slipping down, and the Salon erupted. Critics called it a flagrant insufficiency of clothing; Virginie's mother demanded the work be withdrawn. Sargent repainted the strap in its proper position, but the damage was done in France. Ironically, the scandal accelerated his move to **London**, where the portrait's audacity read as sophistication.

When he sold it to the **Metropolitan Museum** in **1916**, the title became simply Madame X — her identity officially erased, her notoriety permanent.

Notes

The intention was to create a positive sensation in Paris but the picture went too far and shocked and scandalised the public. However, Sargent later wrote: 'I suppose it is the best thing I have ever done'.

There are mixed views of Madame Pierre Gautreau from 'stopped traffic in the street' to poorly educated and boorish.

Madame X

Sargent and Madame Pierre Gautreau (1859-1915) collaborated on this portrait in order to create a sensation at the Paris Salon of 1884. She did not commission it but Sargent pursued her unlike most of his clients. Sargent wrote to a mutual friend:

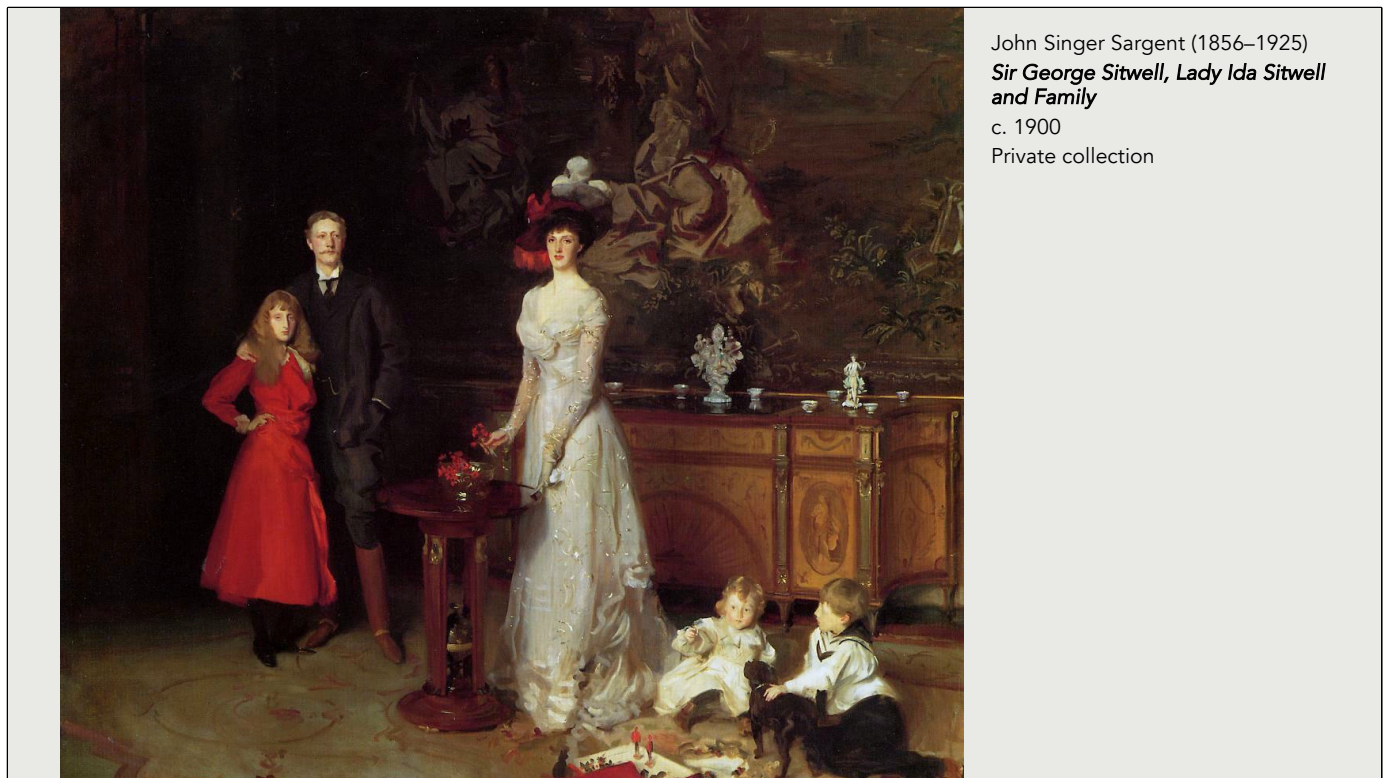
I have a great desire to paint her portrait and have reason to think she would allow it and is waiting for someone to propose this homage to her beauty.
...you might tell her that I am a man of prodigious talent.

She moved to France when she was eight and was later introduced to French high society. She became one of Paris's conspicuous beauties, as she was a pale-skinned brunette with fine features and an hourglass figure. She used lavender-coloured face and body powder to enhance her complexion, to dye her hair with henna, and to color her eyebrows.

The original portrait had one shoulder strap hanging down and people were shocked and scandalized. It was described as a 'flagrant insufficiency' of clothing. Although the painting failed to establish as a society artist in France it achieved its objective in England and America. When he sold it to the Metropolitan Museum of Art Sargent wrote to the director, 'I suppose it is the best thing I have ever done'.

Most writers believe she attracted much admiration due to her elegance and style and she married Pierre Gautreau, a French banker and shipping magnate and she was rumoured to have had numerous affairs. Her beauty is

described as 'having stopped traffic in the street'. However, some research indicates all this was the creation of later writers and she was rarely mentioned in society pages until the scandal of the public portrait and no affairs are known to have taken place. She has been described as poorly educated, boorish, vapid and naïve and she fell into obscurity after the scandal.



John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)
*Sir George Sitwell, Lady Ida Sitwell
 and Family*
 c. 1900
 Private collection

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), *Sir George Sitwell, Lady Ida Sitwell and Family*, c. 1900, Private collection

The scandal that drove Sargent to London ultimately secured his place at the heart of British aristocratic life — and few commissions illustrate that more vividly than the **Sitwell family portrait** of **1900**. Sir George Sitwell hired Sargent to do what grand patrons have always done: project a dynasty. The painting was posed in Sargent's **Chelsea** studio using Sitwell heirlooms hauled down from **Renishaw Hall**, the family's Derbyshire seat built in **1625**. Sir George, who rarely rode, wore polished riding boots to signal sporting ancestry; Lady Ida arranged flowers she would never actually have touched — that was the head gardener's work. When it was shown at the **Royal Academy**, **Sergei Diaghilev** was among those who admired it. The three Sitwell children in that portrait — **Edith**, **Osbert**, and **Sacheverell** — grew into one of London's most provocative cultural cliques, active roughly **1916 to 1930** and sometimes mentioned in the same breath as the Bloomsbury group. All three reacted sharply against their cold, eccentric parents. Edith became a poet and critic of real technical rigour, despite being

routinely dismissed as a poseur. Osbert wrote the libretto for **William Walton's** *Belshazzar's Feast*. Sacheverell became an authority on baroque architecture and published serious studies of Mozart, Liszt, and Scarlatti.

Notes

The Sitwells and the Arts of the 1920s and 1930s (1994) published by National Portrait Gallery,

"In the spring of 1900 Sir George [Sitwell] commissioned John Singer Sargent to paint a family group, and therefore immortalise the great patron, his beautiful aristocratic wife and the dynasty, represented by his three children. After exhibition at the Royal Academy where it was admired by Sergei Diaghliiev among others, the painting was intended to be hung at Renishaw [Hall] as a companion to the Copley portrait. The symbolism was there for all to see: Sir George (who seldom rode) wore polished riding boots, an illusion to his sporting ancestry, while Lady Ida was the picture of the dutiful wife, elegantly arranging flowers in a silver bowl (something she would never have done; at Renishaw as in all grand houses the flowers were arranged by the head gardener). The family was posed against carefully chosen Sitwell heirlooms brought down from Renishaw to the artist's Chelsea studio. As the elegant projection of an image, the painting was a triumph - the dominant father, his hand resting protectively on his daughter's shoulder, the beautiful wife absorbed in her domestic task, the heir and his brother playing contentedly - but as a representation of a happy family it was pure fantasy."

The Sitwells (Edith, Osbert and Sacheverell) were these three siblings who formed a literary and artistic clique in London between 1916 and 1930 that some thought rivalled the Bloomsbury group.

All three reacted badly to their unloving, eccentric parents and Edith lived much of her life with her governess. Edith was a poet and critic who never married, but became passionately attached to the gay Russian painter Pavel Tchelitchev, and her home was always open to London's poetic circle. With her dramatic style and exotic costumes, she was sometimes labelled a poseur, but her work was praised for its solid technique and painstaking craftsmanship.

Osbert was a writer who served in the trenches in WWI. He was a friend of William Walton although they later fell out and Osbert wrote the libretto for Walton's Belshazzar's Feast. In the mid-1920s he met David Horner who was

his lover and companion for most of his life.

Sacheverell (pronounced 'Sir-cheverel') was a writer as well as an art and music critic. He wrote books on Mozart, Liszt and Scarlatti as well as on architecture, particularly the baroque. In WWI he served with the Grenadier Guards. He married a Canadian woman and had two sons.

The family home was Renishaw Hall (built 1625) near Eckington in Derbyshire.

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)
Lady Helen Vincent in Venice
1904
Birmingham Museum of Art,
Alabama



John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), *Lady Helen Vincent in Venice*, 1904,
Birmingham Museum of Art, Alabama

The Sitwell children grew up in a world where Sargent's portraits defined social distinction — and the subject of this next painting belonged to exactly that world. **Helen Vincent**, later **Viscountess D'Abernon**, was born **Helen Duncombe** in **1866** and was celebrated across London society as, in the words of one contemporary, "the most resplendent figure" of her age — outstanding in beauty, intelligence, and charm. Her husband **Sir Edgar Vincent** served as governor of the **Imperial Ottoman Bank** in Constantinople, giving Helen a cosmopolitan stage few British hostesses could match. She moved at the centre of **the Souls**, the intellectually ambitious social circle that gathered around figures including **Arthur Balfour**, who would become Conservative Prime Minister in **1902**, the novelist **Edith Wharton**, and **Henry James**. It was a group that demanded wit as well as rank. **Sargent** painted her during a visit to **Venice in 1904**, producing one of his most luminous society portraits. Yet Helen was more than a subject for painters. During the First World War she

trained as a nurse anaesthetist and personally treated thousands of patients — a detail that resists any easy reduction of her life to the decorative role her portraits might suggest.

Notes

Lady Helen and her sister were renowned beauties in their circle. Helen Duncombe married Sir Edgar Vincent then a governor of the Imperial Ottoman Bank in Constantinople. Lady Helen, in that period, was "the most celebrated hostess of her age" and was 'by reason of her outstanding beauty, intelligence and charm, one of the most resplendent figures.'"

She was part of an intellectual circle known as 'the Souls' and it included Arthur Balfour, Edith Wharton and Henry James. In 1904, on a visit to Venice, Sargent painted this portrait.

During the war she trained as a nurse anaesthetist and treated thousands of patients.

Notes

Helen Venetia Vincent, Viscountess D'Abernon (née Duncombe) (1866–1954) was a British noblewoman, socialite and diarist.

Edith Wharton (née Jones; 1862–1937) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning American novelist, short story writer, and designer. She was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature in 1927, 1928 and 1930.

Arthur Balfour (1848-1930) was Conservative Prime Minister from July 1902 to December 1905.

Henry James (1843-1916) was an American-born British writer who is regarded as one of the key figures of 19th-century literary realism. He was the son of Henry James, Sr. and the brother of philosopher and psychologist William James and diarist Alice James.



John Singer Sargent (1856–1925)
Mrs. Waldorf Astor
1908-9
149.9 x 99 cm
The Athenaeum

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), Mrs. Waldorf Astor, 1908-9, 149.9 x 99 cm, The Athenaeum

From **1907**, Sargent closed his portrait studio, exhausted — he called commissioned portraiture "a pimp's profession" — and retreated largely into landscape and architectural watercolour. Yet certain subjects pulled him back, and **Nancy Astor** was one of them. Born **Nancy Witcher Langhorne** in Virginia in **1879**, she came to England, married **Waldorf Astor**, and when he was elevated to the peerage and moved to the House of Lords, she stood for his former seat. In **1919** she won it, becoming the first woman to take her seat as a **Member of Parliament** in the House of Commons — a distinction that places her at the hinge of modern British political history. She was a forceful, sometimes bewildering figure. On her own character she was unflinching: "My vigour, vitality, and cheek repel me. I am the kind of woman I would run away from." She campaigned for women's suffrage, state healthcare, equal parental guardianship, and the reform of the treatment of young offenders. She and Waldorf made their country house **Cliveden** — pronounced *cliv-den* — the centre of a

celebrated social and political circle through the **1920s** and **1930s**, one of the great gathering points of interwar British life.

Notes

From 1907 he closed his portrait studio and painted mostly landscapes and architecture but there were some exceptions.

Nancy Witcher Langhorne Astor, Viscountess Astor (1879–1964) was an American-born English socialite who made a second marriage to Waldorf Astor as a young woman in England. After he succeeded to the peerage and entered the House of Lords, she entered politics, in 1919 winning his former seat in Plymouth and becoming the first woman to sit as a Member of Parliament in the House of Commons.

Nancy Astor was a teetotaler, feminist, an advocate of votes for women at 21, improved treatment of young offenders, equal guardianship for mothers and fathers, state health care and town planning. She said, "My vigour, vitality, and cheek repel me. I am the kind of woman I would run away from."

She created the social sect at their country home of Cliveden (pronounced 'clif-den', with 'i' as in 'lid' and 'f' as in 'have') in the 1920s and 30s.

Notes

Later, during the 1960s, Cliveden was the setting for the infamous Profumo Affair (which led to the collapse of the Conservative government in 1964). During the 1970s, it was occupied by Stanford University, which used it as an overseas campus. Today it is owned by the National Trust and leased as a five-star hotel.



John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), **Gassed**, c. March 1919, 231 × 611 cm, Imperial War Museum, London

John Singer Sargent (1856–1925), **Gassed**, c. March 1919, 231 × 611 cm, Imperial War Museum, London

Sargent's war commission produced what many consider the defining image of his final decade. **Gassed**, completed in **1919**, shows a long file of blinded soldiers, hands on each other's shoulders, picking their way across a duckboard at **Le Bac-du-Sud** near Arras. The canvas is enormous — nearly six metres wide — and its effect is cumulative rather than dramatic. There is no heroism on display, only exhaustion and temporary blindness from a mustard gas attack. The **Imperial War Museum**, which holds the painting, has long recognised it as one of the most affecting British works to emerge from the **Great War**. By the time Sargent returned from his American stay in **1918**, critics had largely written him off as a relic. Modernists saw him as irrelevant against the backdrop of **Cubism** and **Futurism**, and Sargent accepted the verdict without bitterness, maintaining his admiration for **Ingres**, **Raphael**, and **El Greco**. He declined a knighthood in **1907**, retaining his American citizenship to the end. He died in his sleep of a heart attack in **1925**, the same year he completed his final oil portrait, of **Grace**

Curzon, Marchioness Curzon of Kedleston. His estate sale of two hundred and thirty-seven works raised a remarkable **£175,000**.

Notes

In 1907, aged 51, Sargent officially closed his studio. His fame was still considerable and museums eagerly bought his works. That year he declined a knighthood and decided instead to keep his American citizenship. He made numerous visits to the United States in the last decade of his life, including a stay of two full years from 1915 to 1917. By 1917 most critics consigned him to the masters of the past and modernists considered completely out of touch with the latest trends including Cubism and Futurism. Sargent accepted the criticism but said that he still admired Ingres, Raphael and El Greco.

Upon his return to England in 1918 after a visit to the United States, Sargent was commissioned as a war artist by the British Ministry of Information. In his large painting *Gassed* and in many watercolours, he depicted scenes from the Great War.

In 1925, soon before he died, Sargent painted his last oil portrait, *Grace Curzon, Marchioness Curzon of Kedleston*.

Notes

Sargent is often viewed as a conventional figurative artist following a long tradition but he is a complex personality, quiet and she and a very private person. A portrait by Sargent was never flattering and if you were brave enough to commission one you took 'your face in your hands'. Recent research suggests he was a homosexual but there is a danger in interpreting his work in a simplistic way in the light of this. It is unfortunate that this had to be hidden during his lifetime but his male nudes were not destroyed and are now available online at the Fogg Gallery, Harvard.

He died in his sleep of a heart attack. His probate estate was £25,000 but his estate sale of 237 works raised £175,000. He is buried at Brookwood Cemetery, Woking, Surrey.

References

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gassed_\(painting\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gassed_(painting))

<http://www.harvardartmuseums.org/art/307680>

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Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942)
The Juvenile Lead (Self-Portrait)
1907
45.8 x 51 cm
Southampton City Art Gallery,
Southampton

Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942), *The Juvenile Lead (Self-Portrait)*, 1907, 45.8 x 51 cm, Southampton City Art Gallery, Southampton

Sargent's death in **1925** closes one chapter of British figurative art and opens another, and no figure better embodies that transition than **Walter Sickert**. Born in **Munich** in **1860** to a Danish father and an Anglo-Irish mother, Sickert came to England as a child and never left it behind, even as he spent formative years absorbing **Impressionism** and **Post-Impressionism** in Paris and Dieppe. His route into art was anything but direct. His father, himself a painter, actively discouraged the profession, and Sickert spent several years on the stage under the name Mr. Nemo before enrolling at the **Slade School** in **1881**. Within a year he had abandoned formal study to become a pupil of **Whistler** — and within two he had broken decisively with Whistler's aestheticism. Meeting **Degas** in Paris in **1883** reoriented him completely. Where Whistler preached pure form, Sickert insisted painting must tell a story. He dismissed the aesthetic doctrine bluntly: "for me it's the rudest word I know." He described painting itself as "a robust and racy wench" — a deliberate provocation aimed squarely at Whistler's

refined sensibilities. His active career would last nearly six decades, making him arguably the central nervous system of British figurative art in the twentieth century.

Notes

A very influential and prolific artist. He influenced many twentieth century artists although his reputation is less well-known to the general public.

He was a colourful and charming character who was recognised as an important artist in his lifetime. He courted many eminent personalities and was a skilled raconteur. In old age he cultivated his eccentric habits frequently appearing in the newspaper having changed his appearance or his name or for some controversial painting stunt.

He was born in Munich to a Danish father and an Anglo-Irish mother. In 1868 the family moved to England and London remained his home although he spent time in Italy and France. He spoke fluent English, German and French and had good Italian.

His father was a painter and illustrator but discouraged him from painting and when he was 18 he took up acting under the stage name 'Mr. Nemo'. In 1881 however, he signed for the Slade School. In 1882 he abandoned the stage to join Whistler's studio.

Notes

The Camden Town Group was a group of English Post-Impressionist artists active 1911-1913. They gathered frequently at the studio of painter Walter Sickert in the Camden Town area of London. It was decided it should be men only and limited to 16 members. Female artists like Ethel Sands, Anna Hope Hudson and Marjorie Sherlock that were involved on the periphery.

The members of the Camden Town Group included Walter Sickert, Harold Gilman, Spencer Frederick Gore, Lucien Pissarro (the son of French Impressionist painter Camille Pissarro), Wyndham Lewis, Walter Bayes, J.B. Manson, Robert Bevan, Augustus John, Henry Lamb, and Charles Ginner.

Influences include Vincent van Gogh and Paul Gauguin whose work can clearly be traced throughout this groups work.

He denounced Whistler's anti-literary theory of drawing and saw all creative paintings as telling a story. He also disliked Whistler's titles as he felt the title

set the scene in which the painting could be interpreted. Regarding the aesthetic, he said, 'for me it's the rudest word I know'.

Sickert chose to allegorise painting as 'a robust and racy wench'. Dismissing Whistler's *Symphony in White, No.3* as a 'bad picture ... badly composed, badly drawn, badly painted' and appealing only to English sentiment, he insisted that: 'painting is a rough-tongued, hard-faced mistress, and her severe rule will brook no dallying of that sort'.

A major retrospective was held at Tate Britain in 2008

Bio:Sickert

Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942) was one of the most influential British artists of the 20th century. He is often called a painter's painter, appealing primarily to artists working in the figurative tradition; there are few British figurative painters of the 20th century whose development can be adequately discussed without reference to Sickert's subject-matter or innovative techniques. He had a direct influence on the Camden Town Group and the Euston Road School. Sickert's active career as an artist lasted for nearly 60 years and his output was vast. He may be seen as the last of the Victorian painters and as a major innovator and precursor of international developments in later 20th-century art.

Sickert was born in Munich, Germany and was an important influence on many 20th century British artists. Sickert was a cosmopolitan and eccentric who often favoured ordinary people and urban scenes as his subjects. His oeuvre also included portraits of well-known personalities and images derived from press photographs. He is considered a prominent figure in the transition from Impressionism to Modernism.

He was the son of a Danish-German artist and the illegitimate daughter of a British astronomer. He settled in England when he was 8 and attended University College (1870-71) and King's College (1871-1878). Despite his father's reputation as an artist he started work as an actor before studying art at the Slade School of Art in 1881. Within a year he had left and become a pupil of James Abbott McNeill Whistler (1834-1903). In 1883 he went to Paris and met Edgar Degas (1834-1917) who had a powerful effect on his style. He started to use sombre colours and like Degas he worked in the studio from drawings and memory to escape the 'tyranny of nature'. In 1888 he joined the New English Art Club and started to paint scenes in London music halls.

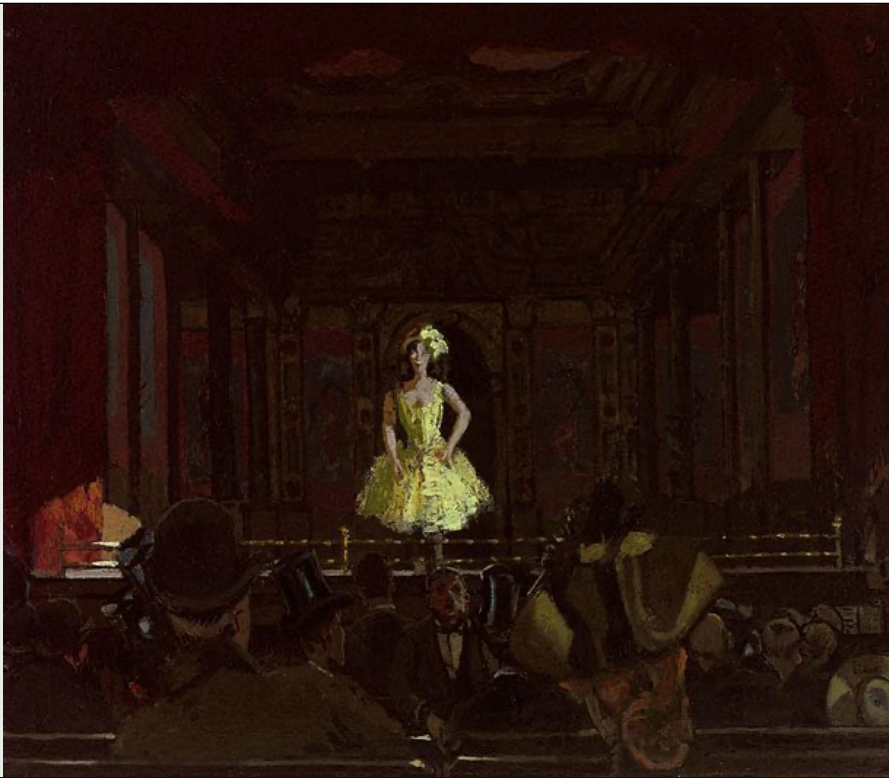
Notes

Art Gallery of New South Wales "Born in Munich of Danish parents, Walter Sickert came to England as a child in 1868. Taught by Whistler and inspired by Degas, whom he knew, he became one of the most influential and prolific British painters of his period. Experimenting with late impressionist and post-impressionist idioms, Sickert forged a personal practice devoted almost entirely to depictions of metropolitan life, some of them squalid. He settled permanently in London in 1905, from which time his studio served as a nerve-centre for the younger 'realist' painters of the Camden Town Group. Sickert's love of urban types, bohemia and the world of variety theatre is apparent in this atmospheric canvas. Katie Lawrence was a knockabout songstress who frequently headlined at Gatti's venue. Despite Sickert's interest in working-class themes his art is far from populist, appealing as it does to sophisticated taste. Daringly, the painter portrays Lawrence as little more than a footlit smudge." (AGNSW Handbook, 1999)

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Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942)
Katie Lawrence at Gatti's
c.1903
84.4 x 99.3 cm
Art Gallery of New South Wales

Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942), *Katie Lawrence at Gatti's*, c.1903, 84.4 x 99.3 cm, Art Gallery of New South Wales

The **New English Art Club** gave Sickert his natural platform, and it was there, in April **1888**, that he detonated his first major controversy. His painting of the music hall singer **Katie Lawrence** performing at Gatti's was greeted with a fury that one art historian has described as more heated than any provoked by an English painting in the entire late nineteenth century. The *Builder* condemned it as representing "the lowest degradation of which the art of painting is capable," and the *Artist* saw it as symptomatic of "the aggressive squalor that pervades to a greater or lesser extent the whole of modern existence." Even **Stanhope Forbes**, a fellow Club member, scorned the work as "tawdry, vulgar and the sentiment of the lowest music hall." The hostility was inseparable from the subject. British music halls were widely understood as places where alcohol flowed, bawdy choruses were sung, and prostitutes solicited in the promenades. Painting a female performer was, to many eyes, painting a kept woman. Where Degas and **Manet** had shown café concert singers in Paris to relative

acceptance, Sickert's London audience brought an entirely different moral framework to the image. The shallow foreground and compressed pictorial space — debts to **Whistler** that Sickert had not yet shed — only sharpened the painting's uncomfortable intimacy.

Notes

One of the two paintings he exhibited at the NEAC in April 1888, Katie Lawrence at Gatti's, which portrayed a well known music hall singer of the era, incited controversy "more heated than any other surrounding an English painting in the late 19th century". Sickert's rendering was denounced as ugly and vulgar, and his choice of subject matter was deplored as too tawdry for art, as female performers were popularly viewed as morally akin to prostitutes. The painting announced what would be Sickert's recurring interest in sexually provocative themes.

Sickert's music hall paintings were inspired by those of his friend Edgar Degas. In Paris, Degas and Edouard Manet's pictures of café concerts were greeted with interest and even respected.

The painting technique used was derived from that used by Whistler and during the 1880s Sickert had been Whistler's studio assistant. The shallow foreground and lack of background recession are typical of Whistler, for example, Arrangement in Grey and Black No.1, Portrait of the Artist's Mother, 1871.

By 1887 he had fixed upon the theme which would occupy him intermittently for most of his career, the world of the British music hall, exhibiting his first painting of this subject, Le Mammoth Comique, at the Society of British Artists. A natural platform for his work at this time was the recently formed New English Art Club, which Sickert joined that year. His arrival crystallised a split within the group between the more conservative artists and those who looked to the example of French impressionism.

In Britain Sickert faced intense critical hostility when he showed Gatti's Hungerford Palace of Varieties: Second Turn of Miss Katie Lawrence, 1887–8 (believed destroyed, possibly similar to the painting above) at the New English Art Club in April 1888. It represented 'the lowest degradation of which the art of painting is capable', according to the Builder, while the Artist

believed it symptomatic of 'the aggressive squalor that pervades to a greater or lesser extent the whole of modern existence.' Even other members of the New English Art Club were shocked, and the artist Stanhope Forbes angrily scorned the picture as 'tawdry, vulgar and the sentiment of the lowest music hall'.

Notes

'No painter before Sickert had dared to consider the music hall as a fitting subject for art, and his production of such pictures was considered wilful and provocative. In Britain the music hall held distinct connotations of immorality. Many of the acts, Minnie Cunningham included, dealt in the currency of ribald, vulgar or suggestive humour, and it was just this waywardness that partly made the music hall so popular. But the halls themselves were considered dens of dissolution by the moral majority. Alcohol was served throughout performances, and volatile audiences were encouraged to join in singing the often bawdy song choruses. Additionally, many of the halls were believed to be venues where prostitutes plied their trade. The Empire in Leicester Square was particularly notorious as a place where, away from the auditorium in its promenade area, clients could meet prostitutes.' (Tate website)

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter-richard-sickert-minnie-cunningham-r1139296>



Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942)
*Summer Afternoon or What Shall We
Do for the Rent?*
c.1907–9
51.5 x 41 cm
Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery

Walter Richard Sickert (1860-1942), *Summer Afternoon or What Shall We Do for the Rent?*, c.1907–9, 51.5 x 41 cm, Kirkcaldy Museum & Art Gallery

The moral fury that had greeted Sickert's music hall paintings in **1888** never really left him — it simply found new material. Through the late 1880s and 1890s, Sickert divided his time between London, **Dieppe**, and **Venice**, where many of his paintings centred on the prostitutes he knew personally. The working-class female body remained his subject, and his method remained confrontational. Back in London, he established himself in **Camden Town**, running Saturday afternoon gatherings at his **Fitzroy Street** studio. That informal circle formalised into the **Fitzroy Street Group**, which by **1910** had evolved into the **Camden Town Group**. The group's name carried a darker charge than a mere address. In **1907**, a prostitute named **Emily Dimmock** was murdered in Agar Grove, her throat cut while she slept. The press turned the case into sustained, prurient spectacle. Sickert had already been painting lugubrious female nudes on iron beds for years; he now gave four of them the collective title **The Camden Town Murder**,

deliberately weaponising the association. As the art historian **Lisa Tickner** argues, Sickert was the first to combine the nude, prostitution, and murder in a single pictorial framework — raising stakes that neither **Manet's** *Olympia* nor any realist predecessor had dared touch.

Notes

In the late 1880s Sickert spent time in Dieppe where his mistress and possible his illegitimate son lived. He began to write art reviews and between 1894 and 1904 visited Venice a number of times. He became fascinated with urban culture and the working class and many of his Venice paintings were of prostitutes that he knew.

Back in London, he painted Cumberland Market and Camden Town. Sickert established himself in rooms in Camden Town and began to hold Saturday afternoon 'At Homes' in his studio in Fitzroy Street. His regular core of visitors became the more formalised 'Fitzroy Street Group', an independent, modern exhibiting society which, in 1910, evolved into the Camden Town Group.

In 1907 a prostitute called Emily Dimmock was brutally murdered in her home at Agar Grove (then St Paul's Road), Camden. We now see a woman who may have been murdered. After sexual intercourse the man had slit her throat open while she was asleep, then left in the morning. The "Camden Town murder" became an ongoing source of prurient sensationalism in the press.

For several years Sickert had already been painting lugubrious female nudes on beds, and continued to do so, deliberately challenging the conventional approach to life painting—"The modern flood of representations of vacuous images dignified by the name of 'the nude' represents an artistic and intellectual bankruptcy"—giving four of them, which included a male figure, the title, The Camden Town Murder, and causing a controversy which ensured attention for his work. These paintings do not show violence, however, but a sad thoughtfulness, explained by the fact that three of them were originally exhibited with completely different titles, one more appropriately being What Shall We Do for the Rent?, and the first in the series, Summer Afternoon.

Sickert loved bamboozling historians. A catalogue from 1911 shows the painting was exhibited as Consolation. It has also been suggested he later changed the title to Father Comes Home and then sold it as The Germans in Belgium.

Notes

Sickert was fascinated with working-class life and with the Camden Town Murder which was a prostitute called Emily Dimmock who was murdered in 1907. Sickert also took a keen interest in the crimes of Jack the Ripper that took place around 1888 in the Whitechapel area. Sickert believed he had lodged in a room used by the infamous serial killer. In 1976 a book was published claiming that Sickert had been forced to be an accomplice in Jack the Ripper's murders because of a statement from Joseph Gorman who claimed to be Sickert's illegitimate son. He later admitted he had lied. In 1990 another book claimed he was the killer and in 2002 Patricia Cornwell published a third book in which she claims she has proof he was Jack the Ripper from DNA evidence. The Oxford Dictionary of National Biography dismisses such claims as 'fantasy' as do historians.

Tate website + [comments]

[Manet's Olympia combined the nude and the prostitute, categories that had been kept distinct.]

'Mapping the prostitute on to the nude – facing and confusing the body in art (as symbol) with the body in life (as commodity) – produced a subversive, modern, hybrid imagery which congealed into old-masterdom in its turn.' [By the end of the nineteenth century Manet's Olympia was hung alongside Ingres and was regarded as an 'old master'.]

'Murder does a certain amount of work for the realist body here. It raises the stakes in invoking an underside of prostitution which was once itself the underside of the nude.' [No one had combined the nude, prostitution and murder. That was Sickert's challenge.]

'The social profile of the prostitute was unskilled, poor working class, with local origins but displaced family relations (like Emily Dimmock, the youngest of fifteen children, who started her working life in a straw-hat factory in Bedford). Prostitution offered a temporary solution to pressing problems – like what to do for the rent – and limited social and economic independence. Many women moved on or married out of it. Emily Dimmock, who was young, attractive, sociable and settled with Bertram Shaw, might have done so too. But she fell victim to a sex-murderer. After the impact of the Ripper crimes in 1888 this was the new narrative ending for the prostitute's life. Jack the

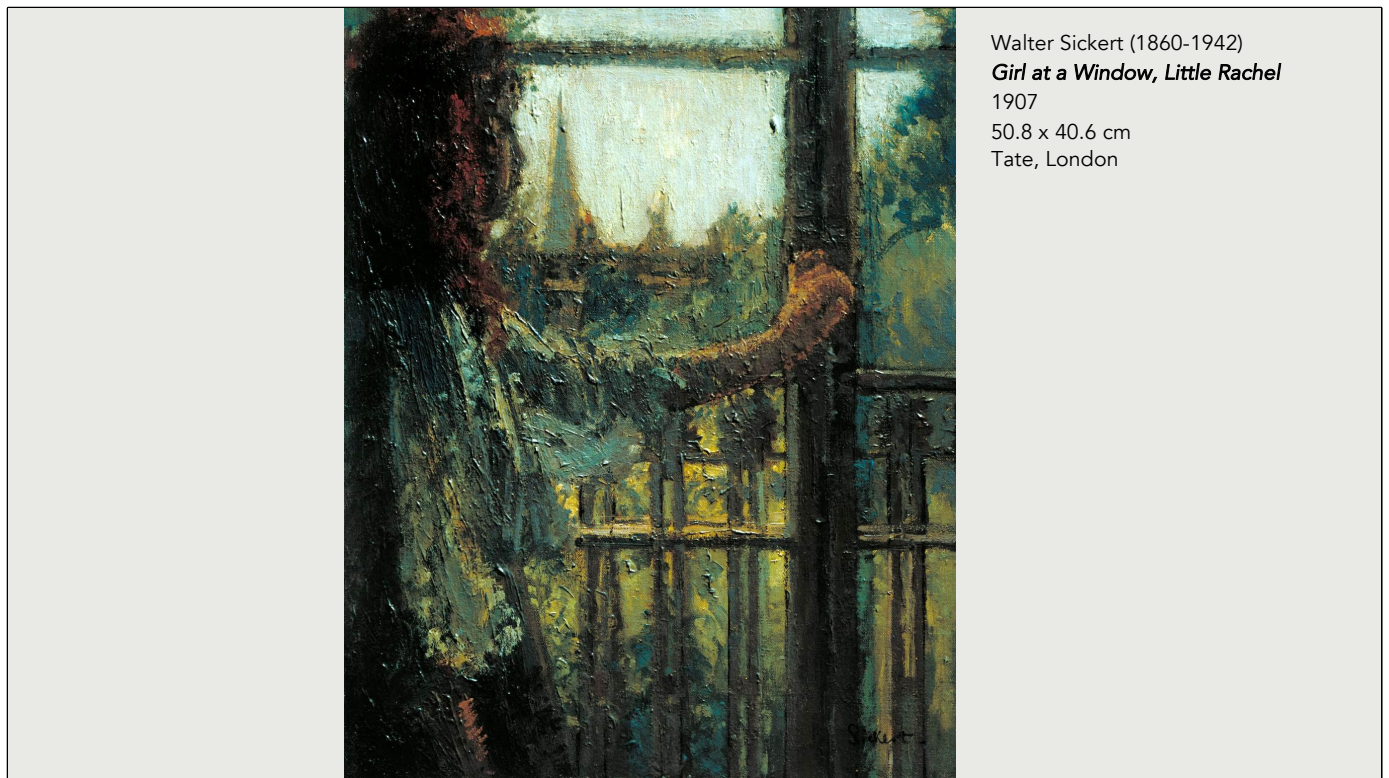
Ripper switched the rails, as it were, from an imaginary trajectory that ended in shame, disease, poverty and a watery suicide to one that ended in bloody violence.' [The mid-nineteenth century fate of the fallen women (such as Watts and Augustus Egg) was poverty and suicide. At the end of the century Jack the Ripper changed this to murder.]

Conservative artists such as Sir William Blake Richmond thought Sickert's Camden Town Murder paintings should be brought to the notice of the police as they were 'worse far than Prostitution because it is done by a man [who] should know better' (letter from Sir William Blake Richmond to Robert Ross, 16 January 1911).

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<http://www.thearttribune.com/Walter-Sickert-The-Camden-Town.html>

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Walter Sickert (1860-1942), *Girl at a Window, Little Rachel*, 1907, 50.8 x 40.6 cm, Tate, London

The Camden Town Murder paintings show Sickert at his most confrontational, yet working simultaneously at **6 Mornington Crescent**, he was producing something altogether quieter. **Girl at a Window, Little Rachel** is dominated by the **French window** of his north-facing front room, with soft exterior light falling into the dim interior and gently illuminating a red-haired girl looking out across **Mornington Crescent Gardens**. The girl was **Rachel Sideman**, daughter of his frame maker, and she appears in five known oil paintings. Sickert delayed a trip to **Paris** to complete this sequence, writing to a friend that he had done too many slight sketches and wanted instead to produce a few considered, elaborate works. The alternation is telling: between sessions with Rachel at the window, he was painting another model lying nude on his cast-iron bed — the two sequences running in parallel, the domestic and the disquieting held in deliberate tension. The compositional device of bright exterior light softly illuminating a figure in a darkened room connects directly to **Degas's** **Woman at a*

Window*, painted around **1871**. Sickert himself recounted that **Degas** had painted it during the Prussian siege of Paris, and paid his model with a piece of raw meat, which she fell upon and devoured, so hungry was she.

Notes

This painting is dominated by the French window of Sickert's north-facing front room at 6 Mornington Crescent. Light falls softly on the dim figure of the red-haired girl, seen looking across Mornington Crescent Gardens. The girl is Rachel, the daughter of his frame maker and she features in five known oil paintings by Sickert.

Sickert delayed a trip to Paris to work on this sequence of paintings. He wrote to a friend to say that he had done too many 'slight sketches' and he wanted to create a few 'considered, elaborate works'.

Notes

Rachel's surname was Siderman, and that she died in 1963 aged 70. However, on her marriage certificate her father's profession was listed as grocer. Neither Rachel or her father are listed in the 1911 London census.

The bright exterior light falling into the dark room and softly illuminating the sitter's face was also used by Edgar Degas *Woman at a Window*, 1871-72.

Sickert alternated the five paintings of Rachel with paintings of another model lying nude on his cast iron bed.

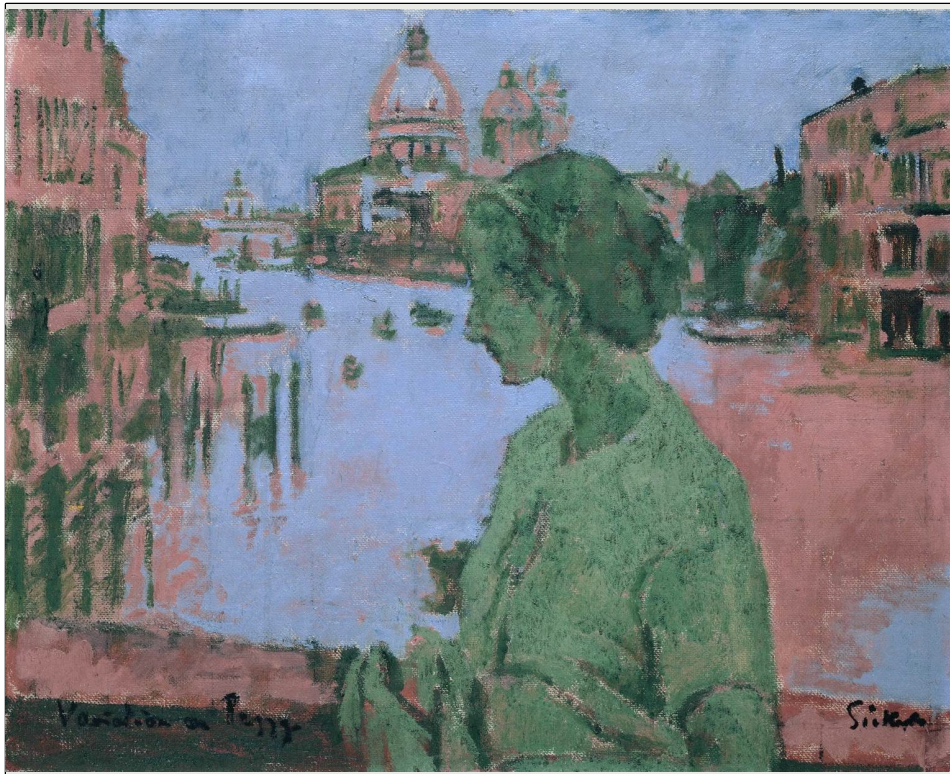
Through the window Sickert shows the view across Mornington Crescent Gardens, on which the Carreras cigarette factory was built in 1928. The steeple visible on the horizon is that of St Matthew's Church in Oakley Square. Designed in Gothic Revival style by John Johnson, it was built in 1852-6 and demolished in 1977.

In the Degas painting the woman, seated by a window against the light, looks serene. But the artist Walter Sickert recounted that Degas's work was painted around the time of the siege of Paris by the Prussians. According to Sickert, Degas gave the model a hunk of meat as payment, 'which she fell upon, so hungry was she, and devoured it raw'.

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<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/research-publications/camden-town-group/walter->

richard-sickert-girl-at-a-window-little-rachel-r1136821



Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942)
Variation on Peggy
1934–35
57.8 x 71.8 cm
Tate, London

Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942), *Variation on Peggy*, 1934–35, 57.8 x 71.8 cm, Tate, London

From the quiet domesticity of Mornington Crescent, Sickert's gaze shifts to a very different kind of subject — a celebrated public figure rather than a frame-maker's daughter. **Variation on Peggy**, painted around 1934, shows the actress **Peggy Ashcroft** standing on the wooden **Accademia Bridge** in Venice, looking back along the **Grand Canal** towards the silhouette of **Santa Maria della Salute**. She wears a short-sleeved summer dress, her hair drawn up, her profile clean against the Venetian light. Sickert worked not from life but from a black-and-white photograph published in the **Radio Times** in November 1934, part of a feature on prominent female broadcasters — a characteristically modern source for a man who had long championed photography as a legitimate compositional tool. Ashcroft was twenty-three when Sickert first encountered her; he was seventy. He attended her early defining performances, including her appointment as leading lady at the **Old Vic** and her celebrated Juliet opposite **John Gielgud**. She later recalled his habit of breaking into

solitary applause mid-performance whenever a line pleased him. One actress of the period remarked that when Ashcroft arrived in Sickert's life, she became for him "the sun, moon and stars" — the infatuation flowing directly into this luminous, unusually tender portrait.

Notes

The English actress Peggy Ashcroft is standing on the new Accademia Bridge in Venice looking back along the Grand Canal to the Santa Maria della Salute. Variation on Peggy presents a profile view of the actress, Peggy Ashcroft (1907–1991), dressed in a short-sleeved summer dress with her hair tied back in a bun. She is standing on the new wooden Accademia Bridge in Venice, looking back across the Grand Canal with the silhouette of the church of Santa Maria della Salute in the background. The painting was based upon a black and white photograph which appeared in a feature on famous female broadcasters in the Radio Times, 16 November 1934.

A famous actress described how Sickert fell in love with her and then 'when she faded out with Peggy [Ashcroft] became the sun, moon and stars'. At the time of their first meeting Ashcroft was twenty-three and just beginning to make a name for herself as a stage actress. Sickert was seventy and enjoying the last years of his career as something of a national treasure. She was attracted to 'writers and creators, people who created from nothing' He attended many of her early famous performances and witnessed her rise to stardom, including her appointment as leading lady at the Old Vic theatre in 1931 and the role considered to be her finest, as Juliet in Romeo and Juliet. She later recalled: 'I always knew when he was in the house ... If he liked a line he would break into solitary applause, usually at the matinées.'

Notes

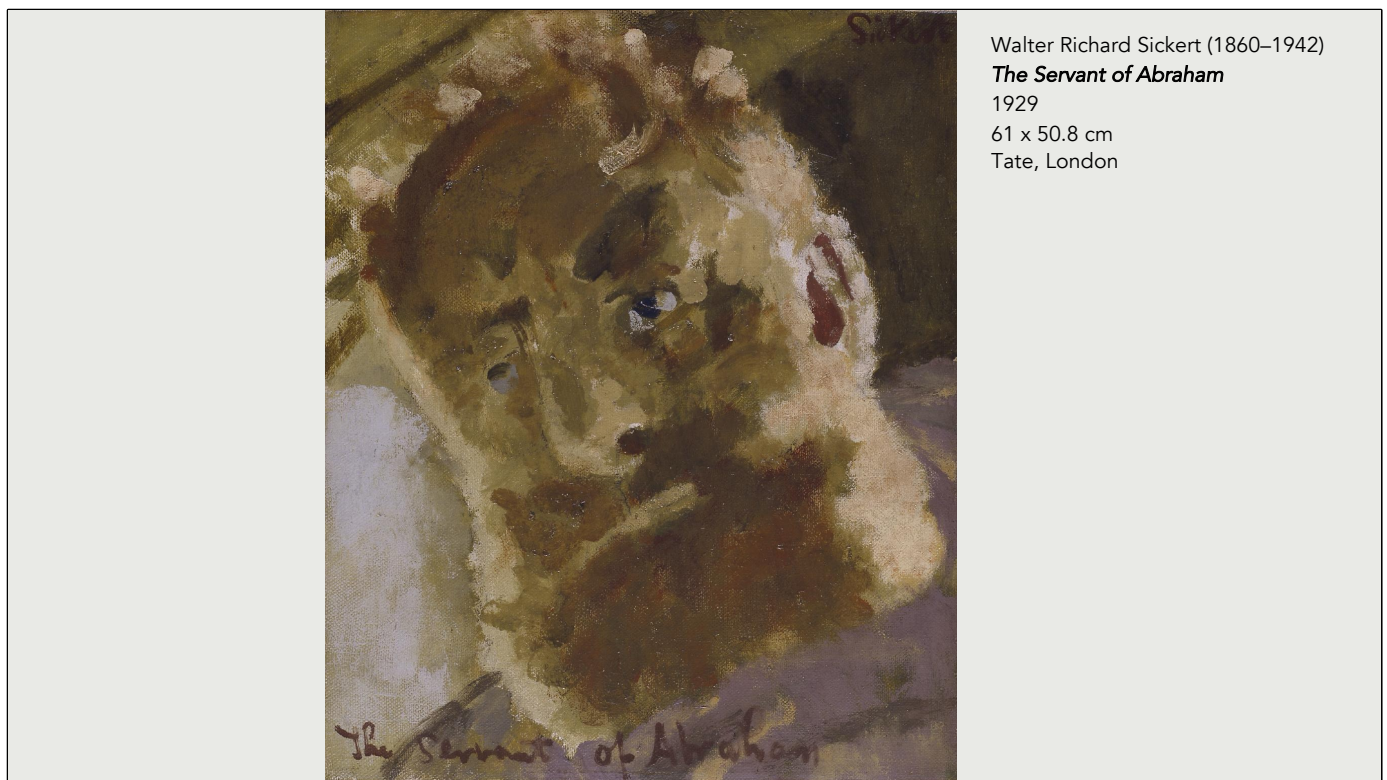
Dame Edith Margaret Emily Ashcroft (1907–1991), commonly known as Peggy Ashcroft, was an English actress whose career spanned more than sixty years. Born to a comfortable middle-class family, Ashcroft was determined from an early age to become an actress, despite parental opposition. She was working in smaller theatres even before graduating from drama school, and within two years thereafter she was starring in the West End. Ashcroft maintained her leading place in British theatre for the next fifty years. Always attracted by the ideals of permanent theatrical ensembles she did much of

her work for the Old Vic in the early 1930s, John Gielgud's companies in the 1930s and 1940s, the Royal Shakespeare Company from the 1950s and the National Theatre from the 1970s. Well regarded in Shakespeare, Ashcroft was also known for her commitment to modern drama, appearing in plays by Bertolt Brecht, Samuel Beckett and Harold Pinter. Her career was almost wholly spent in the live theatre until the 1980s, when she turned to television and cinema with considerable success, winning an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress and several British and European awards.

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<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-variation-on-peggy-t06601>

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Walter Richard Sickert (1860–1942), *The Servant of Abraham*, 1929, 61 x 50.8 cm, Tate, London

That luminous, tender portrait of Ashcroft stands at one extreme of Sickert's late output — this self-portrait stands at the other. **The Servant of Abraham**, painted in **Islington** and first exhibited in **1930**, casts Sickert as the unnamed servant sent by **Abraham** to find a wife for his son Isaac — a figure of loyalty, discernment, and quiet power. The source was a photograph taken from below by his third wife **Thérèse Lessore**, so that Sickert looms monumentally over the viewer. Where the photograph holds a penetrating directness, the painted gaze is deliberately harder to read: one eye arrests you, as the **Morning Post** noted, "like the point of a fencing foil," while the other, half-closed in shadow, "sardonically directs the attack." The **Manchester Guardian** called it "a terrific statement of an artist ego" and wished it hung in the Uffizi beside the great self-portraits of history. It is one of three late self-portraits in which Sickert appropriates a **Biblical role**, and the choice of an ambiguous, unnamed servant — a Gentile intermediary, neither master nor subject —

suggests the role is deliberately unresolved. Sickert, who had trained as an actor and subscribed to a press-cuttings service to track his own celebrity, was fully conscious of performing identity in public. The portrait asks whether any fixed self lies beneath the performance at all.

Notes

The picture's source was a photograph of the sixty-nine-year-old Walter Sickert taken by his third wife, Thérèse Lessore. The photograph was taken from below so Sickert looms over the viewer. The penetrating gaze of the photograph has been replaced by a more ambivalent but difficult to read gaze. The photograph is squared up to assist with the transfer to the canvas.

It is one of three late self-portraits casting the artist as a Biblical character, appropriating the monumentality of the Old Masters as well as provoking public perception of Sickert in the national press at the time. The Manchester Guardian named it a 'terrific statement of an artist ego'. Sickert trained as an actor and his self-portraits portray various aspects of his character, or the aspects that he wishes to convey. This portrait is harder to interpret as the role is ambiguous and Sickert may therefore be making a comment on the nature of identity itself.

Sickert had become a celebrity and the press followed his witticisms and peculiarities taking affectionate pride in his international reputation. The press were amused by his frequent change to the titles of his paintings and of his own name when in 1926-7 he dropped the 'Walter' and wanted to be known as 'Richard Sickert'. Sickert used a press cuttings service and shamelessly played the role of ageing eccentric and this portrait may be another humorous and perceptive engagement with the nature of identity.

Reviews

The Manchester Guardian wrote, 'Nowhere has he shown more conclusively his mastery of his material and complete understanding of exactly what he wants to do ... this terrific statement of an artist ego must stand as one of the marking pictures of our time. One would like to see it in the Uffizi beside the other self-portraits of famous artists.'

The Morning Post wrote, 'Anyone who would solve the enigma known nowadays as Richard Sickert must see his self-portrait 'The Servant of Abraham' as subscribed on the canvas itself, with his customary blague. The

left eye, looking as purposely as the point of a fencing foil, arrests you as soon as you enter the Savile Gallery ... and the right eye, half shut in the shade, sardonically directs the attack on the intellectuality or humour of the visitor. The shaggy face cannot be read as easily as a tale with a happy ending. There is in it, as in his art, something that gives you seriously to think.'

The Saturday Review wrote, 'A cruel caricature, following on the previous discovery that by stressing the character of the 'man who understands the commercial side of Art' which he frequently affects, he could turn himself into a rather formidable Jew. The portrait is an excellent rendering of one of his favourite impersonations; but it is not, of course, in the least like the real Sickert, the delicacy of whose expression that impersonation never for long concedes.'

Another write commented, badge of suffering', symbolic of a man who has forfeited his pre-eminence and no longer occupies the position he once commanded'.

Notes

It was painted in Islington and first exhibited in London in 1930.

In the Biblical story the servant of Abraham was sent to find a wife for Abraham's son Isaac. The servant found Rebekah drawing water from a well and recognised her as the person he was looking for because she offered him water and water for his camels. The servant is named once as Eliezer, a Gentile, and is regarded as a loyal and faithful servant of his master and of God.

See the reference to a long article with critics comments on the Tate site.

References

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sickert-the-servant-of-abraham-t00259>

A self-portrait by Gwen John, 1902. The painting shows a woman with reddish-brown hair pulled back, wearing a red patterned jacket over a dark high-collared garment with a small brooch. She has a serious expression and is looking directly at the viewer. The background is a dark, mottled brown.

Gwen John (1876-1939)
Self-Portrait
1902

Gwen John (1876-1939), Self-Portrait, 1902

From Sickert's theatrical self-construction, we move to an artist whose practice was built on almost the opposite impulse — quiet, inward, and obstinately unshowy. **Gwen John** was born in **1876** in Wales and died in **1939**, and her reputation has grown steadily in the decades since. She trained at the **Slade School of Art** from **1895**, where her brother **Augustus John** was already becoming a celebrated personality. The contrast between the siblings is telling: Augustus was glamorous and prolific; Gwen was neither, and she knew it, describing her own approach as the slow accumulation of near-identical canvases, saying that to finish one painting properly "one must paint a lot of canvases probably and waste them." Her total output of **158 oil paintings** is remarkably small. The critic **T. Martin Wood**, writing in **Studio**, called her work "one of the greatest achievements in this exhibition because of its sincerity," and in **1968** **Nigel Gosling** in the **Observer** wrote that "the force of this almost obsessive reticence is astonishing," comparing her tonal restraint to **Morandi**. That comparison to a near-**Vermeer**-like discipline is apt: her training under **Whistler** at the

Académie Carmen in Paris embedded a rigorous, meditative approach to tone that underpins everything she made.

Notes

Gwen John's work never exhibits any flashiness or contrived effects; it is always simple, plain yet deeply moving. This portrait was described by one critic [T. Martin Wood in *Studio*] as 'one of the greatest achievements in this exhibition because of its sincerity' and in 1926 she was described as 'a sort of modern Vermeer'. One reviewer [Nigel Gosling, 1968, *Observer Review*] 'The force of this almost obsessive reticence is astonishing ... the extreme subtlety and reticence of the exquisite tonal arrangements ... is a chief source of delight ... Its power within awesomely restricted means is reminiscent of Morandi's.'

Gwen John (1876-1939) was a Welsh artist who worked in France most of her life. She trained at the Slade School of Art from 1895 to 1898 where her younger brother, Augustus John, had already begun his studies. They lived together on fruit and nuts and even as students her brother's personal glamour made him a celebrity. Gwen was quieter and her reputation has steadily grown since her death. She neglected her health throughout her life and in 1900-01 she lived as a squatter in a derelict building.

She and was taught in the traditional manner, which involved copying Old Master paintings. This training shows in the naturalism and carefully controlled colour range of this picture. As a woman in a career still largely dominated by men, including her successful brother Augustus, Gwen had to struggle for recognition. The self-scrutinizing intensity of this image, and the isolation of the figure, registers some sense of this struggle.

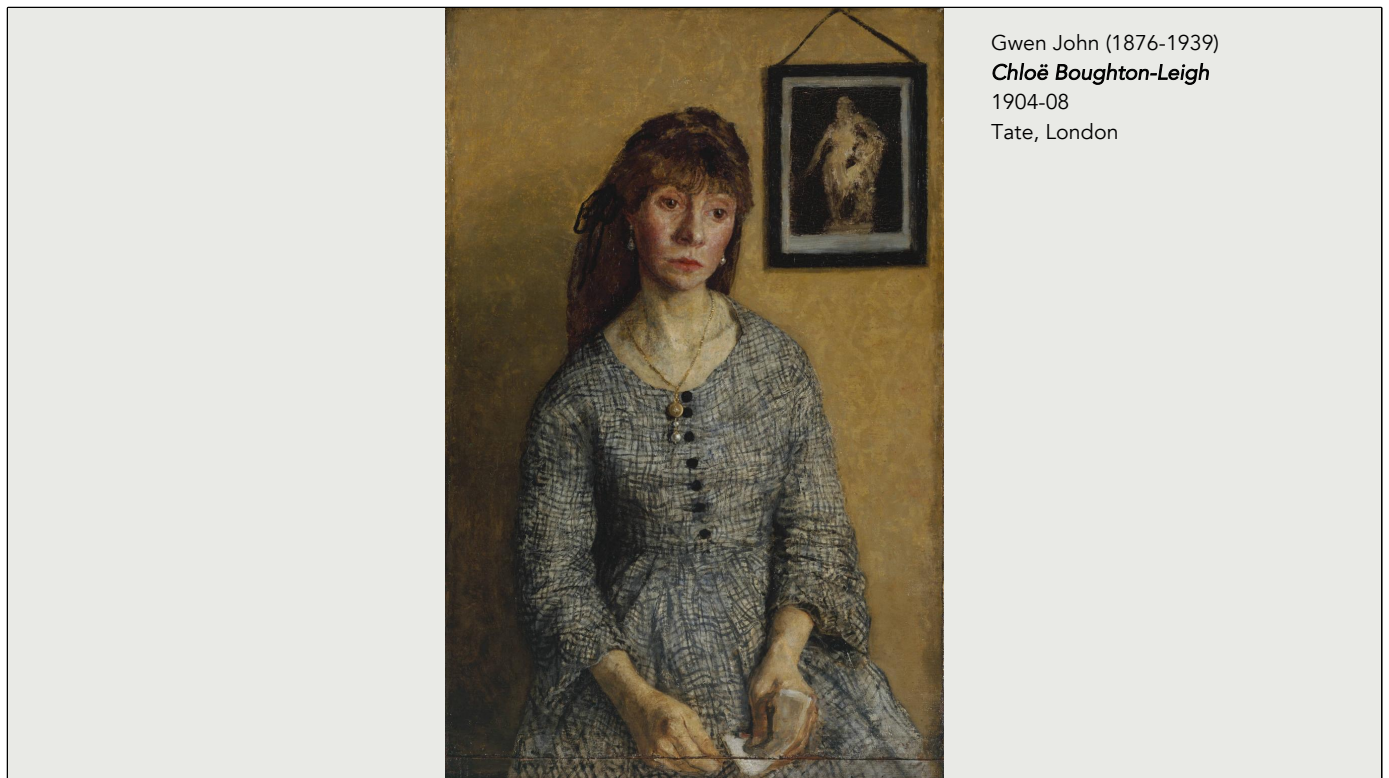
She settled in Paris in 1904, working as a model, becoming Rodin's mistress and immersing herself in the artistic world of the metropolis. She lived in France for the rest of her life, exhibiting on both sides of the Channel.

From 1910 to 1924 nearly all her work was purchased by her patron John Quinn an American art collector and this freed her from having to work as a model, mostly for women artists. The majority of her work is portraits, mainly of female sitters and her oeuvre is small, consisting of only 158 oil paintings. She drew thousands of drawings and thought a painting should be finished in one or two sittings and 'For that one must paint a lot of canvases probably and waste them'. Her meticulous preparation shows the influence of James

McNeill Whistler who she trained under in Paris at the Académie Carmen.

Like many women artists she tried drawing her own body in the mirror but she complained in a letter to her brother about how difficult it was. Even the Slade imposed restrictions of women drawing from female models and so friends would draw each other but kept silent about the practice as 'the respectability of these middle-class women students would have been jeopardized if they had acknowledged at the time that they had worked from studies of their own bodies rather than those of anonymous working-class models'.

When she lived in Paris she had to work as a model to survive. She posed nude for Auguste Rodin and for other artists, mostly women. In her dairies she wrote of many occasions when, working as a model, she felt harassed or abused by both men and women artists. For example, one of her clients, a woman artist, was kissing a man all afternoon and then told her not to tell anyone if she wanted to keep her job as a model, treating her as a child and discussing her as if she was not there. As a model she would be kept waiting for hours, shouted at, ignored, given no breaks, and propositioned by male artists. She developed fierce attachments to both men and women that worried some people and she later became Rodin's lover.



Gwen John (1876-1939)
Chloë Boughton-Leigh
1904-08
Tate, London

Gwen John (1876-1939), Chloë Boughton-Leigh, 1904-08, Tate, London

That accumulation of near-identical canvases the previous slide described finds one of its finest expressions in the painting now before us. The sitter is **Ellen Theodosia Boughton-Leigh**, known to her family as Chloë, who came into Gwen John's orbit through her sister Maude, a fellow Slade student and close friend of the artist. The subdued colouring, compressed foreground, and the sitter's downward gaze over an open book produce an atmosphere of concentrated inwardness entirely characteristic of John's mature practice. John extended the composition physically, adding a strip of wood to the bottom of the panel so that she could paint the hands in full — a detail that speaks to her obsessive precision. **John Rothenstein**, in **Modern English Painters** published in **1952**, described Gwen John as "one of the finest painters of our time and country." Augustus John himself anticipated the reversal of their reputations, saying "In fifty years I shall be known as the brother of Gwen John." That moment arrived sooner than he expected. The personal life behind these serene surfaces was

turbulent. In Paris John had modelled for and become the lover of **Auguste Rodin**, then the most celebrated sculptor in the world. When that affair collapsed, she converted to Catholicism and withdrew almost entirely, describing herself as "**God's little artist**" — a phrase of self-deprecation that barely conceals a fierce, solitary devotion to the work.

Notes

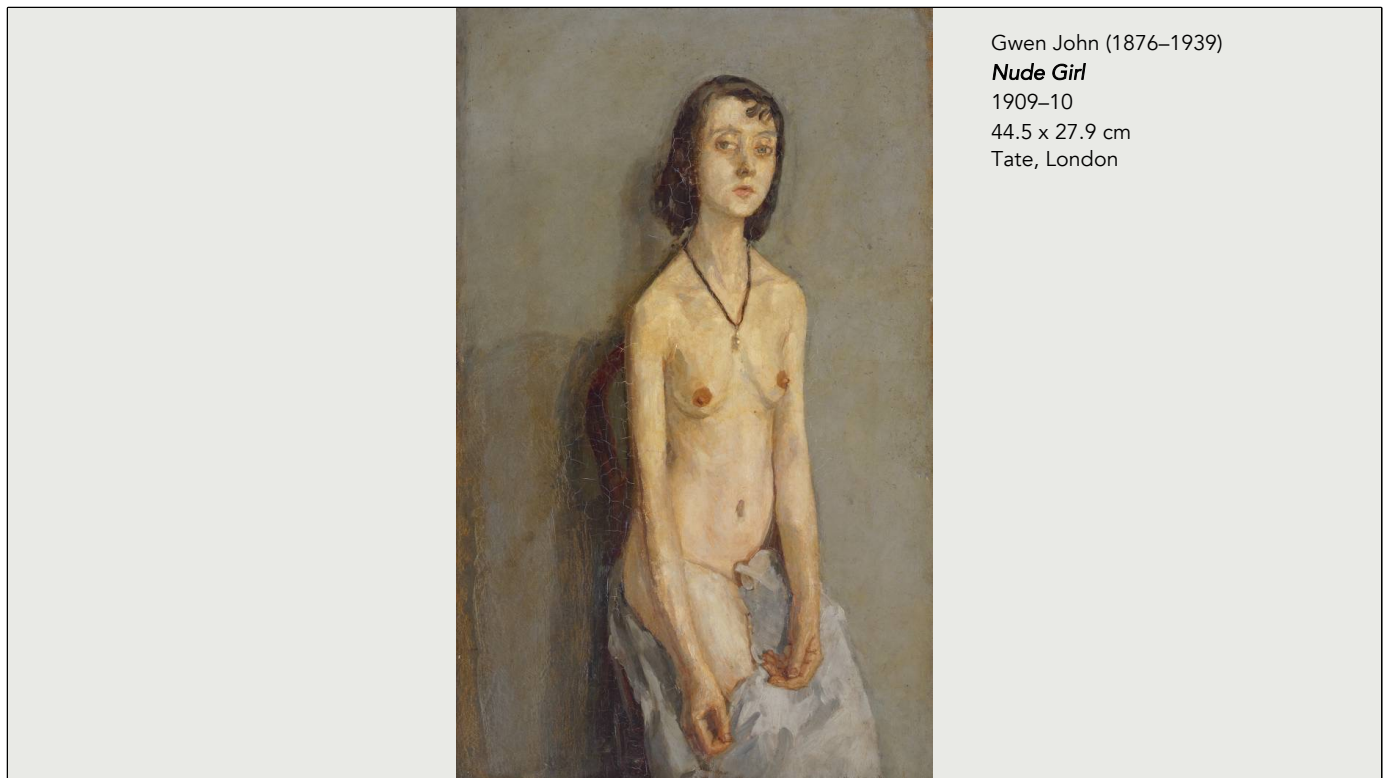
The solitary figure, her downward gaze and the open book in her hand produce a sense of calmness and intensity that was typical of her work. Gwen John's quiet art with its subtle colour relationships, stands in contrast to her brother, Augustus John's, far more assertive work. She was once overshadowed by his work and his enormous reputation at the time but critical opinion now tends to view her as the more talented. Augustus predicted this reversal, saying 'In 50 years' time I will be known as the brother of Gwen John.' And in 1952 she was described as 'one of the finest painters of our time and country' [John Rothenstein, *Modern English Painters*].

Ellen Theodosia Boughton-Leigh was known by her family as Chloë and met John through her sister Maude who studied at the Slade with John. The subdued colouring, short foreground and self-absorption of the sitter create a deeply intense atmosphere. John showed it in London, at the New English Art Club. Chloë, was, like Gwen John, a Catholic convert and latterly she and her sister Maude lived on Canvey Island. Maude was Gwen John's friend; both had studied at the Slade and probably met in Paris.

John added a strip of wood at the bottom of the picture to enable her to paint the whole of the hands.

Notes

Gwen John had to work as a model to survive in Paris and she posed nude for Auguste Rodin and became his lover. Rodin was much older and was the most famous artist of his time. John became fiercely attached to him and when the affair ended she became a Catholic and spent the rest of her life alone in a Paris suburb working as what she called 'God's little artist'.



Gwen John (1876–1939)
Nude Girl
1909–10
44.5 x 27.9 cm
Tate, London

Gwen John (1876–1939), *Nude Girl*, 1909–10, 44.5 x 27.9 cm, Tate, London

That fierce solitary devotion extended, with uncomfortable intensity, to the human figure itself. **Nude Girl**, painted between **1909 and 1910**, depicts **Fenella Lovell**, a model John found genuinely difficult to work with. In a letter to a friend she wrote plainly, "It is a great strain doing Fenella. It is a pretty little face but she is dreadful." In another she admitted she only wanted to exhibit the work to sell it, pay Fenella what she owed, and never see her again. The paintings were shown but remained unsold. What makes the painting so unsettling is precisely what John refused to do. She strips away every convention of the female nude — the softened contours, the inviting gaze, the flattering light. Lovell is lean, pale, painted against a dingy wall in a compressed range of foggy greys, greens, and yellows. She looks not displayed but exposed, and clearly uncomfortable that we are looking at her. John began the composition with the model clothed and reworked it progressively toward nakedness, which gives the final image its quality of unwilling revelation. The **Contemporary Art**

Society purchased the work in **1911** and presented it to the **Tate** in **1917** — making it the first of John's paintings to enter a public collection.

Notes

A profoundly deliberate painter, Gwen John offers the viewer an audacious view of womanhood stripped bare, and it is calculated to shock. The nude was considered, at the time, to be an unsuitable subject for women painters yet John boldly paints flaunting her nakedness. Skinny, ascetic, with skin the colour of alabaster, Fenella Lovell is depicted against a dingy wall, the unwilling victim of Gwen John's gaze. She is not nude, but naked, a lean-faced pale creature trapped in John's paired down palette of foggy greys, greens and yellows. As a female painter her perception of the nude was very different from that of a male artist. This is not painted as a conventional female beauty or an object of admiration or fantasy. It is simply a woman without her clothes on. This painting was made between 1909 and 1910, three years into John's love affair with Auguste Rodin and five years after her insane mission to walk to Rome, which reduced her to a half-crazed, half-starved wreck.

The human body, a traditional theme in western art, was a tricky subject for women artists at the turn of the century because of questions of morality and decorum. By using a narrow colour range and minimal setting, and suppressing biographical details, John draws attention to the naked body. At the same time, the character of the model, Fenella Lovell, comes across powerfully. So the viewer experiences this painting, disconcertingly, as a portrait of a contemporary woman with no clothes on, who seems to be uncomfortable that we are looking at her.

John intensely disliked the model. In a letter to a friend she wrote, "It is a great strain doing Fenella. It is a pretty little face but she is dreadful." In another letter she wrote, "Why I want to send the two paintings [to the New English Art Club] is because I may sell them and then I shall pay her what I owe and never see her again." The paintings were exhibited but were not sold. *Nude Girl* began with the model clothed but it was altered as the painting progressed. It was bought by the Contemporary Art Society in 1911 and presented to the Tate in 1917. It was the first of her paintings to enter a public art collection. The clothed portrait has an unflinching gaze but the nude girl has a greater intensity.

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Augustus John (1878-1961)
Self-Portrait
c. 1901
49.5 x 39.4 cm
Sold at Christie's, 2012

Augustus John (1878-1961), Self-Portrait, c. 1901, 49.5 x 39.4 cm, Sold at Christie's, 2012

The previous slide introduced Gwen John's uncompromising vision, and her younger brother **Augustus John** offers an instructive contrast — spectacular where she was austere, socially magnetic where she was withdrawn. Augustus studied at the **Slade School of Art** in London, where the drawing teacher **Henry Tonks** recognised him as the most gifted draughtsman of his generation. A near-drowning accident in **1897** left him bedridden for months; he emerged, by common account, a changed artist — looser, more visionary, and possessed of a new intensity. He studied in Paris, taught briefly at the **University of Liverpool**, and fell deeply in love with **Martigues** in Provence, where he lived from **1910 to 1928**. His lifelong fascination with the **Romani people** drove him to travel Britain in a caravan alongside his wife, his mistress — who became his second wife in **1907** — and the children of both women. By the **1920s** he had succeeded **John Singer Sargent** as the leading British portrait painter. The portraits could be merciless. When **Lord Leverhulme** cut his own likeness from John's canvas and

locked it in a vault, it suggested the painting had exposed something he found unbearable. The canvas was reassembled in **1954** and now hangs in the **Lady Lever Art Gallery**, Port Sunlight.

Notes

Was a Welsh painter who for a short time around 1910 was an important exponent of Post-Impressionism. He was the younger brother of the acclaimed artist Gwen John. He briefly attended the Tenby School of Art before leaving for the Slade School of Art in London. He became the star pupil of the drawing teacher Henry Tonks and was recognised as the most talented draughtsman of his generation.

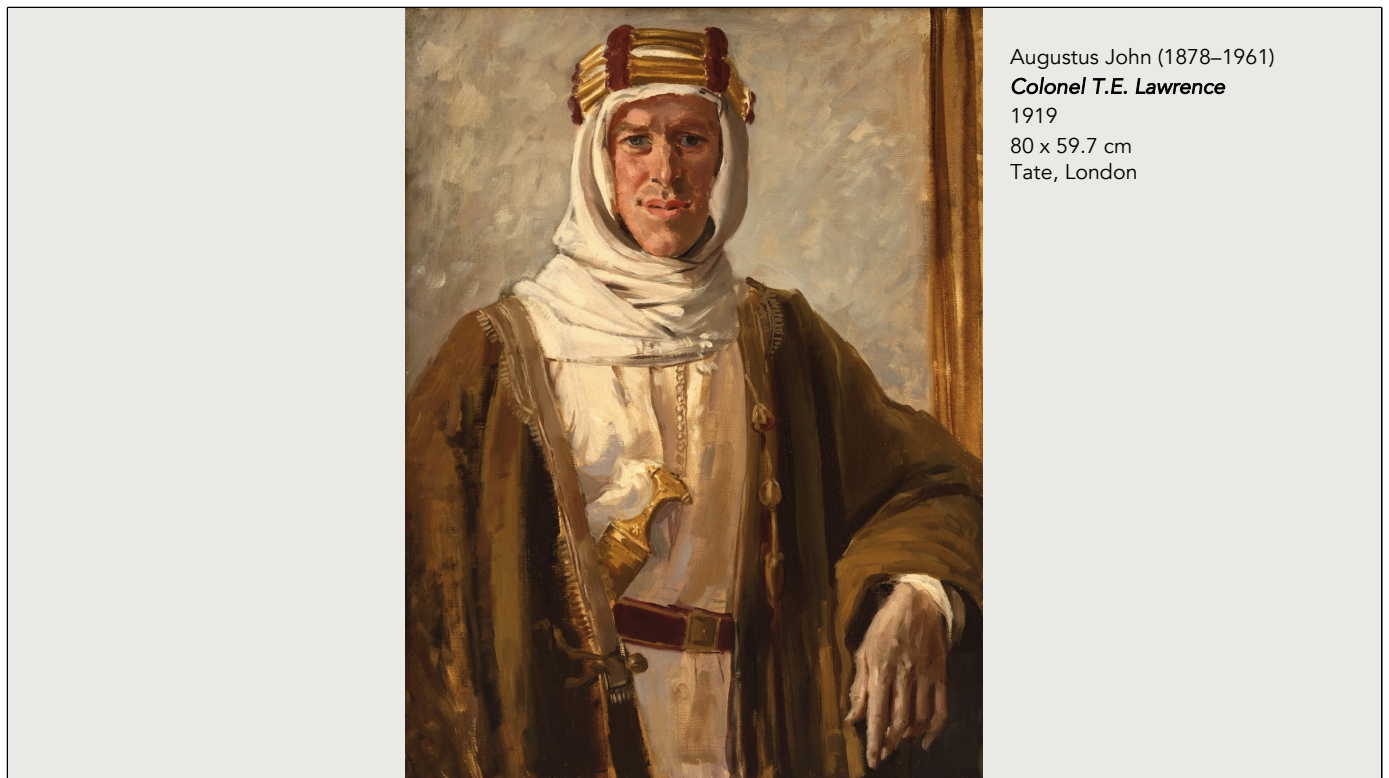
In 1897 he was seriously injured while swimming and his lengthy convalescence accelerated his artistic development. He studied in Paris, married in 1901 and started teaching at the University of Liverpool. He fell in love with the town Martigues in Provence and lived there from 1910 to 1928. Throughout his life he was interested in painting the Romani people (whom he called gypsies) and for a short time travelled round Britain in a caravan with his wife, mistress (who in 1907 became his second wife on the death of his first) and the children of both women.

During World War I he painted two huge murals but they remained unfinished. The bulk of his later work consist of portraits. He was known for the psychological insight of his portraits, many of which were considered 'cruel' for the truth of the depiction. There was an international outcry when Lord Leverhulme cut out the head of his portrait to hide it in his vault. Perhaps Lever was shocked because he appears not confident and bold but reflective and sad. The painting was reassembled in 1954 and is in the Leverhulme Gallery, Liverpool.

By the 1920s Augustus John was the leading British portrait painter replacing John Singer Sargent. His most famous portrait is of Dylan Thomas.

One critic has claimed that "the painterly brilliance of his early work degenerated into flashiness and bombast, and the second half of his long career added little to his achievement."

Augustus John's promiscuity gave rise to rumours that he had fathered as many as 100 children over the course of his life.



Augustus John (1878–1961)
Colonel T.E. Lawrence
1919
80 x 59.7 cm
Tate, London

Augustus John (1878–1961), Colonel T.E. Lawrence, 1919, 80 x 59.7 cm, Tate, London

That merciless quality in John's portraiture made him the natural choice for the official portraits at the **Paris Peace Conference of 1919**, where the assembled delegates represented one of the most extraordinary gatherings of the twentieth century. Among them was **T. E. Lawrence**, already legendary as **Lawrence of Arabia** for his role as British military liaison officer during the **Arab Revolt of 1916 to 1918**, in which he helped co-ordinate the Hashemite uprising against the **Ottoman Empire**. At Paris he served as adviser and interpreter for the **Emir Feisal**, and John painted both men. The two had met before — John was irresistibly drawn to Lawrence's combination of physical compactness and enormous charisma. Lawrence's life was as compressed and contradictory as any of John's painted sitters. Born in **1888**, the illegitimate son of an Irish nobleman, he read History at **Jesus College, Oxford**, served throughout the Near Eastern campaign, and between **1922** and his death in **1935** deliberately retreated into the obscurity of enlisted life. His autobiographical account of the

revolt, **Seven Pillars of Wisdom**, became one of the most celebrated prose works of the century. He died that same year, thrown from a **Brough Superior** motorcycle on a Dorset road, aged forty-six.

Notes

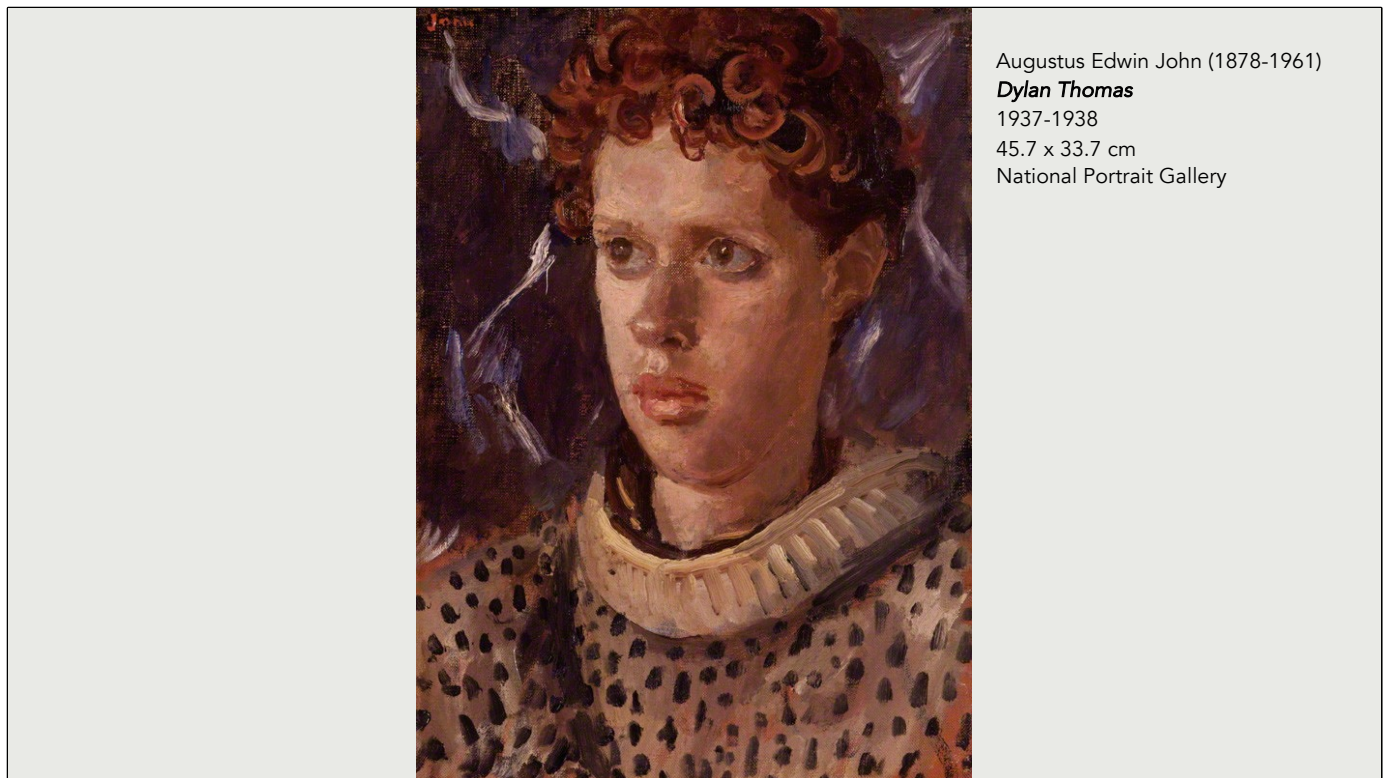
Tate website

'After service as a war artist in World War I, John found fashionable success with his portraits of famous literary and society figures such as Thomas Hardy, James Joyce and Lady Ottoline Morrell. Popularly known as 'Lawrence of Arabia', TE Lawrence became famous for his exploits as British Military liaison officer during the Arab Revolt of 1916-18. In 1919 he acted as adviser and interpreter for his friend the Emir Feisal at the Paris Peace Conference, where John painted many official portraits, including one of the Emir.'

Thomas Edward Lawrence (1888-1935) was known as Lawrence of Arabia because of his role during campaigns and the Arab Revolt against the Ottoman Empire during the First World War. He was the illegitimate son of an Irish nobleman and an illegitimate Scottish governess. The Irish nobleman left his wife to live with the governess and they called themselves Mr. and Mrs. Lawrence. Lawrence went to school in Oxford and later studied History at Jesus College, Oxford. He served in Egypt and Arabia during the war and later became a diplomat. Between 1922 and 1935 he served as an enlisted man, retired from public life and wrote his most famous book, *Seven Pillars of Wisdom* an autobiographical account of his participation in the Arab Revolt. In 1935, Lawrence was fatally injured in a motorcycle accident in Dorset. He was riding a Brough Superior SS100 motorcycle when a dip in the road obstructed a view of two boys on bicycles. He swerved to avoid them, lost control and was thrown over the handlebars and died six days later. His neurosurgeon began a life long study of head injuries of motorcyclists which led to the use of crash helmets by both military and civilian motorcyclists. There is no reliable evidence of his sexuality and his friends considered him asexual. There is indirect evidence that he was a homosexual but no partners have been identified. There is also some evidence that he was a masochist which one of his biographers has suggested was connected to the childhood beatings he received from his mother for routine misbehaviour.

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Augustus Edwin John (1878-1961)
Dylan Thomas
1937-1938
45.7 x 33.7 cm
National Portrait Gallery

Augustus Edwin John (1878-1961), Dylan Thomas, 1937-1938, 45.7 x 33.7 cm, National Portrait Gallery

From Lawrence of Arabia, we move to another figure whose legend was built as much on self-destruction as on art — **Dylan Thomas**, the Welsh poet whom Augustus John first encountered in the mid-1930s at the **Fitzroy Tavern** on Charlotte Street, one of Bohemian London's great gathering places. John introduced Thomas to **Caitlin Macnamara**, who became his wife in **1937**, and the friendship deepened through visits to Hampshire, where Caitlin's mother lived near John's own home. The portrait is one of two John made of Thomas and carries all the psychological weight the painter brought to his best sitters. Thomas was born in **1914** in Swansea and left school at sixteen. By twenty, his poem "**Light breaks where no sun shines**" had announced a voice unlike anything else in British poetry. Works like "**Do not go gentle into that good night**" and the radio play **Under Milk Wood** secured his reputation, but the man behind them was consuming himself. His marriage to Caitlin was, by most accounts including their own, defined by alcoholism and mutual devastation. He

travelled repeatedly to America in the early **1950s**, reading to rapturous audiences, but his health collapsed on his fourth visit to **New York**. He died in **1953**, aged thirty-nine.

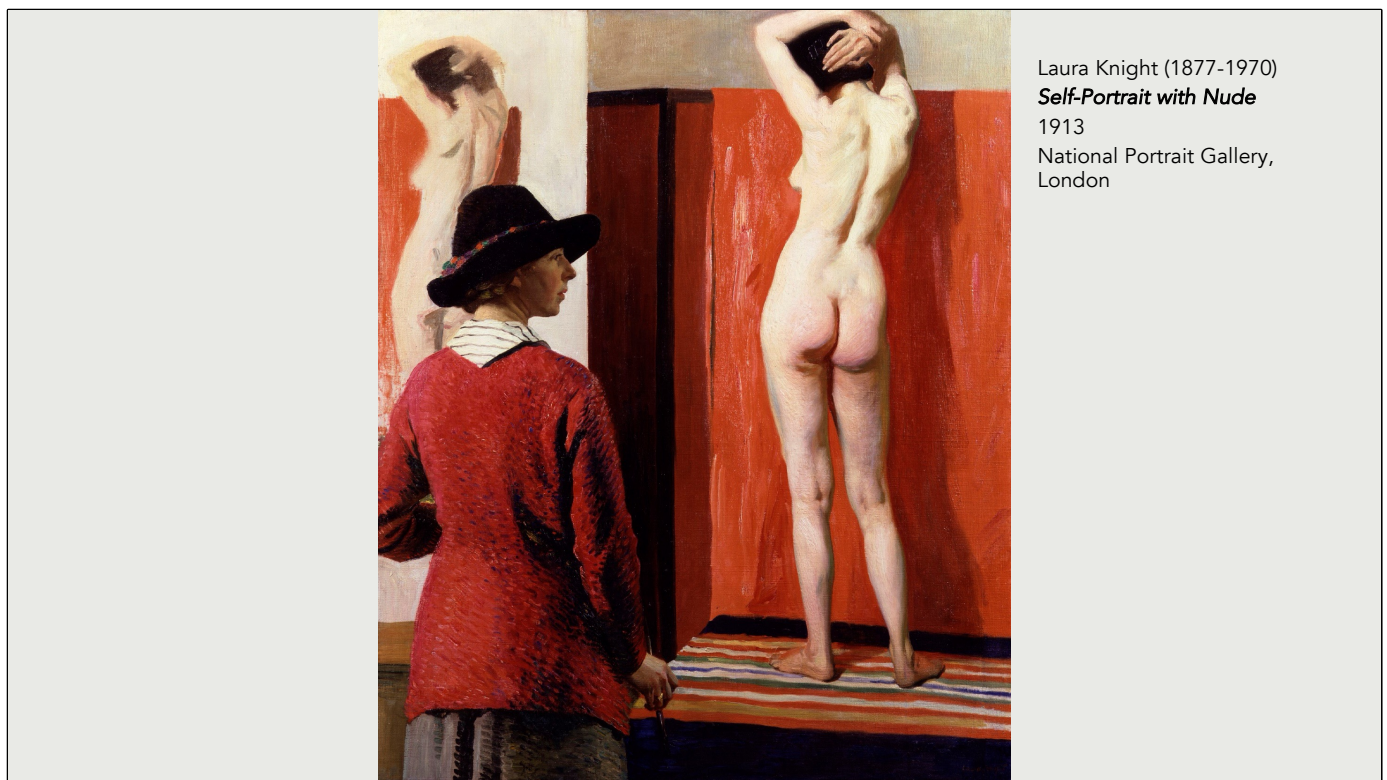
Notes

"This engaging portrait links one of the most important twentieth-century British portrait painters with one of the most significant and notorious literary figures of the period, Dylan Thomas (1914-1953). This portrait is one of two painted by Augustus John and is the product of a close acquaintance. The artist and sitter met in the mid-1930s at the Fitzroy Tavern in London's Charlotte Street, and furthered their friendship during many evenings there and in the nearby Marquis of Granby. John introduced Thomas to his future wife, Caitlin Macnamara. After their marriage in 1937, the Thomases met John fairly frequently whilst visiting Caitlin's mother who lived near John in Hampshire. It was in these circumstances that Dylan Thomas sat to Augustus John." (NPG)

Dylan Marlais Thomas (1914-1935) was a Welsh poet he poems "Do not go gentle into that good night" and "And death shall have no dominion"; the 'play for voices' Under Milk Wood; and stories and radio broadcasts. He acquired the reputation for being a drunken and doomed poet and died at the age of 39. He was an undistinguished pupil at school and left at 16 to become a journalist. When he was 20 'Light breaks where no sun shines' caught the attention of the literary world. He married in 1937 and he and his wife settled in a Welsh village and their relationship was defined by alcoholism and was mutually destructive.

He became a popular poet but found it difficult to earn a living and took work at the BBC reading tours and radio broadcasts.

He travelled to America in the 1950s and earned money reading but his drinking worsened. During his fourth trip to New York in 1953, Thomas became gravely ill and fell into a coma, from which he never recovered.



Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Self-Portrait with Nude
1913
National Portrait Gallery,
London

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Self-Portrait with Nude*, 1913, National Portrait Gallery, London

From one artist shaped by Bohemian London to another who moved between its margins and its institutions — **Laura Knight**, born in **1877**, is one of the most significant British figurative painters of the twentieth century, and one of the most consistently overlooked until recently. Her path to prominence was genuinely hard. Her father died shortly after her birth, her mother struggled financially, and Knight was teaching art herself by the age of fifteen. She studied at the **Nottingham School of Art**, met **Harold Knight** at seventeen, and married him in **1903**. Together they became central figures in the **Newlyn School** in Cornwall, alongside **Alfred Munnings**. The work that defines her legacy is "**Self Portrait with Nude**" of **1913**, in which she shows herself painting the artist **Ella Naper**, using mirrors to place the viewer in the position of someone entering the studio. The premise was pointed. As an art student, Knight had been refused access to life classes — only casts were permitted to women. **Edward Poynter**, the Slade's first principal, had acknowledged in his inaugural address of

1871 that women were "debarred from the same complete study of the model that is open to the male students." The painting was Knight's direct answer to that exclusion. The **Daily Telegraph** called it vulgar. The **National Portrait Gallery** eventually bought it.

Notes

Laura Knight (born Johnson) was an artist who worked in the figurative, realist tradition and was an English Impressionist. She was created a Dame in 1929 (aged 52) and was elected a Royal Academician in 1936, the first since 1778. Her large retrospective at the RA in 1965 was the first for a woman.

Her father died shortly after she was born and her mother struggled financially but managed to send her France to study in a Paris atelier. She returned and her mother managed to enrol her at the Nottingham School of Art aged 13. She started teaching art when she was 15 and her mother fell ill and won a scholarship and gold medal from the South Kensington Museum (which became the V&A in 1899). She met Harold Knight when she was 17 and they married in 1903 when she was 26.

She became a central figure in the Newlyn artists colony with Alfred Munnings.

In 1913, she painted a nude, *Self Portrait with Nude* showing her painting the artist Ella Naper. Using mirrors she painted herself and the model as seen from the point of view of someone entering the studio. As an art student she was not permitted to paint nude models, only casts, which she deeply resented. It was first shown in Newlyn and was well received but rejected by the RA. The *Daily Telegraph* art critic called it 'vulgar' and suggested it 'might quite appropriately have stayed in the artist's studio.' She continued to exhibit it throughout her career and it continued to receive criticism but it was purchased by the NPG after her death and is now considered both a key work in the story of female self-portraiture and as symbolic of wider female emancipation.

She painted the world of theatre and ballet and was a war artist during WWII. She was also interested in marginal groups, such as gypsies and circus performers.

A woman artist painting a nude was very difficult during the nineteenth century as few art schools allowed women students to attend life classes. One of the first was the Slade towards the end of the century. It was one thing to

paint a working class model another for a middle-class Slade woman student to pose naked. Women students painted themselves in the mirror and other women students but did not acknowledge this.

In 2015 Simon Schama described the painting as a "masterpiece" and "incomparably, her greatest work, all at once conceptually complex, heroically independent, formally ingenious and lovingly sensual."

Notes

Edward Poynter, first principal at the Slade, in his inaugural address in October 1871:

'There is unfortunately a difficulty which has always stood in the way of female students acquiring that thorough knowledge of the figure which is essential to the production of work of a high class; and that is, of course, that they are debarred from the same complete study of the model that is open to the male students...But I have always been anxious to institute a class where the half-draped model might be studied, to give those ladies who are desirous of obtaining sound instruction in drawing the figure, an opportunity of gaining the necessary knowledge...It is my desire that in all the classes, except of course those for the study of the nude model, the male and female students should work together.'

The Royal Academy did not allow women in its School although in 1860, Laura Herford was admitted by accident to the RA Schools after submitting drawings with only her initials, L.H. This was later called 'the invasion' and in the next ten years an additional 34 women were admitted as students.

Following a number of petitions it was resolved in 1883 to open a women-only class to sketch the partially draped figure but this was withdrawn a month later and women were not allowed to sketch the partially draped figure until 1893. By this time there were life classes for women across the country and the Royal Academy was perceived as old-fashioned.

Some facts about Dame Laura Knight,

Laura Knight (née Johnson, 1877-1970) one of the most famous and prolific female British artists started life in most impoverished circumstances, having to quickly learn how to fend for herself from an early age as together with her sister Eva ("Sis") she became orphaned in her late teens.

She was the first woman to be elected as a Royal Academician.

She was the only woman to be given War Commissions in the Two World Wars.

In 1946, at the age of 69! She was commissioned as the only British artist to cover the Nuremberg Trials.

The first female artist to be made a Dame of the British Empire at a time when such awards were rarely given and not so prolifically as today.

The first husband and wife to be Royal Academicians.

She became most famous in the 1920s, 1930.s and 1940.'s and then became known by the press as the grand old lady in the Art world; but kept on painting and exhibiting up to her death in her 93rd year

The first woman to have had a retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy.

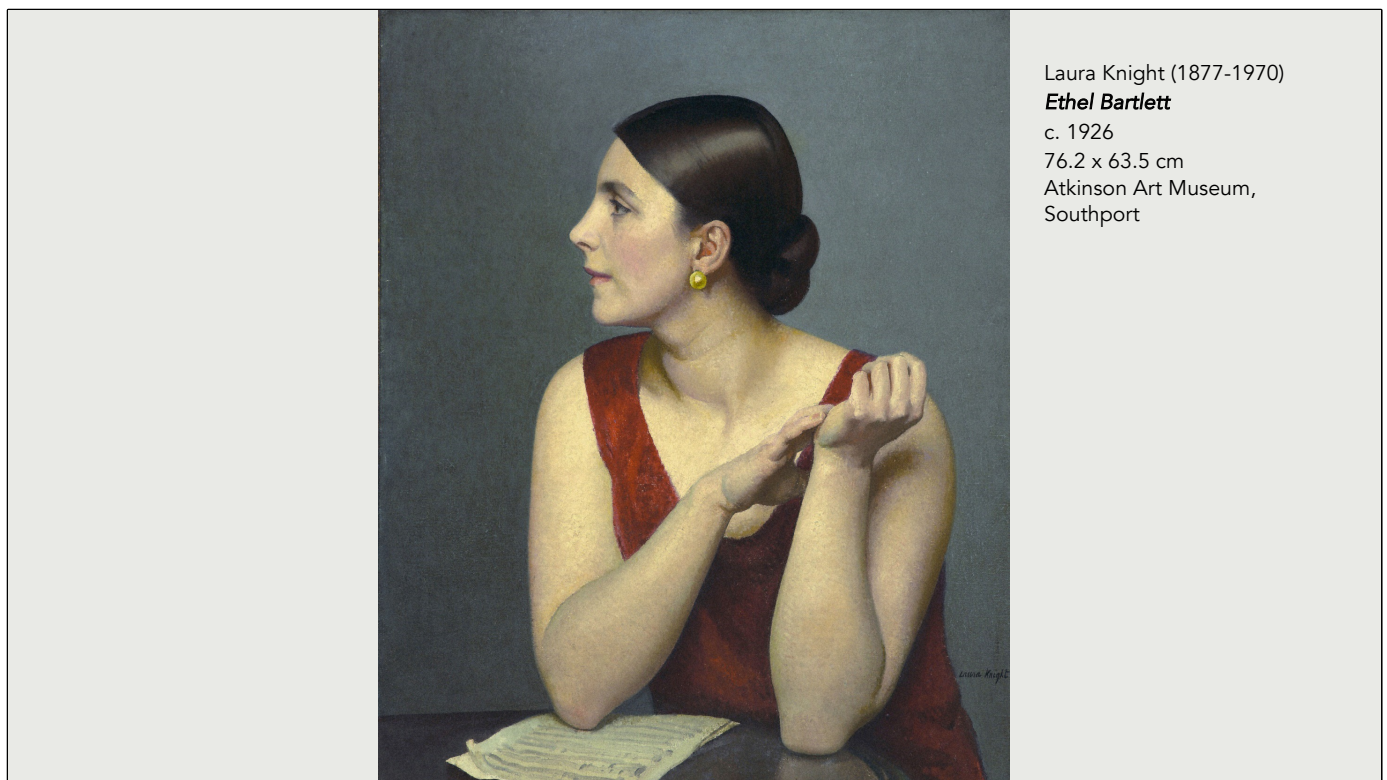
She exhibited every year from 1903 to her death in 1970 (67 years) at the Royal Academy except for 1918 when she was ill and 1922 when she was in USA). Such exhibits at the RA totaled same 284 works plus a further 176 at her retrospective exhibition. This number of works has not been exceeded by any other artist.

At the 1928 Summer Olympics in Amsterdam she won the Silver Medal in Painting for Boxer (1917).

She was also an author of three books, two autobiographies and one on the circus; wrote a play for Sir Barry Jackson and privately was a poet (none of which have yet been published).

References

<http://www.damelaurnight.com/>



Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Ethel Bartlett
c. 1926
76.2 x 63.5 cm
Atkinson Art Museum,
Southport

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Ethel Bartlett*, c. 1926, 76.2 x 63.5 cm,
Atkinson Art Museum, Southport

The wartime years tested the Knights in different ways. With **conscription** introduced in **1916**, Harold registered as a conscientious objector and was assigned agricultural labour. Laura, meanwhile, found her habitual subject matter — the Cornish coastline — closed off by wartime restrictions on painting near the shore. Yet the decade that followed produced some of her most assured portraiture. "**Ethel Bartlett**", shown at the **Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1926**, centred on a young pianist of striking presence who performed internationally as one half of a celebrated duet partnership with her husband **Rae Robertson**. Knight's handling of Bartlett's composure and intelligence confirmed her as the foremost painter of women in Britain at that moment, and the recognition gave her confidence to push further. Later that same year Harold travelled to **Baltimore** to paint portrait commissions at the **Johns Hopkins Hospital**, and Laura joined him. She was granted access to paint in the hospital's racially segregated wards, and there she met **Pearl Johnson**, a long-serving

nurse who became a close friend. Johnson was an active campaigner against segregation and took Knight to lectures and concerts, giving her direct exposure to what would become the early **Civil Rights movement**. The portrait of Johnson that emerged from these months stands among Knight's most searching and politically charged works.

Notes

During WWI, with the imposition of conscription in 1916, her husband Harold Knight, registered as a conscientious objector, and was eventually required to work as a farm labourer. Wartime censorship included restrictions on painting around the British coastline, which caused problems for Laura Knight.

This is one of her finest portraits. The sitter was Ethel Bartlett (1896-1978) a young pianist whose serene beauty captivated Knight and her husband Harold Knight. The sitter was the wife of the famous pianist Rae Robertson and they toured Europe and America as duet pianists. Shown at the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition of 1926, Ethel Bartlett confirmed Knight as the country's pre-eminent painter of women, a stamp of approval that freed her to take risks.

Later in 1926 Harold Knight spent several months at the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, in America, painting portrait commissions of surgeons. Laura joined him there and was given permission to paint at the Baltimore Children's Hospital and in the racially segregated wards of the Johns Hopkins Hospital. One of the most stunning results was a portrait of Pearl Johnson, a long-serving John Hopkins nurse who soon became a friend. An energetic campaigner against segregation, Johnson took Knight to lectures and concerts to observe this early phase of the Civil Rights movement.

Laura Knight (1877-1970, née Johnson)

English artist in the figurative, realist tradition who embraced Impressionism. She became one of the most successful and popular painters in Britain.

Her father died shortly after her birth and so she was brought up in tight financial circumstances. She was sent to France to study in an atelier at the age of 12 but she shortly returned and entered the Nottingham School of Art when she was 13 paying no fees. Her mother Charlotte Johnson did part-time work at the School. When she was 15 she took over her mother's teaching duties when her mother became seriously ill. She won a scholarship and a

gold medal from the South Kensington School.

She was criticized for 'drawing like a man' as she used thick outlines and drew from the shoulder rather than the wrist.

She gave private lessons to support herself and her sister, Sissie (Evangeline Agnes) when her mother, her other sister and her grandparents died.

She met Harold Knight, then aged 17, and the most promising student at the School and she was determined to copy his techniques. They became friends and were married in 1903.

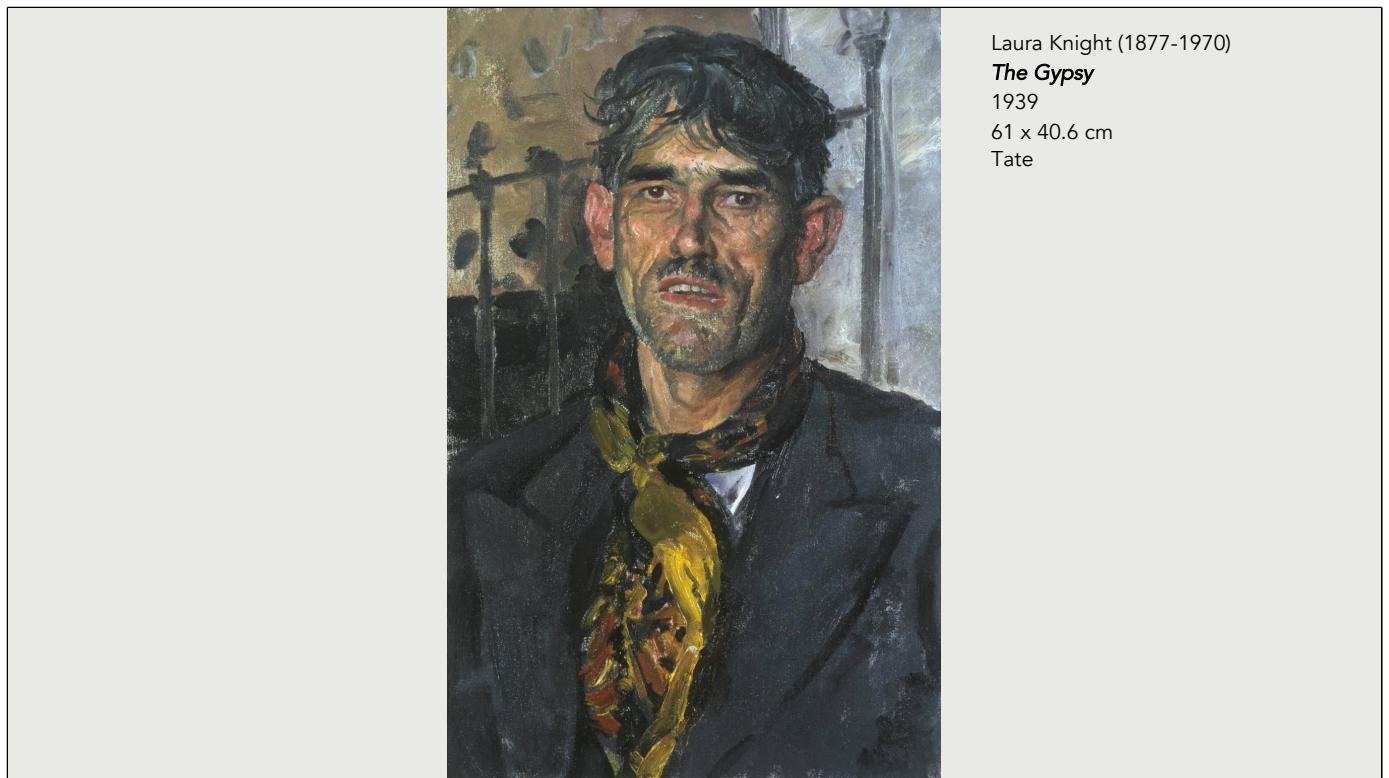
In 1894 they visited Staithes, a Yorkshire fishing community, to paint. They returned with Sissie to live and work there.

They also visited the artists colony at Laren in the Netherlands, a group of artists who had been painting in remote rural communities since 1850.

They moved to Newlyn in 1907 and then a nearby village called Lamorna. Laura and Harold Knight and Alfred Munnings became central figures in the artists colony. She found more freedom to express herself and developed a more Impressionistic style. About this time Knight began painting compositions of women in the open air, often on the rocks at Lamorna. Knight would sometimes use models from London who were prepared to pose nude.

Created a Dame in 1929 and in 1936 became the first woman to be elected as an Academician since its foundation

She painted the theatre, ballet and marginalised communities, such as gypsies and circus performers. She was a war artist during the Second World War.



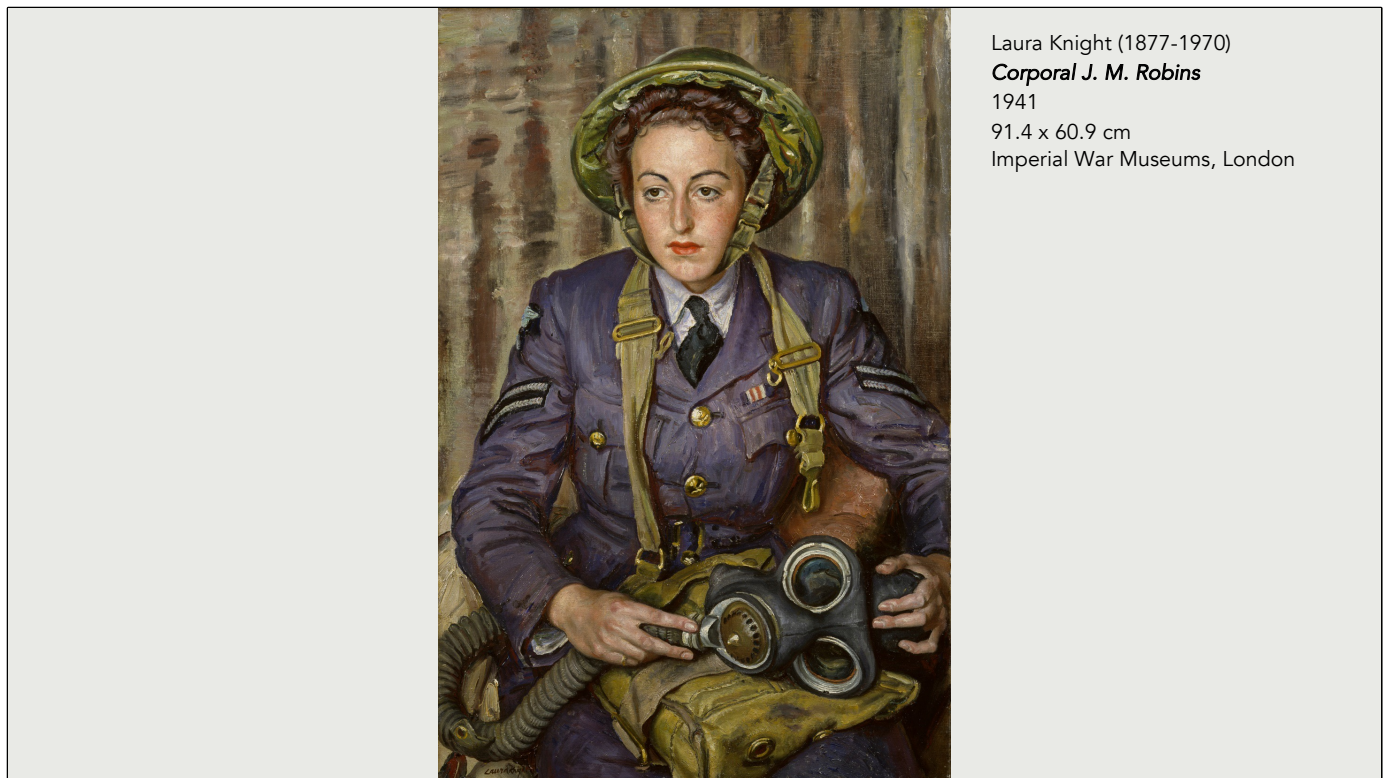
Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Gypsy*, 1939, 61 x 40.6 cm, Tate

The Baltimore experience deepened Knight's commitment to painting people outside the established social order — a commitment that had roots going back decades. Among the subjects she returned to repeatedly were the Romani communities she encountered at **Iver in Buckinghamshire**, and she wrote about one session with characteristic directness. In a letter dated **15 November 1957** she described her sitter: "He, a gentleman called Mr Smith, one wet day, at Iver, in the camp there near the railway, posed for me in a little lean-to tent — just a corner in shelter, crowded by a big double bed where an old gypsy and his wife slept. I painted it in three or four hours." She added that Smith appeared in several other works from **Iver**, including a family portrait now somewhere in Scotland, depicting his wife, three children, and his mother, whom Knight called "a beautiful old Romany, queen of the camp." What strikes us in that account is the complete absence of condescension. Knight was a guest in that tent, working fast, alive to what she called the dignity of her subjects. This instinct — to paint people on their own terms rather than as picturesque types — is what

separates her documentary impulse from the romanticised **Gypsy genre painting** fashionable among her contemporaries.

Notes

The artist wrote (15 November 1957): 'He, a gentleman called Mr Smith, one wet day, at Iver, Bucks, in the camp there near the railway, posed for me in a little lean-to tent - just a corner in shelter, crowded by a big double bed where an old gipsy and his wife slept. I painted it in 3 or 4 hours. ... I haven't anything more to say about that Mr Smith except that he figures in several other pictures I painted at Iver - one in particular, his whole family which is somewhere in Scotland - wife, three children and his mother, a beautiful old Romany, queen of the camp.'



Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Corporal J. M. Robins
1941
91.4 x 60.9 cm
Imperial War Museums, London

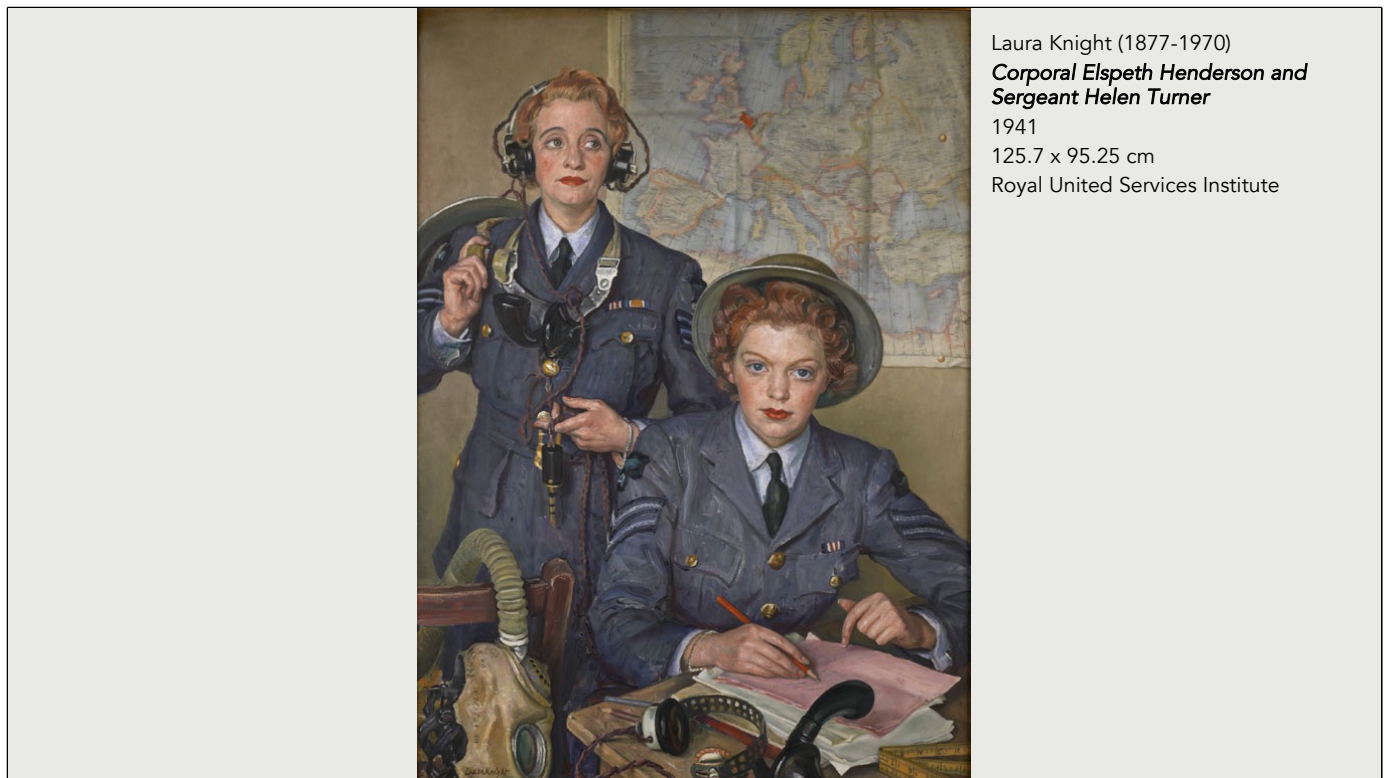
Laura Knight (1877-1970), Corporal J. M. Robins, 1941, 91.4 x 60.9 cm,
Imperial War Museums, London

That instinct to record people with dignity rather than spectacle carried Knight into some of the most demanding circumstances of her career. When the **Second World War** broke out, she was already in her seventies, yet she continued working, and she was not alone among British figurative artists in documenting the war's human cost. Knight's own contribution included the **Nuremberg trials** paintings, but the war produced other remarkable records of courage entirely outside the gallery world. The **London Gazette** of **20 December 1940** carried this citation: "Corporal Robins was in a dug-out which received a direct hit during an intense enemy bombing raid. A number of men were killed and two seriously injured. Though dust and fumes filled the shelter, Corporal Robins immediately went to the assistance of the wounded and rendered first aid. While they were being removed from the demolished dug-out, she fetched a stretcher and stayed with the wounded until they were evacuated. She displayed courage and coolness of a very high order in a position of extreme danger." The

citation is plain prose, but it functions as portraiture — it individuates a person under pressure, insisting on her specific actions. That impulse to make the individual visible against overwhelming circumstance is, in different materials, exactly what figurative painting does.

Notes

London Gazette, 20 December 1940: 'Corporal Robins was in a dug-out which received a direct hit during an intense enemy bombing raid. A number of men were killed and two seriously injured. Though dust and fumes filled the shelter, Corporal Robins immediately went to the assistance of the wounded and rendered first aid. While they were being removed from the demolished dug-out, she fetched a stretcher and stayed with the wounded until they were evacuated. She displayed courage and coolness of a very high order in a position of extreme danger.'



Laura Knight (1877-1970)
**Corporal Elspeth Henderson and
 Sergeant Helen Turner**
 1941
 125.7 x 95.25 cm
 Royal United Services Institute

Laura Knight (1877-1970), Corporal Elspeth Henderson and Sergeant Helen Turner, 1941, 125.7 x 95.25 cm, Royal United Services Institute

That citation from the London Gazette shows us exactly how language can do the work of portraiture — and Knight's painting of **Corporal Elspeth Henderson** and **Sergeant Helen Turner** carries that same impulse into oil on canvas. Both women served in the **Women's Auxiliary Air Force** and were awarded the **Military Medal for Bravery**, and their story is rooted in one of the most brutal weeks of the **Battle of Britain**. In the last days of **August 1940**, the Luftwaffe concentrated on destroying Fighter Command's airfields in the south-east, and **Biggin Hill** was hit repeatedly — six raids across three days. On **30 August**, nine Junkers 88 bombers struck the airfield with devastating effect. An air raid shelter was destroyed outright, and thirty-nine people were killed, including WAAFs sheltering in an adjacent slit trench. Henderson was on duty in the operations room throughout, maintaining the telephone link between Biggin Hill and **Fighter Command headquarters at Uxbridge** — a connection that kept British pilots in the air. When the bombing stopped, she and Turner were

among the first to dig survivors out of the rubble. Knight's task was to make two particular women visible within that catastrophe, to insist on individual faces and individual acts against the scale of industrial war.

Notes

Corporal Elspeth Henderson and Sergeant Helen Turner celebrates two young women in the Women's Auxiliary Air Force who were awarded the Military Medal for Bravery in recognition of the way they had stayed at their posts after their building received a direct hit.

In the last few days of August 1940 the Luftwaffe concentrated on knocking out the fighter airfields in the south-east of England; and Biggin Hill, one of the most important, suffered heavily.

During this period, when there were six raids in three days, the then Corporal Elspeth Henderson was on duty in the operations room, responsible for maintaining the vital contact between the airfield operations staff and the controllers at Fighter Command headquarters, Uxbridge.

On August 30 nine Junkers 88 bombers delivered a devastating attack on the airfield. An air raid shelter was completely destroyed, and a number of WAAFs sheltering in an adjacent slit trench were amongst the 39 people killed. Others were entombed, and Elspeth Henderson and Helen Turner were some of the first to help to dig them out.

References

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/obituaries/1527548/Elspeth-Green.html>



Laura Knight (1877-1970)
Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring
1943
86.3 x 101.9 cm
Imperial War Museum

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Ruby Loftus screwing a Breech-ring*, 1943, 86.3 x 101.9 cm, Imperial War Museum

From the airfield to the factory floor — Knight's next commission took her into equally unfamiliar territory. In the autumn of **1942**, the **War Artists' Advisory Committee** commissioned her to paint a portrait intended to bolster female recruitment to the ordnance factories, where the Ministry of Supply was alarmed by rising disaffection and absenteeism among women workers. The subject was **Ruby Loftus**, flagged to the committee as an outstanding factory worker. Knight had expected a studio portrait, but the Ministry insisted she be shown at the **Royal Ordnance Factory in Newport**, operating a lathe to produce a **Bofors breech ring** — the most technically demanding job in the factory, ordinarily requiring eight or nine years of training. Loftus was twenty-one, with no prior factory experience. Her presence at that machine was a deliberate publicity coup. For Knight, who had spent years painting circus performers and ballet dancers, industrial machinery was entirely new. Contemporary critics nonetheless praised her technical accuracy. The resulting canvas is the largest single-figure

portrait in the entire WAAC collection. First shown at the **Royal Academy on 30 April 1943**, it was reproduced in eight newspapers the following morning and featured in a **British Paramount News** cinema short. As Brian Foss notes in **War Paint**, published in 2007, the painting's success drove a string of further industrial commissions for Knight throughout the decade.

Notes

Miss Ruby Loftus had been brought to the attention of the War Artist's Advisory Committee as 'an outstanding factory worker'. Laura Knight was expected to paint a studio portrait but the Ministry of Supply requested that she be painted at work in the Royal Ordnance Factory in Newport.

Making a 'Bofors Breech ring' was the most highly skilled job in the factory, normally requiring eight or nine years training. Loftus was aged 21 at the time of the painting and had no previous factory experience. Her ability to operate the machine presented a considerable publicity coup at the time and she was probably placed at this machine for this reason.

Knight had been painting circus performers and ballet dancers; industrial machinery was a wholly new element in her work but her technical accuracy was praised in contemporary reports.

The painting received enormous publicity and was reproduced in most of the daily newspapers. Laura Knight was the most outstandingly successful women artist of the inter-war years and she was the best-known and most honoured woman artist. She did not conform to gender expectations and campaigned actively and vocally to become the first female Royal Academician since the founding membership. She wrote, 'Can Women Succeed as Artists?' and identified inequality of opportunity between men and women as the basis for the latter's near exclusion from the centre of the British art world.

It could be said that Knight, like Loftus, was proving herself in a traditionally male environment. However, the press and society at large identified Knight and Loftus not as beacons of gender equality but as outstanding exceptions whose achievements highlighted the limitations rather than the potential of other women.

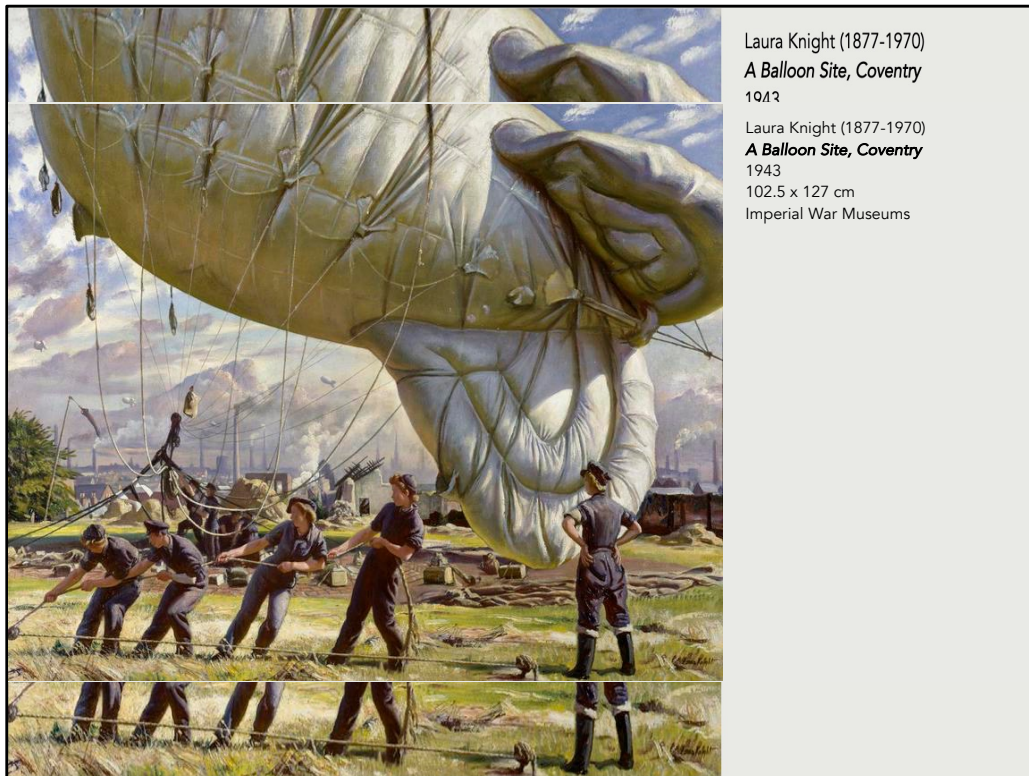
Notes

Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring (1943) – in the autumn of 1942 the WAAC commissioned Knight to paint a portrait to bolster female recruitment to the ordnance factories, as the Ministry of Supply were concerned at the level of disaffection and absenteeism among women in the factories. The resulting painting is one of the largest oil paintings in the entire WAAC collection, and the largest single figure portrait it acquired throughout the war. The painting was first shown on 30 April 1943 at the Royal Academy and the next day was reproduced in eight British newspapers. The painting, along with Knight and Loftus, also featured in a British Paramount News short film shown in cinemas, and was reproduced in a poster version by WAAC. The success of the painting led to further industrial commissions for Knight throughout the 1940s. In 1945 she painted Switch Works at Ellison Switchgear in Birmingham. This was followed by paintings of operations at the Dow Mac concrete railway-sleeper works and at the Skefko ball bearing factory

References

Imperial War Museum website

Brian Foss, *War Paint, Art, War, State and Identity in Britain, 1939-1945*, 2007



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *A Balloon Site, Coventry*, 1943, 102.5 x 127 cm, Imperial War Museums

The Ruby Loftus portrait was not Knight's only wartime commission to deploy female labour as patriotic spectacle. **A Balloon Site, Coventry**, painted in **1942**, returns to precisely that territory. The **War Artists' Advisory Committee** commissioned the work to recruit women into **Balloon Command**, the branch of the RAF responsible for operating the barrage balloons that defended British cities from low-level air attack. Knight's composition shows a team of women hauling an enormous balloon skyward, the industrial chimneys of Coventry massed behind them, framing the spire of **Coventry Cathedral** — a building that would, of course, become the war's most potent symbol of civilian destruction. The juxtaposition is striking: women's labour presented as both heroic and glamorous against a skyline already defined by sacrifice. Knight's ability to win these commissions reflected a career-long instinct for entering unfamiliar worlds — circus, ballet, factory floor, airfield — and rendering their inhabitants with documentary conviction. That instinct had earned her extraordinary

institutional recognition: a **Dame** in **1929**, and in **1936** the first woman elected to the **Royal Academy** since its foundation in **1768**. Her retrospective there in **1965** was, again, a first for a woman. These were not incidental honours — they marked a sustained breach in one of British art's most entrenched institutional barriers.

Notes

Laura Knight (1877-1970) was an English artist who worked in oils, watercolours, etching, engraving and drypoint. Knight was a painter in the figurative, realist tradition who embraced English Impressionism. In her long career Knight was among the most successful and popular painters in Britain. In 1929 she was created a Dame, and in 1936 became the first woman elected to the Royal Academy since its foundation in 1768. Her large retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1965 was another first for a woman. Although Knight was known for painting amidst the world of the theatre and ballet in London, and for being a war artist during the Second World War, she was also greatly interested in, and inspired by, marginalised communities and individuals, including Gypsies and circus performers. Her success in the male-dominated British art establishment paved the way for greater status and recognition for women artists.

Laura Johnson was born in Derbyshire and her father died shortly after she was born so she grew up in a family struggling with financial problems.

Her husband, Harold Knight registered as a conscientious objector, and was eventually required to work as a farm labourer. Wartime censorship included restrictions on painting around the British coastline, which caused problems for Laura Knight.

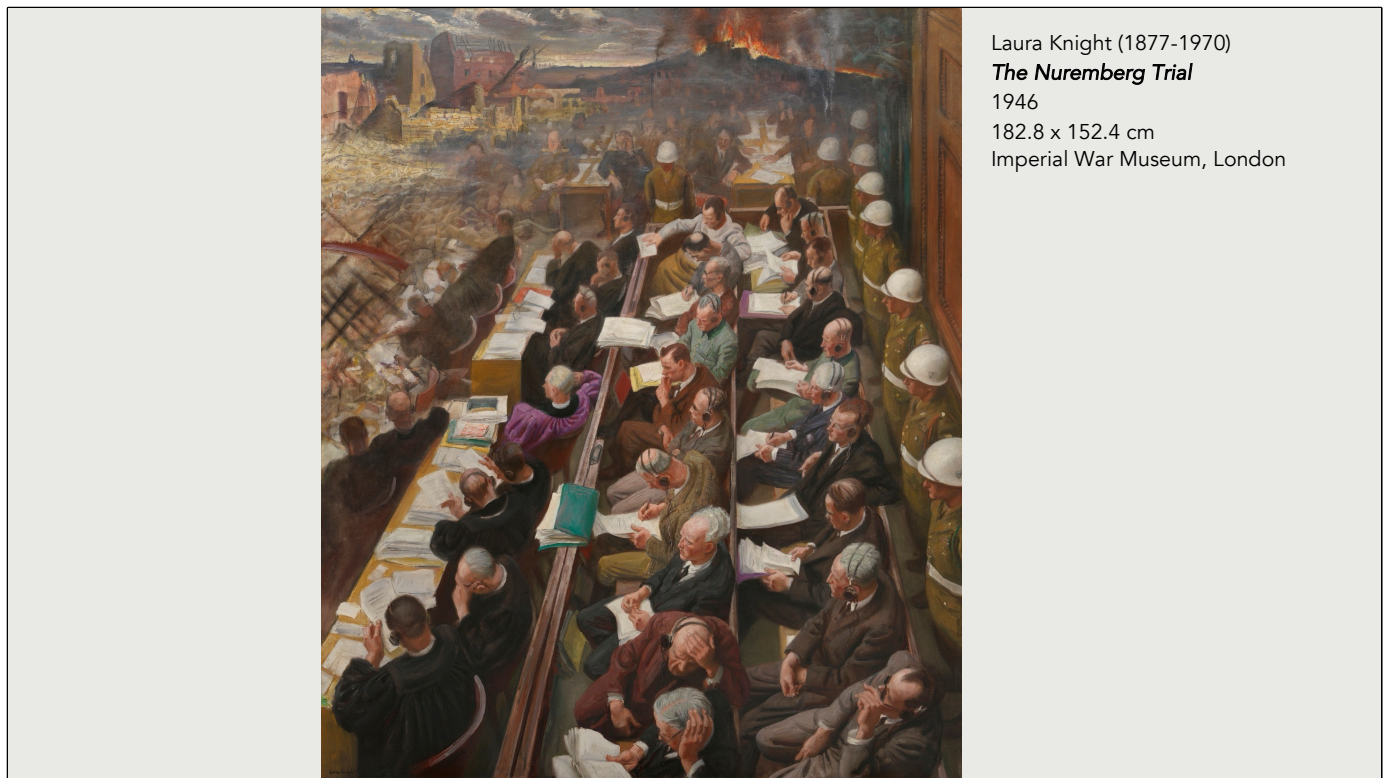
In September 1939 Knight was asked to produce a recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army. Knight hired two Suffolk Punch horses and a plough from a farmer and painted them outdoors in a cherry orchard on the Averills' farm in Worcestershire. Her original design for the WLA poster was rejected for placing too much emphasis on the horses rather than the women working. A new design, with a single woman, was accepted. Knight painted her 1940 Royal Academy entry, January 1940, showing a similar scene at the same time. During the Second World War, Knight was an official war artist, contracted by the War Artists' Advisory Committee on short-term commissions.

A Balloon Site, Coventry (1942) – shows a team of women hoisting a barrage balloon into position with the chimneys of industrial Coventry in the background surrounding the spire of Coventry Cathedral. WAAC commissioned the work as a propaganda tool to recruit women for Balloon Command, and Knight's composition succeeds in making the work appear both heroic and glamorous.

References

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Laura_Knight

<http://www.iwm.org.uk/collections/item/object/15503>



Laura Knight (1877-1970)
The Nuremberg Trial
 1946
 182.8 x 152.4 cm
 Imperial War Museum, London

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Nuremberg Trial*, 1946, 182.8 x 152.4 cm, Imperial War Museum, London

That instinct for entering forbidden or unfamiliar spaces reached its most extraordinary expression in **The Nuremberg Trial**, completed in **1946**. The **War Artists' Advisory Committee** sent Knight to Germany as an accredited war correspondent — she also made a special **BBC** broadcast from the city — and secured her a place in the broadcasting box directly above the defendants, close enough to make charcoal studies of the accused and their lawyers. The painting is structurally unusual. Behind and above the crowded courtroom, Knight opens the walls to reveal the rubble of **Nuremberg** itself — a landscape of desolation that hovers over the proceedings like a shared nightmare, connecting the men in the dock to the destruction they commissioned. The twenty-one defendants, including **Hermann Goering**, wear the cumbersome headphones required for translation, a detail that gives them an oddly mundane, bureaucratic quality. Eleven would be sentenced to death. Knight was, by her own account, deeply disturbed by what she heard during the trial, and that disturbance is

legible in the composition's unease. **Kenneth Clark** dismissed her work as mere commonplaceness, a verdict shaped less by looking than by snobbery — Knight had trained in **Nottingham**, not London, and Clark never quite forgave her for it.

Notes

The defendants are shown sitting on two benches with a line of military police behind them and two rows of lawyers in front of them. The rear and left walls of the court room are missing to show the rubble and bomb damage of the surrounding city.

Imperial War Museum, "Knight was appointed a 'war correspondent' for this commission and made a special BBC broadcast from Nuremberg. She gained special access to the broadcasting box just above the prisoners where she was able to make charcoal studies of the main protagonists amongst the lawyers and the accused. Her painting reproduces faithfully the courtroom scene and is, in effect, a group portrait of the prisoners who are shown wearing the cumbersome headphones necessary to hear a translation of the proceedings. Knight was deeply disturbed by what she heard during the trial and the painting shows a landscape of desolation floating above the courtroom like a shared nightmare. We are invited to contemplate the dreadful consequences of totalitarian power. The international tribunal at Nuremberg tried twenty-one leading Germans, headed by Hermann Goering. Eleven of the accused were sentenced to death, three to life imprisonment and a further four were given lesser prison terms."

Kenneth Clarke sneered at Laura Knight's work and described it as 'commonplaceness' because she had been trained in Nottingham rather than London.



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Laura Knight
The Nuremberg Trials
1946
Imperial War
Museum, London

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