



## GWEN JOHN (1876-1939)

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- This week is the first of two talks about a sister and brother, Gwen and Augustus John. Both became well known artists but their styles are completely different and many **people have projected their style onto their personality**. I will show that it is **misleading to explain an artists style from a simplistic descriptions of their personality** and even more misleading to assume their personality from their style.
- The two started out together in Tenby, Wales, went to the Slade together and later took very different paths. I will be **talking briefly about the two artists** and I will then show you the **work of Gwen John in chronological sequence** followed in my second talk by the work of Augustus John. To avoid confusion I will call them 'Gwen' and 'Augustus'.
- Let us look at their self-portraits together...

### NOTES

- There are few brother and sister artists. The most famous are perhaps Rosa Bonheur and her less well-known brother Auguste, an animal painter. John Brett, the Pre-Raphaelite-style artist and his

sister Rosa Brett. Hilda Carline, first wife of Stanley Spencer, had two brothers who were artists, Richard and Sydney. Marcel Duchamp had a sister Suzanne who was a Dada artist. Anne, Barbara, Charlotte, Jane and Patrick Nasmyth were all artists and children of artist Alexander Nasmyth. There was also the Peale family of American artists.

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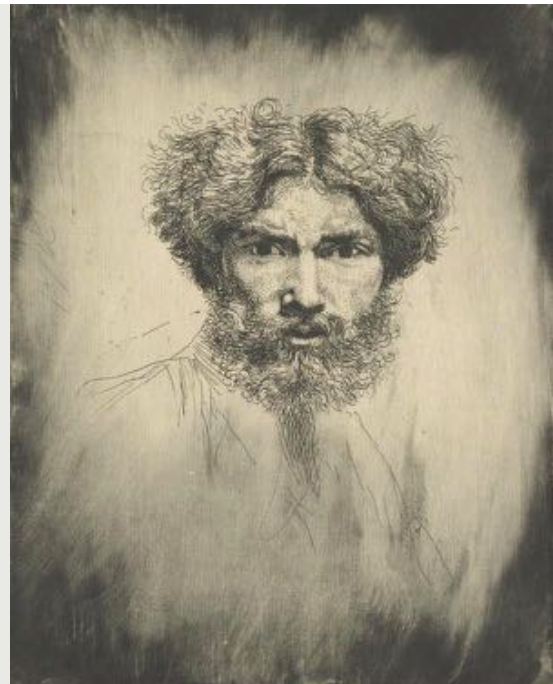
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- If I have forgotten to reference any work then please let me know and I will add a reference or delete the information.



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Self-Portrait*, 1902, 44.8 x 34.9 cm, Tate



Augustus John (1878-1961), *Tete Farouche (or Portrait of the Artist)*, c. 1900, 28.40 x 22.50 cm, Scottish National Gallery

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Self-Portrait*, 1902, 44.8 x 34.9 cm, Tate

Augustus John (1878-1961), *Tete Farouche* (literally 'Wild Head' or *Portrait of the Artist*), c. 1900, etching on paper, 28.40 x 22.50 cm, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art

- You can see immediately why it was assumed that Gwen was quiet, intense, reserved and introverted and Augustus was a social, wild extrovert. But we shall see it was not that simple.
- Gwen, Augustus and their two siblings were Welsh. Their **mother Augusta** (1848-1884) was often ill and **died when Gwen was eight** which is when they **moved to Tenby**. Their **father Edwin** (1847-1938) was a **solicitor and cold and distant** although not completely uncaring. He used to write to her frequently but when he died Gwen didn't go to his funeral.
- As I said, it is very easy to look at their art and equate it with an imagined personality but listen to what Augustus wrote about his sister, "**Gwen and I were not opposites, but much the same really, but we took a different attitude. I am rarely 'exuberant'.**"

She was always so; latterly in a tragic way. She wasn't chaste or subdued, but amorous and proud. She didn't steal through life, but preserved a haughty independence which some people mistook for humility. Her passions for both men and women were outrageous and irrational. She was never 'unnoticed' by those who had access to her."

- It is worth considering his words, she was exuberant, full of energy, excitement, and cheerfulness. She was proud and haughty but also outrageously passionate.
- We also know that Augustus would visit exhibitions of her art and peer obsessively at her pictures and when the critics ignored her work at one exhibition he wrote, **"To me the little pictures are almost painfully charged with feeling, even as their neighbours are empty of it. Gwen's pictures are simply staggering."** While he became a leading figure in the art world her work was largely ignored by the critics until about 1926 when she had her first solo exhibition. Augustus saw her as much the greater artist. He once said **"Fifty years after my death I shall be remembered as Gwen John's brother."** That would have been 2011 as he died in 1961 and he was right, she was by then regarded as one of the **most important British artists of the 20th century** and he had been largely forgotten to the extent that the retrospective at the Tate in 2004 felt that it had to reclaim his reputation. In the last few years his reputation has been on the rise.
- Commentators often emphasise their differences and describe **Gwen simplistically as a recluse who had an affair with Rodin and painted quiet interiors with solitary women** and **Augustus as a wild bohemian, a society portrait painter who is rumoured to have fathered over 100 children** through his numerous affairs.
- This is correct as far as it goes but the reality was far more

complex ...

## **NOTES**

- Thornton John was the eldest, then Gwen, then Augustus and the youngest was Winifred.
- 'Following a **long and obsessive love affair with Rodin** in Paris, she increasingly searched for isolation and solitude which was illustrated in her intensely personal studies of interiors and solitary figures. Her methodical technique and palette of subtle mauves and blue-greys is in direct contrast with the bravura and brilliance of Augustus' colours.' (Tate, Gwen John and Augustus John exhibition 2004-2005, website)
- 'Gwen John trained at the Slade School of Art in London. As a woman in a career still largely dominated by men, including her successful brother Augustus, Gwen had to struggle for recognition. It has been suggested that the self-scrutinising intensity of this image, and the isolation of the figure, registers this, but the figure retains its privacy. In recent years, her reputation has grown and now eclipses that of Augustus.' (Tate display caption)
- 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.'

## **BIO:JOHN,GWEN**

- **Gwendolen Mary John (22 June 1876 - 18 September 1939, died aged 63)** 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. She lived with Augustus and other students at 21 Fitzroy Street which was an ex-brothel. The landlady was an eccentric mature student at the Slade. They lived together on fruit and nuts and even as students her brother's personal glamour made him a celebrity. Her friends included **Ida Nettleship, Ursula Tyrwhitt, Edna Waugh and Gwen Salmond**. The group were known as the 'nursery' as they acted in a childlike manner—they gave each other names from Jungle Book. Ida was at the Slade for six years, in Italy in 1897 and in Paris with Gwen in 1898. She was engaged to Clement Salmond but switched to Augustus who she married in 1901. Ursula was the daughter of a clergyman and her father sent her to Paris when he thought she was getting too close to Augustus. Edna Waugh (1879-1979) was the most. Beautiful and talented. She started at the Slade when she was 14 and won many prizes. She married but her husband would not let her continue with her art. She had a nervous breakdown and he relented. She had her own studio, exhibited, was described as the 'most imaginative artist in England' and lived till she was 100.
- **Gwen 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-scrutinising intensity of this image, and the isolation of the figure, registers some sense of this struggle.

- She went to Paris in 1898 and attended James McNeill Whistler's Académie Carmen and was influenced by his tonal approach. She settled in Paris in 1904 and worked as a model, becoming Rodin's mistress and immersing herself in the artistic world of the metropolis. Rodin stopped seeing Gwen in about 1913 and he died in 1917. She always referred to herself as his 'little wife'. 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 Whistler. She developed a complex numerical system for describing tones which has still not been fully decoded by scholars.
- 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 jeopardised 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.

- In 1911 she moved to a top-floor flat at 29 rue Terre Neuve in Meudon, about five miles from the Eiffel Tower. She was frugal and solitary and Rodin was reducing her visits. She became a Roman Catholic. She exhibited in Paris for the first time in 1919 at the Salon d'Automne, and exhibited regularly until the mid-1920s, after which time she became increasingly reclusive and painted less.
- She had only one solo exhibition in her lifetime, in London in 1926 and that confirmed her reputation as a leading twentieth-century artist. With the money from the sales she purchased a bungalow in Meudon and built a wall round it. In December 1926, distraught after the death of her old friend Rilke, she met and sought religious guidance from her neighbour, the neo-Thomist (Thomas Aquinas) Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain. She also met Maritain's sister-in-law, **Vera Oumançoff** (pronounced 'oo-man-soff'), with whom she fell passionately in love although it is unlikely it had physical expression. Gwen was never attracted physically or emotionally by lesbians although they found her attractive. The relationship ended in 1931 and in the last eight years of her life she lived as a recluse. She only had her cats for company and eat so little she could hardly stand. Her last dated work is a drawing of 20 March 1933, and no evidence suggests that she drew or painted during the remainder of her life. In 1939 no wishing to live in another war-

torn country she travelled to Dieppe en route to England but she fell ill on the way and died and was buried as a pauper in an unmarked grave.

- Quotes
  - "I think if we are to do beautiful pictures, we ought to be free from family conventions and ties"
  - She wrote to Rodin, "If you chide me do it gently as to a child."
  - "In talking, shyness and timidity distort the very meaning of my words, I don't pretend to know anybody well. People are like shadows to me and I am like a shadow."
  - She told a friend: "When I was a child, I used to cry all the time."

### **COMPARISON**

- Essay on Gwen John by John Rothenstein commented that they were "in every respect the opposite" but Augustus disagreed and he wrote:
  - Common contempt for sentimentality
  - Augustus is not 'exuberant' she was always so, latterly in a tragic way
  - Gwen was not chaste or subdued but amorous and proud
  - She preserved a haughty independence which some thought was humility
  - Her passions for both men and women were outrageous and irrational
  - She was never 'unnoticed' by those who met her
- Both were confident in their talent and both went to the Slade
- Both followed a traditional path after the Slade based on portraiture

- Both rejected realism and believed they must take their cue from the subject
- Both followed their imagination and both looked for escape
- Both produced works of passion based on a selfish preoccupation with their own ideas
- Gwen was introvert, Augustus extrovert but both sought to find areas not occupied by others
- Look at their drawing of each other and of their closest friends
- Look at portraits of Dorelia:
  - Augustus - gypsy, exterior, distant, landscape, a before story has begun
  - Gwen - refuge, retreat, interior, closed room, story after it has been told

### **TIMELINE**

- Augustus - praised from 1899, compared with Sickert, declined around 1916 in the eyes of critics but he was still a fashionable portrait painter
- Gwen was largely ignored
- 1899 finish Slade
- 1903 both go to Paris and do not mix with trendy modern artist, later Augustus meets Modigliani and Epstein.
- 1902-03 Dorelia McNeill (1881-1969, outlives them), menage á quatre
- 1904 Dorelia and Gwen go on a walking tour to Toulouse (Rome was the aim), they then go on the Paris. Dorelia 'elopes' with a Belgian artist to Brussels. Gwen writes to Augustus and he goes to Brussels and takes her back to Essex. Gwen stays in Paris. There is a manage á trois of Augustus, Ida and Dorelia.
- 1905 Augustus, Ida and Dorelia go to Paris.

- 1903-08 Gwen didn't exhibit because of her affair with Rodin (he was 64 and she was 28).
- 1907-14 Augustus triumphs, Gwen does some of her best work but unrecognised. 1907 Ida dies leaving five children. Dorelia brings them up plus her two and two more later. Gwen went her separate way.
- 1910 American patron John Quinn funds Gwen.
- 1911 Gwen goes to Meudon (just outside Paris) and becomes deeply involved with religion.
- 1926 Gwen is increasingly admired ('a sort of modern Vermeer') and Augustus is in decline with the critics but still a famous society portrait painter.

### **HISTORY OF THE LIFE CLASS**

- Hogarth has male and female models.
- The Royal Academy had female models from the beginning (1769) but only for men over 20 or married. There were four male models to every one female model and the female model cost double the male. On the continent there were only male models.
- In 1841 the census had 278 professional women artists and by the 1871 census there were 1,069.
- The first woman student was Laura Herford in 1860. She only got in because she signed the application form L. Herford. They wanted to exclude her but discovered nothing in the rules excluded women so more women students joined over the years. In 1893 women could draw the draped male model but in a different room from men. This changed to the male nude in 1903.
- The Schools of Design. Had only plaster casts to draw.
- In 1871 the Slade opened for male and female students. 1871-75 Poynter ran it, and from 1875 Legros. By the 1890s two-thirds of

the students were women. Men and women drew statues together but the life class was segregated. For women the male model was draped but the female model was nude.



Gwen John (1876–1939), *Landscape at Tenby with Figures*, c. 1896-97, 46 × 57 cm, Tenby Museum & Art Gallery



Augustus Edwin John (1878–1961), *Moses and the Brazen Serpent*, 1898, 149.9 x W 213.4 cm, UCL Art Museum, Summer Composition, First prize, 1898

Gwen John (1876–1939), *Landscape at Tenby with Figures*, c. 1896-97, 46 × 57 cm, Tenby Museum & Art Gallery

- Let us start at the beginning. This is the **earliest known painting by Gwen** and she probably painted it in **1896 when we know she returned briefly to Tenby from the Slade**. The older woman in the picture is her **younger sister Winifred**. (CLICK) This is a photograph to show that although the landscape is roughly accurate she has used chiaroscuro (contrasting light and dark) to create drama but also, contradictorily a sense of peace and timelessness. The upturned face of the child creates a central pivot and focus point.

## NOTES

- Their parents were Edwin William John and his wife Augusta (née Smith). They had four children Thornton, Gwen, Augustus and Winifred. Their Edwin was a dour solicitor who cast a chill over the

family. Their mother Augusta suffered from ill health and was often absent leaving the two girls to look after the family.

Augusta was an amateur water-colourist and **both parents encouraged their children's interest in art and literature.**

Augusta died in 1884 when Gwen was eight and the family moved to Tenby where Gwen and Winifred were taught by a governess. The children often went to the coast to sketch gulls, shells and fish but we don't have examples of their early work.

- The above painting by Gwen John is the only known time she painted her hometown, Tenby.



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Portrait of Mrs Atkinson*, c. 1897-98, 30.5 × 31.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Portrait of Mrs Atkinson*, c. 1897-98, 30.5 × 31.1 cm, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York

Augustus John (1878-1961), *An Old Lady*, c. 1898-99, 68.6 × 55.8 cm, Tate

- Gwen trained at the **Slade School of Art from 1895 to 1898** where her younger brother, Augustus John, had already begun his studies. Although Gwen was two years older it took her longer to convince her father she would be safe in London. The Slade (founded 1871) was the only art college at the time that took women students.
- **They lived at 21 Fitzroy Street** (now an office block nestling below the BT Tower) an area **notorious for its brothels**. The landlady, Mrs Everett, was an eccentric mature student at the Slade. This is a painting of her cleaner **Mrs Atkinson**. There is a sheep's skull on the mantelpiece although this is not thought to be symbolic. Simon Schama notes that she is "**glancing anxiously sideways, uncertain of what is wanted of her.**"
- Gwen and Augustus had little money and survived on fruit and nuts



and even as students her brother's personal glamour made **him** a celebrity. She made many friends and the group **Ida Nettleship, Ursula Tyrwhitt, Edna Waugh and Gwen Salmond** were known as the 'nursery' as they acted in a childlike manner—they gave each other names from Jungle Book. Ida Nettleship became the first wife of her brother.

- It is a **tonal painting** which means she used a limited palette, here rich earth colours, and varied the **tonal values**. This is an **important point in understanding Gwen's later paintings**. She used a limited colour palette but varied the tone, that is **how light or dark** she made the colours. There are three technical things the artist needs to consider:
  - First, **the colour** which is more accurately known as the **hue**.
  - Second, **the tone**, that is how light or dark it is. If we take a hue and add white it is called a **tint**. If we add black it is called a **shade**. A wide range of tones of a single hue is used by Gwen to give visual depth.
  - Finally, there is **the chroma**, also called the **saturation or intensity** of the hue. This is also called the **purity of the hue** and is changed by adding **grey of the same tone**. If we add grey of the same tone **the intensity or chroma of the hue is reduced**. I think you can see that all three **hue, tone and chroma** are interrelated and the artist controls those elements to create a **picture of a certain feel**.

## NOTES

- **Hue** is what we normally call colour. Value or **tone** is how light or dark it is, and **chroma** or saturation or intensity is the purity of the colour, think of the effect of adding grey of the same value as a colour to change its chroma.
- If white is added to a colour the result is called a **tint**. If black is added to a colour the result is called a **shade**. Adding grey

creates a tone. A wide range of tones of a colour will often give visual depth even when a limited palette of colours is used.

- **Edna Waugh** (1879-1979) was the **most beautiful and talented**. She started at the Slade when she was 14 and won many prizes. She married but her husband would not let her continue with her art. She had a nervous breakdown and he relented. She had her own studio, exhibited, was described as the '**most imaginative artist in England**' and lived till she was 100.
- It is a sheep skull on the mantelpiece next to Mrs Atkinson. Simon Schama wrote that she is "glancing anxiously sideways, uncertain of what is wanted of her." (*The Face of Britain: A History of the Nation Through Its Portraits*, 2016)

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Gwen John (1876-1939), *Interior with Figures*, c. 1898-99, 46 × 33.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne, Australia



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Interior with Figures*, c. 1898-99, 46 × 33.4 cm, National Gallery of Victoria (NGV), Melbourne, Australia

- This is an early picture painted during her **last year at the Slade School of Art** or the following year. She painted fewer than **200 paintings in her lifetime** and several thousand drawings. Her technique involved careful planning and many sketches. She would then paint rapidly and if she was not happy with the result start again.
- Her pictures are all modest and unassuming and they derive their power from their **quiet presence. The palette is restricted and they are small in size.** The subject matter is restricted mostly consisting of a single girl or woman or a small group in an interior space. Although she did a few sketches of men she never painted any pictures of men except for a watercolour in 1897 that included her brother and Michael Salaman . There is no obvious story or message or symbolism behind her pictures. They are the timeless statement of a quiet moment.

- She wrote, "**As to whether I have anything worth expressing ... I may never have anything to express except this desire for a more interior life.**" [1]

### **NOTES**

- More than a third of her paintings are in public collections and more than 1,000 drawings are at the National Museum of Wales, Cardiff. Most of her letters and papers are preserved in public collections.

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Gwen John (1876-1939), *Self-portrait*,  
c. 1900, 61 x 37.8 cm, National  
Portrait Gallery



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Self-portrait*, c. 1900, 61 x 37.8 cm, National Portrait Gallery, given by the Art Fund to mark Sir Alec Martin's 40 years service to the fund, 1965

- If you wish to read personality into a portrait then this perhaps shows her haughty side that Augustus referred to.
- **She went to Paris in 1898** and attended James McNeill **Whistler's Académie Carmen** and was influenced by his tonal approach. **She settled in Paris in 1904** and **worked as a model, becoming Rodin's mistress** and immersing herself in the artistic world of the metropolis. Rodin stopped seeing Gwen in about 1913 and he died in 1917. She always referred to herself as his '**little wife**'. She lived in France for the rest of her life, exhibiting on both sides of the Channel.
- 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 diaries 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.**



Gwen John (1876-1939),  
*The Student*, 1903-4,  
56.1 x 33.1 cm,  
Manchester City Art  
Galleries



Augustus John (1878-1961),  
*Woman Smiling*, 1908-9,  
221 x 123.8 cm, Tate

Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Student*, 1903-4, 56.1 x 33.1 cm,  
Manchester City Art Galleries

James McNeill Whistler (1834–1904), *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1*, 1871, 144.3 x 162.4 cm, Musée d'Orsay

- This is the last work by Augustus I will be showing in this talk and I am showing it to explain a complex relationship.
- Early in 1901, **John married Ida Nettleship** (1877–1907), daughter of the artist John (Trivett) Nettleship, and a fellow student at the Slade. She quickly became pregnant and found being a mother a full-time job which meant she had to stop painting.
- Then in **1903, just before she settled in Paris Gwen met the women shown in both portraits, Dorothy McNeill** (1881-1969, who outlived them both) **known as Dorelia** (pronounced 'door-el-ee-ur'), and **Gwen introduced her to Augustus.**
- The later portrait of **Dorelia on the right by Augustus shows her dressed as a gypsy.** Throughout his life Augustus John was interested in Romani people whom he referred to as gypsies.

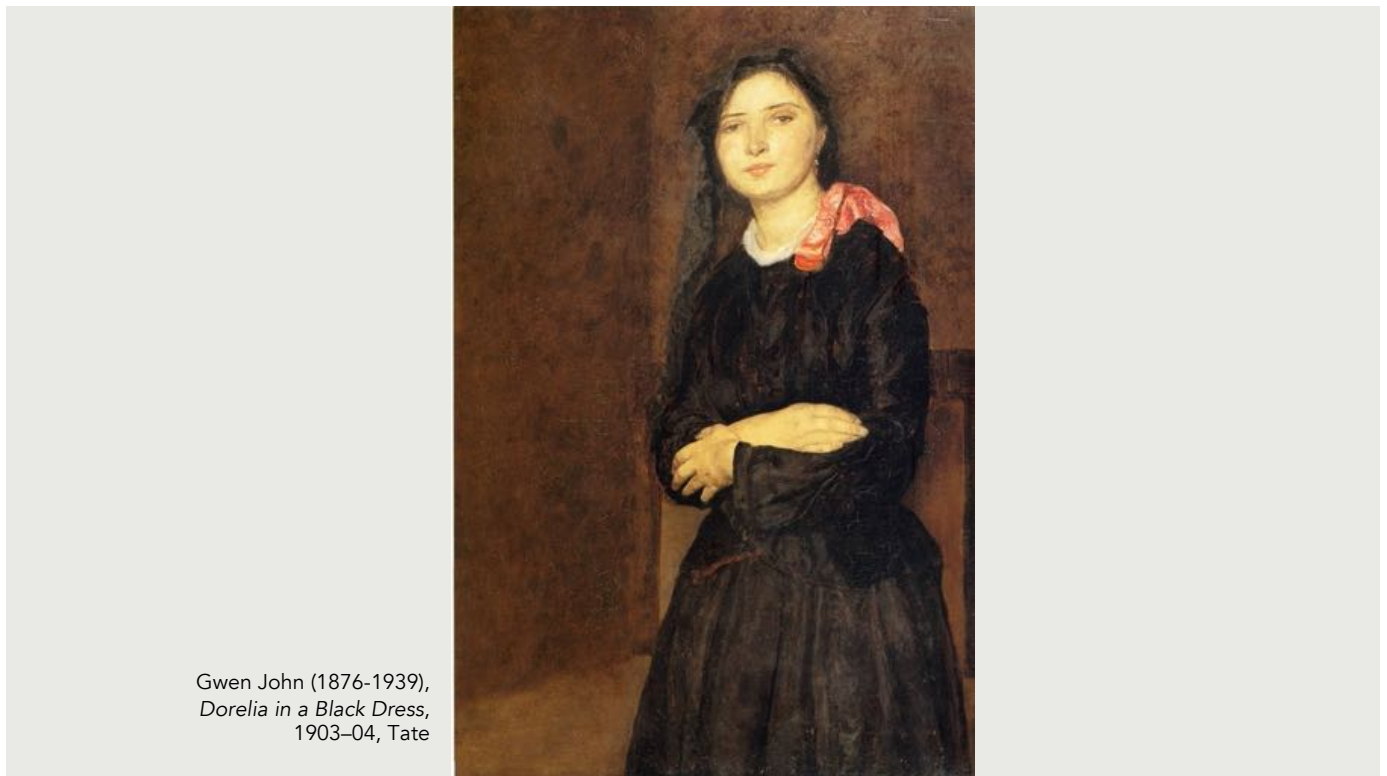
- Shortly after **Gwen and Dorelia met they 'eloped' together intending to hike to Rome**. They slept rough and had little to eat and walked a hundred and fifty miles to Toulouse before ending their journey. On the way **Gwen insisted that Dorelia carry all her equipment** so that her artist's hands would not be damaged. When they reached **Toulouse they rented a cheap room where this painting on the left and three other pictures were painted**.
- Gwen's Dorelia wears a simple dress buttoned up to the neck and tied at the waist. **Her face looks thinner** than in the painting by Augustus, perhaps because they have walked 150 miles with little food. There are two large books on the table and we can see the top one is called '**La Russie**' (pronounced 'la roosey') or '**Russia**'. She holds a third book loosely by her side. A black garment on the table and a **yellowish light, perhaps from a candle** or table lamp lights her face from below. She is quieter, contemplative, studious and immersed in thought. We expect her to sit down and start reading.
- Unlike the society portrait we just saw **neither portrait gives us a clue about the rank and status** of the sitter. Neither names the sitter and so they could be assumed to represent a type of person rather than a particular person.
- **An important difference between the artists is that we get the feeling that everything in a painting by Augustus is about to happen and in Gwen's it happened long ago**. In other words an Augustus painting is the beginning of a story and a painting by Gwen it all happened long ago. This feeling of timelessness we also find in **Vermeer** which is why she has been compared with him.
- You can also see from this pair of paintings that **Dorelia was an excellent model** as she could **adopt the personality required by the artist**.



- But was Gwen trying to **capture character**? There is an interesting anecdote. In 1898, Gwen attended American artist James McNeill Whistler's art school in Paris. When **Whistler met Augustus** in the Louvre, Augustus asked him whether he agreed that Gwen was **skilled in capturing character**. 'Character?' retorted Whistler, who had **taught Gwen the art of tonal relationships**, 'What's that? Your sister has a fine sense of **tone**'. So, like Whistler's painting *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 1* colloquially known as *Whistler's Mother*, it might simply be an arrangement of tones.
- After Gwen died in 1939 Dorelia said, "**She was extremely strange and hard ...always attracted to the wrong people for their beauty alone. But her work was more important than anyone.**" (Augustus's biography by Michael Holroyd)

## NOTES

- It has been suggested that women, like Dorelia, who are posing in picturesque clothing for an artist become **simply accessories** to, and symbols of, male genius. In this context Gwen's picture of a woman **wearing everyday clothes** does not label her as a model but as another person. In addition, she is a studious and intellectual woman.



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Dorelia in a Black Dress*, 1903–04, Tate  
Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres (1780–1867), *Mademoiselle Caroline Rivière*, 1806, 100 × 70 cm, Louvre

- **Gwen painted this at the end of their journey through France**, sleeping rough and earning money from sketching and singing. By the end of their journey they were **exhausted and undernourished**. This was painted during their three months' stay in Toulouse with another called *Dorelia by Lamplight, at Toulouse*. Both were painted directly on to the canvas **without any underdrawing**.
- Dorelia McNeill met Gwen John while attending the **Westminster School of Art in 1903** and Gwen introduced her to Augustus. She has also been described as a **typist from Camberwell**.

### NOTES

- *Dorelia by Lamplight, at Toulouse* sold at Sotheby's in 2014 for \$509,000 against an estimate of \$120,000-180,000.

### REFERENCES

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/john-dorelia-in-a-black-dress-n05910>



Gwen John (1876-1939), Chloë Boughton-Leigh, 1904–8, 58.4 × 38.1 cm, Tate

- This is **Chloë Boughton-Leigh**, a good friend of Gwen and we think this was painted in Gwen's attic room in Paris. She uses a painting technique taught at the Slade which she attended from 1894 to 1897. She uses **opaque oil colours but dilutes them** giving them a soft translucency. Note she added a **strip of wood at the bottom** so she could show the whole of her hands and the piece of paper.
- Chloë, who was christened Ellen, had a sister Maude who was at the Slade with Gwen. Chloë is lost in thought, perhaps thinking of what was written in the note. She is alert and could snap out of her reverie at any moment and engage with us.
- **A woman sitting alone in an interior is typical** of most of the paintings of Gwen John. This has been interpreted as reflecting Gwen's own introverted character although, as we have seen, it is always dangerous to jump to such conclusions. **Augustus described Gwen as outrageously passionate and haughty not retiring.**

- This painting was favourably received when it was exhibited at the New English Art Club in 1908 and was described by T. Martin Wood as '**one of the greatest achievements in the exhibition because of [its] sincerity**'. One commentator wrote, '**Intensity**' - '**this quality, so uncommon in English painting, she retained all her life, and it was present in everything she did**' (Allan Gwynne-Jones)
- Some feel her pictures of solitary female figures are **imbued with sadness** but I feel they are **neither sad nor happy figures but a moment in time between emotions**. Like Vermeer to whom she has been compared she **captures a moment in time** and holds it up to us so there is nothing before and nothing after that moment. She captures what T.S. Eliot described as, '**... the still point of the turning world**' ('Burnt Norton', *Four Quartets*).

## NOTES

- Gwen John wrote in her notebooks '**I don't live when I spend time without thought.**'
- Excerpt from 'Burnt Norton' (No. 1 of *Four Quartets*) by T.S. Eliot

*At the still point of the turning world. Neither flesh nor  
fleshless;*

*Neither from nor towards; at the still point, there the  
dance is,*

*But neither arrest nor movement. And do not call it fixity,  
Where past and future are gathered. Neither movement  
from nor towards,*

*Neither ascent nor decline. Except for the point, the still  
point,*

*There would be no dance, and there is only the dance.  
I can only say, there we have been: but I cannot say  
where.*

*And I cannot say, how long, for that is to place it in time.*

- This is Chloë Boughton-Leigh who is wearing a similar dress to the one Dorelia was wearing in *The Student*. It is not as high round the neck and there is no waistband but critics have wondered whether it is a dress that Gwen asked her sitters to wear.
- The New English Art Club (NEAC) was founded in 1885 as an alternative to the Royal Academy and it continues to exhibit annually at the Mall Galleries (pronounced mæl, æ as in 'trap', not 'mawl'). It was created by British artists returning from Paris so was influenced by Impressionism. Today the roles are reversed and the NEAC shows realistic, figurative style and the Royal Academy abstract and conceptual art.

## **REFERENCES**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/john-chloe-boughton-leigh-n04088>

<https://youtu.be/8pd-diwFbcU> Alec Guinness reading T.S. Eliot's 'Burnt Norton'



Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), *The Milkmaid*, c. 1657-58, 45.5 × 41 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam  
Gwen John (1876-1939), *Chloë*  
Boughton-Leigh, 1904-8, 58.4 (x) 38.1 cm, Tate



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Chloë*  
Boughton-Leigh, 1910-14, 60.3 × 38.1 cm, Leeds Art Gallery



Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), *Still Life*, 1946, 37.5 × 45.7 cm, Tate

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Chloë Boughton-Leigh*, 1910-14, 60.3 × 38.1 cm, Leeds Art Gallery  
Giorgio Morandi (1890-1964), *Still Life*, 1946, 37.5 × 45.7 cm, Tate  
Johannes Vermeer (1632-1675), *The Milkmaid*, c. 1657-58, 45.5 × 41 cm, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam

- This second portrait of Boughton-Leigh was painted **three years after** the first. As I said, 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 and rapid creation** shows the influence of James McNeill **Whistler** who she trained under in Paris at the Académie Carmen.
- **In 1910, John Quinn, an American art collector became her patron** and continued supporting her until his death in 1924. During this period he **purchased the majority of her works**. His support freed her from having to work as a model, and enabled her to devote herself to her work. She exhibited fairly regularly but was

ambivalence. She wrote in 1911, "**I paint a good deal, but I don't often get a picture done—that requires, for me, a very long time of a quiet mind, and never to think of exhibitions.**"

- (CLICK) 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.**'
- (CLICK) This is an example of Giorgio Morandi's art at the Tate so you can see what he meant about restricted means and subtle tonal arrangement. (CLICK)

## NOTES

- **John Quinn** (1870-1924) was an Irish-American, **New York lawyer** who was an important patron of Post-impressionism and literary Modernism. He was a friend and gave financial assistance to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot. In 1913 **he helped organise a huge and controversial event, the 1913 Armory Show** (officially The International Exhibition of Modern Art) in New York City included examples of Symbolism, Impressionism, Post-Impressionism, Neo-Impressionism, and Cubism. Quinn opened the exhibition. He died aged 54 of intestinal cancer.





Gwen John (1876–1939), *Cat*, c.1904–8, 11.1 × 13.7 cm, Tate

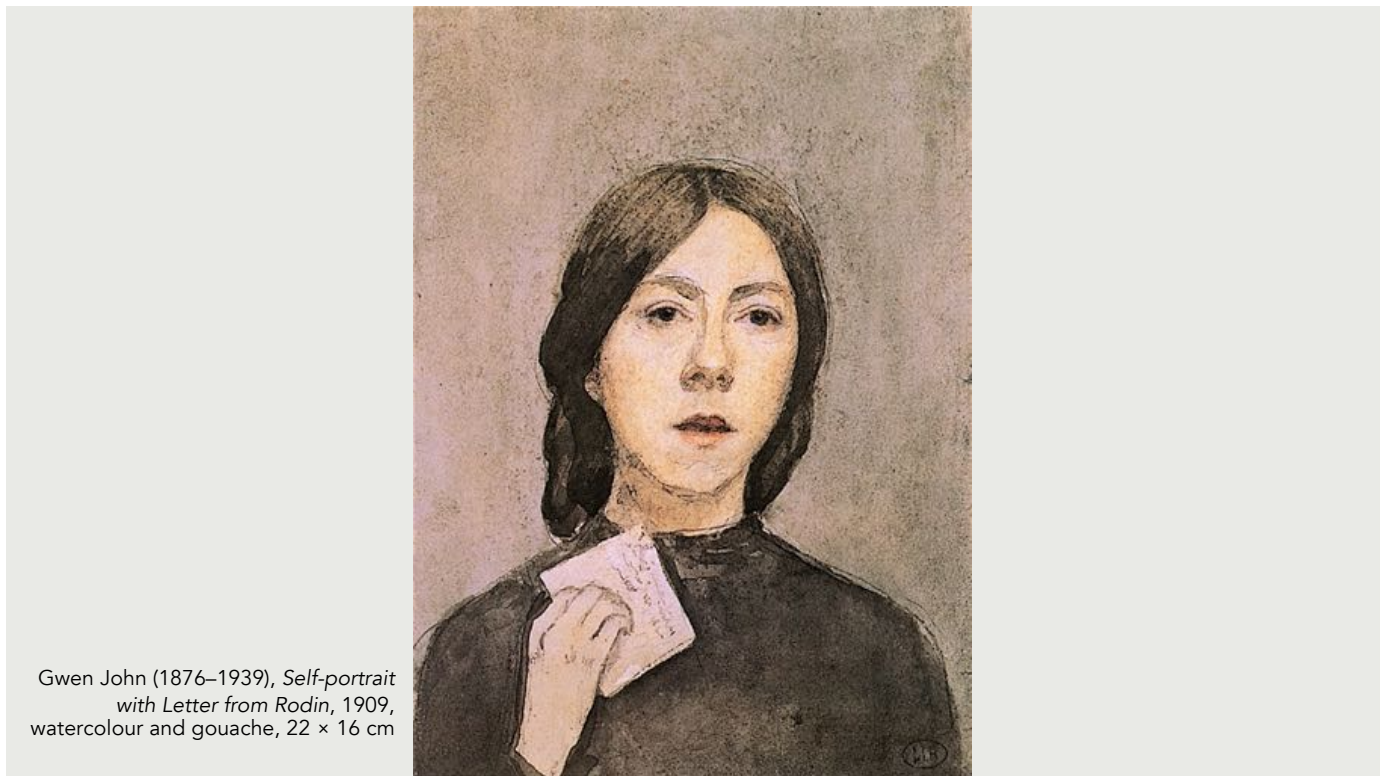
Gwen John (1876-1939), *Cat*, c.1904–8, 11.1 × 13.7 cm, Tate

- Gwen loved cats and she acquired this **tortoiseshell cat** in 1904. She named her **Edgar Quinet** after the street in which she was living at the time. This cat, occasionally with her kittens, is the subject of most of the cat drawings for which the artist is now known. The cat disappeared in 1908 and Gwen was inspired to write a poem that included the line "**little mysterious soul in the body of a cat**".
- The majority of her pictures are portraits, but she also painted still-lives, interiors and a few landscapes. She wrote, "**...a cat or a man, it's the same thing ... it's an affair of volumes ... the object is of no importance.**"
- "These evocative, spontaneous drawings were done from life, often capturing poses that could not have lasted more than a moment. They are executed in a fluid pencil line, frequently reinforced by broadly applied colour washes. The technique is strongly reminiscent of that of Rodin's drawings of the 1890s and 1900s." [1]

## REFERENCES

[1] David Jenkins and Chris Stephens (Eds.), *Gwen John and Augustus John*, p. 84

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/john-cat-n05154>



Gwen John (1876–1939), *Self-portrait with Letter from Rodin*, 1909, watercolour and gouache, 22 × 16 cm

- This is *Self-Portrait with Letter from Rodin*. As I said, when she first came to Paris she supported herself by **modelling** and that is how **she met Auguste Rodin (1840-1917)** in 1904. He was the **most famous artist** in the world at the time and she was the sort of person that could become **deeply obsessed** with another person, male or female. She was 28 and he was 64. She became his lover and was deeply obsessed with him and wrote him literally thousands of letters to the extent that her friends and family worried about the consequences.
- Rodin distanced himself from her from about **1912 onwards** until it was ended in 1914. Although Rodin liked her in the end he used his secretary and assistants to avoid seeing her. 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**'.

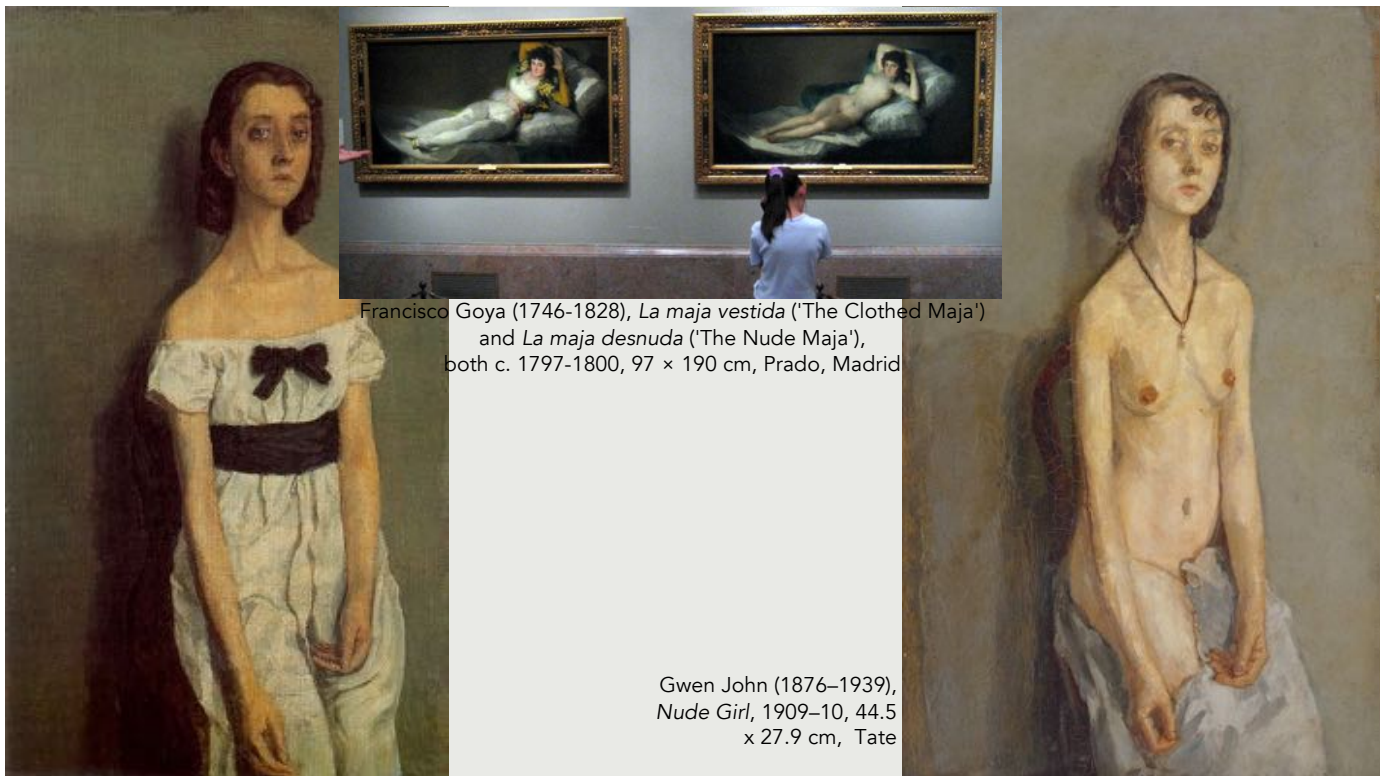
## NOTES

- **Gwen John** (1876-1939) became Rodin's lover in about 1904 and Auguste Rodin (1840-1917) had other lovers. His first was **Rose Beuret** (1844-1917) who first met Rodin in 1864 and they became life long partners. They married in 1917 16 days before she died.
- Another famous lover was the sculptor **Camille Claudel** (1864-1943) who was his mistress from 1883 when she was 19 to 1892 although they continued to see each other until 1898 when he went back to Beuret. Claudel was committed to an asylum in 1913 by a doctor and her brother. Although the doctors tried to convince the family she did not need to be there the family refused to release her and she remained incarcerated for 30 years. For a while, the press accused her family of committing a sculptor of genius. Her mother forbade her to receive mail from anyone other than her brother. The hospital staff regularly proposed to her family that Claudel be released, but her mother adamantly refused each time.
- **Claire Coudert** (1864-1919) was the eldest daughter of a well-known New York lawyer. The family was originally French but moved to America in 1824. She married the Marquis (later Duc) in 1891 and later became the **La Duchesse de Choiseul** and moved to France. She enjoyed a close friendship with Rodin from about 1904 until he ended their relationship in 1912.
- "A Miss Flodin, a friend of Gwen John's, and one of Rodin's assistants and a former lover, often came in and watched her old lover with Gwen. Eventually Miss Flodin joined them in their love making. Gwen then entered into "...a playful relationship with Flodin.", with both women enjoying each other's bodies in the absence of the 'Master' ... When Rodin didn't want Gwen's services as a model anymore, Miss Flodin took her on. It was all rather fun and very bohemian — she knew her brother would have approved — but it was also beginning to get a bit

complicated, and although Gwen still loved Rodin - and enjoyed the company of Miss Flodin - he was not the man he had been just a few weeks before, complaining of headaches, and suffering from exhaustion, and a lack of libido. They made love less often." [1]

## **REFERENCES**

[1] <https://stevenewmanwriter.medium.com/the-passionate-love-affair-between-gwen-john-and-auguste-rodin-e44b912d73e8>



Gwen John(1876-1939), *Girl with Bare Shoulders*, 1909-10?, 43.4 x 26 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Nude Girl*, 1909-10, 44.5 x 27.9 cm, presented by the Contemporary Art Society 1917

Francisco Goya (1746-1828), *La maja vestida* ('The Clothed Maja') and *La maja desnuda* ('The Nude Maja'), both c. 1797-1800, 97 x 190 cm, Prado, Madrid

- The woman is Fenella Lovell, an acquaintance of Gwen. (CLICK) The two paintings have been seen as a modern equivalent of Goya's *Maja Vestida* (pronounced 'ma-ha') and *Maja Desnuda*—these two paintings. (CLICK).
- An art critic (Robert Rosenblum) wrote that like Stanley Spencer and Lucian Freud some of her paintings "**reveal the volcano beneath the placid surface**". Augustus wrote that his sister's "**passions for both men and women were outrageous and irrational**". However, I am not sure that is the case here, Gwen intensely disliked the model. In a letter to a friend (Ursula Tyrwhitt, Sept

1909) 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.

- We are used to seeing female nudes painted by men. Here we have a naked woman. Kenneth Clark in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (1953) wrote that to be naked is to be deprived of clothes, and implies embarrassment and shame, while a nude, as a work of art, has no such connotations but John Berger wrote that the word '**naked**' means '**to be oneself, to be without disguise**' (*Ways of Seeing*, 1972), which is what we have here. Berger wrote that a nude is a naked body turned into an object.
- 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 *The Studio*] as '**one of the greatest achievements in this exhibition** [at the NEAC] **because of its sincerity**'.
- 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 Gwen boldly flaunts 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.
- It was **difficult for Gwen to find models**. 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 jeopardised 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**'.

## NOTES

- 'Gwen John trained at the Slade School of Art in London. As a woman in a career still largely dominated by men, including her successful brother Augustus, Gwen had to struggle for recognition. It has been suggested that the self-scrutinising



intensity of this image, and the isolation of the figure, registers this, but the figure retains its privacy. In recent years, her reputation has grown and now eclipses that of Augustus.' (Tate display caption)

- 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.

## **REFERENCES**

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/john-self-portrait-n05366>

<http://www.artfund.org/what-to-see/london/ten-london-masterpieces>

<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/john-nude-girl-n03173>

<http://www.moma.org/collection/works/78904?locale=en>

<http://theculturetrip.com/europe/united-kingdom/wales/articles/gwen-john-serene-art-unruly-life/>

Kenneth Clark in *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* was a A.W. Mellon lecture delivered in 1953 and first published in 1956



Gwen John(1876–1939), *Girl with Bare Shoulders*, 1909-10?, 43.4 x 26 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York



William Rothenstein (1872-1945), *Parting at Morning*, 1891, 129.5 x 50.8 cm, Tate

Gwen John(1876–1939), *Girl with Bare Shoulders*, 1909-10?, 43.4 x 26 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

William Rothenstein (1872-1945), *Parting at Morning*, 1891, 129.5 x 50.8 cm, Tate

- It is worth comparing Gwen's portrait with one by William Rothenstein which is in the Tate.
- Rothenstein's picture represents a scene from a poem by Robert Browning called *Parting at Morning*. This is the second part of a two-part poem in *Dramatic Romances and Lyrics* (1845). The first part 'Meeting at Night' is about a long, hard journey ending with the meeting of two lovers. In the morning they must part and the need for the man to return to 'the world of men' leaving the woman behind.

## NOTES

- In 1892, Toulouse-Lautrec persuaded the dealer Père Thomas, who specialised in Impressionist paintings, to put on a show of works by

Rothenstein. This drawing was included and it attracted some favourable press attention and was admired by Whistler and Degas.

- The verse inscribed at the bottom right is a quotation of Robert Browning's poem of the same title (Rothenstein substitutes 'cliff' for Browning's 'cape'):

*Round the cliff on a sudden came the sea,  
And the sun looked over the Mountain's rim:  
And straight was a path of gold for him,  
And the need of a world of men for me.*

#### **REFERENCES**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rothenstein-parting-at-morning-t07283>

Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.2 x 24.8 cm, Museum of Wales



Gwen John (1876–1939), , *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.2 x 24.8 cm, Museum of Wales

Purchased with the assistance of the Derek Williams Trust and the Estate of Mrs J. Green

- This is the **interior of her bare room in Paris**. It is an attic room in an eighteenth century house in the Rue du Cherche Midi near the **Luxembourg Gardens, where she lived from spring 1907 to autumn 1909**. On hot summer nights she would creep into the Luxembourg Gardens and **sleep under the stars with her cat Tiger**. She spent all her money on paints and treats for her cat while living on nuts and fruit.
- **She was no recluse**, she had friends and contacts in the Paris art world and she stayed in touch with her brother and his family. In her letters she talks of her friends, of boat trips on the Seine, of visiting galleries and sitting drawing in pavement cafes.
- In this picture the outside world does intrude, **the window is open, the sun is shining** and her outside clothes are waiting on the wicker

chair. It was painted at a time when her love affair with the sculptor **Auguste Rodin** was declining and some have interpreted the empty chair as signifying his absence and her sadness but it can be seen as a scene of contentment and quiet joy.

#### **REFERENCES**

<https://museum.wales/articles/2180/Gwen-John-Its-tone-that-matters-Part-1-/>



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Van Gogh's Chair*, 1888, 91.8 x 73 cm, National Gallery



Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Gauguin's Chair*, 1888, 90.5 x 72.7 cm, Van Gogh Museum



Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.2 x 24.8 cm, Museum of Wales

Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.2 x 24.8 cm, Museum of Wales. Purchased with the assistance of the Derek Williams Trust and the Estate of Mrs J. Green

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Van Gogh's Chair*, 1888, 91.8 x 73 cm, National Gallery

Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Gauguin's Chair*, 1888, 90.5 x 72.7 cm, Van Gogh Museum

- **Van Gogh painted two chairs, his and Gauguin's.** Both chairs function as surrogate portraits, representing the personalities and distinct artistic outlooks of the two artists. While **Van Gogh's chair is simple and functional, Gauguin's is an elegant and finely carved armchair.** Van Gogh's chair, on which he placed his pipe and tobacco, is shown in bright daylight. Gauguin's, with two novels on its seat, was painted at night and is illuminated by a candle and gas light." (National Gallery website)
- If we now compare **Gwen's chair is it more feminine** and the other two more masculine as some have suggested? I am **not inclined to**

**assign a gender** to the chair. It is for me more a **sign of absence**.

### **NOTES**

- "This painting of a simple chair set on a bare floor of terracotta tiles is one of Van Gogh's most iconic images. It was painted in late 1888, soon after fellow artist Paul Gauguin had joined him in Arles in the south of France. The picture was a pair to another painting, *Gauguin's Chair* (Van Gogh Museum, Amsterdam). They were to be hung together, with one chair turned to the right, the other to the left.

### **REFERENCES**

<https://museum.wales/articles/2180/Gwen-John-Its-tone-that-matters-Part-1-/>

<https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/vincent-van-gogh-van-goghs-chair>





Gwen John (1876–1939), *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.7 × 26.7 cm, Sheffield Museum



Gwen John, *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.2 × 24.8 cm, Museum of Wales

Gwen John (1876–1939), *A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris*, 1907-9, 31.7 × 26.7 cm, Sheffield Museum

- It is also interesting to compare the interior with **another painting by Gwen of about the same time**. The window is closed and the curtain pulled. There is an umbrella leaning against the chair and the light is more subdued. The open book has been replaced by a vase of flowers but otherwise the room is similar.



Gwen John (1876–1939), *Girl Reading at a Window*, 1911, 40.9 × 25.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York



Gwen John (1876–1939), *Girl Reading at a Window*, 1911, 40.9 × 25.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York

- The American collector **John Quinn** was John's only patron. He eventually owned at least eighteen of her paintings and fifty drawings and he included her painting ***Girl Reading at the Window* in the seminal Armory Show, America's first 'modern art' exhibition, in New York in 1913.**
- In the years between 1914 and 1925 she devoted her life to painting and religion. She sold pictures to her American patron John Quinn until his death in 1924, and exhibited and sold at the Paris Salons from 1919.
- Quinn's sponsorship enabled her to live a simple but independent life. She had only **one solo exhibition** in her lifetime, at the New Chenil Gallery in **London in 1926 and that confirmed her reputation** as a leading twentieth-century artist. In that same year she **purchased a bungalow in Meudon with the proceeds** and built a wall round it.

- Her attitude toward her work was both self-effacing and confident. After viewing an exhibition of watercolours by Cézanne she remarked: "**These are very good, but I prefer my own.**"

#### **REFERENCES**

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79663>

<http://goldenagepaintings.blogspot.com/2013/11/girl-reading-at-window-1911-gwen-john.html>



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Study of a Seated Nude Girl*, c.1920s, 32.4 x 24.1 cm, Museum of Wales



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Girl in a Blue Dress*, 1914-15, 34.3 x 26.7 cm, National Museum of Wales

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Girl in a Blue Dress*, 1914-15, 34.3 x 26.7 cm, National Museum of Wales

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Study of a Seated Nude Girl*, c.1920s, 32.4 x 24.1 cm, Museum of Wales

- "From the **mid-1910s onwards**, we see this technique change **quite dramatically**. John moves almost exclusively to **female portraits** and to applying paint much more **sparingly**, and with no upper layers or varnishes. **Brush strokes become visible** and compositions are flatter and less smooth. Again, we see John shift with the artistic movements around her as other artists in Europe were working with similar techniques." [1]
- The **mood** she creates is partly based on the **technique** she used. (CLICK) This unfinished work tells us more of her technique. **She worked from the edges inwards** with very little preliminary sketching. This is difficult to do as it requires a strong sense of **spatial awareness** to create a cohesive, balanced work. It also meant that she does not distinguish the background from the sitter,

both are treated equally and both are equally important.

- From 1915 onwards she developed a dry painting technique first seen in this painting. If we look at the painting in **raking light** we can see she created a textured surface using a mixture of animal glue and chalk and she then applied the paint very dryly and thinly. If a light is shone through the canvas we can see just how little paint she used and how skilful she was to create a mood using hardly any paint at all.(CLICK)
- This is **one of eight almost identical pictures**, one of the earliest and largest of her series of pictures on a theme. In some the dress is plain blue in other spotted and in some the stool is more clearly visible. Gwen used a restricted palette and a simple composition. The lighting is soft and generalised and she used dry, chalky colours like a fresco. The brushstrokes are small and deliberate. In these terms she resembles her contemporary artists of the Camden School, Walter Sickert and Harold Gilman.
- We do not know the **name of the model** but she was frequently used and was **described by Gwen as 'just a Meudon neighbour'**. She is often called '**the convalescent**' because she posed for a series of paintings on the theme of the convalescent.

## **REFERENCES**

David Jenkins and Chris Stephens (Eds.), *Gwen John and Augustus John*, p. 150

<https://artuk.org/discover/artworks/girl-in-a-blue-dress-holding-a-piece-of-sewing-1105>

[https://museum.wales/art/online/?action=show\\_item&item=1018](https://museum.wales/art/online/?action=show_item&item=1018)

[1] <https://museum.wales/articles/2181/Gwen-John-lts-tone-that-matters-Part-2/>

Gwen John (1876–1939), *The Brown Tea Pot*, 1915-16, 33.5 × 23.2 cm, Yale Center for British Art



Gwen John (1876–1939), *The Brown Tea Pot*, 1915-16, 33.5 × 23.2 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- Gwen wrote of her '**scorching, exalting**' passion for Rodin but she avoided what she called the '**ultimate impediment**' of domesticity.
- She wrote to Ursula Tyrwhitt, probably in 1910: '**I think to do beautiful pictures we ought to be free from family conventions as ties... I think the family has had its day. We don't go to Heaven in families now, but one by one**'.
- Gwen was domesticated to the extent that she kept her room '**fresh and pretty**' for Rodin, who paid her rent, and her pleasure in it is a constant refrain in her letters to him. She felt that it was '**so delicious after a whole day outside, it seems to me that I am not myself except in my room**', and the paintings of her interiors, redolent with her presence, do have something of the quality of a self-portrait.
- "But she told him that she could not understand why people wanted to have children: beautiful monuments were erected to artists who created great works; nobody ever erected a monument to anyone

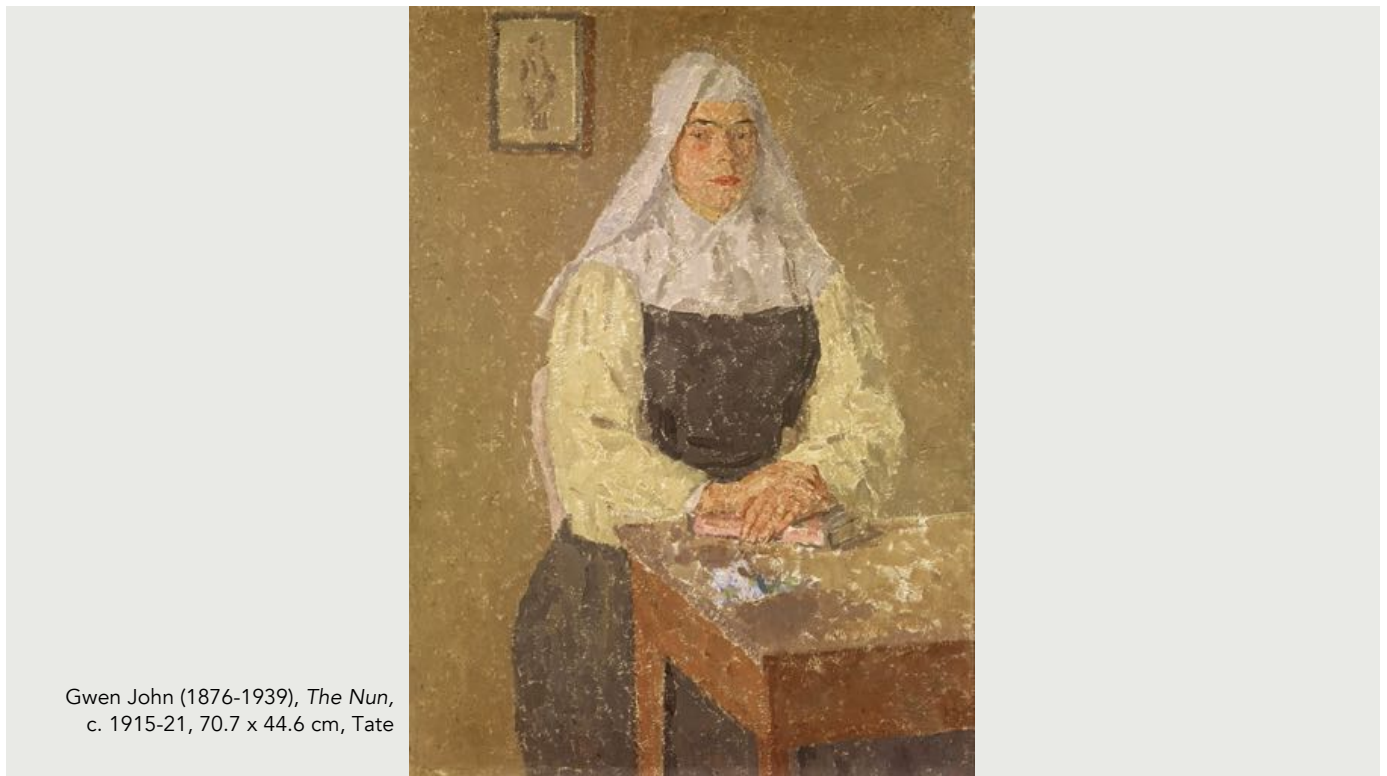
for having children." [1]

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[1] David Jenkins and Chris Stephens (Eds.), *Gwen John and Augustus John*, p. 37

<https://collections.britishart.yale.edu/catalog/tms:38720> (no commentary)





Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Nun*,  
c. 1915-21, 70.7 x 44.6 cm, Tate

Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Nun*, c. 1915-21, 70.7 x 44.6 cm, Tate

- After she left Rodin she became a **Roman Catholic in 1913**. She met the Mother Superior of the orphanage of the Sisters of Charity in Meudon a town on the outskirts of Paris where she had moved in 1910. She promised to paint **portraits of the founder of the order** Mère Poussepin ('mare pouce-a-pan', 1653-1744) working from a printed prayer card and using two nuns from the order as models. **It took her seven years to complete this**, the first painting of the series.
- She became intensely religious and wrote, '**My religion and my art are my entire life.**' (Gwen John)
- Unlike her brother who, in his portraits of friends, brought out their individual characteristics, Gwen used non-professional models in order to **create archetypal images**. That is to say that her interest lay in the **condition of being a nun** rather than in the personality of one specific nun. Nevertheless, I think her portraits show she captures a particular person as well.

## **NOTES**

- Mère Poussepin ('mare pouce-a-pan', 1653-1744) was a French Dominican who founded the congregation of the Dominican Sisters of Charity of the Presentation. Her order was only recognised 150 years after her death. In 1994 she was beatified, the step before being made a saint and recognised with the title 'Blessed'.





Harold Gilman  
(1876-1919), *Mrs  
Mounter at the  
Breakfast Table*, exh.  
1917, 61 (x) 40.6 cm,  
Tate



Gwen John (1876-1939),  
*The Nun*, c. 1915-21,  
70.7 x 44.6 cm, Tate

Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Nun*, c. 1915-21, 70.7 x 44.6 cm, Tate  
Harold Gilman (1876-1919), *Mrs Mounter at the Breakfast Table*, exh. 1917, 61 (x) 40.6 cm, Tate

- According to contemporary critics, Gilman's desire '**to seize the essence of a character in real life and exhibit it on canvas in all its bearings**' was most successfully realised in his 1916-17 paintings of Mrs Mounter his daily help. Gilman was a friend of Walter Sickert who said serious art should '**avoid the drawing room and stick to the kitchen**'. That was forty years before kitchen sink realism.
- As I said earlier, when Whistler met Augustus in the Louvre, Augustus asked him whether he agreed that Gwen was skilled in capturing character. '**Character?**' retorted Whistler, who had taught Gwen the art of tonal relationships, '**What's that? Your sister has a fine sense of tone**'.

## NOTES

- Harold Gilman's father was a rector and Harold was born in

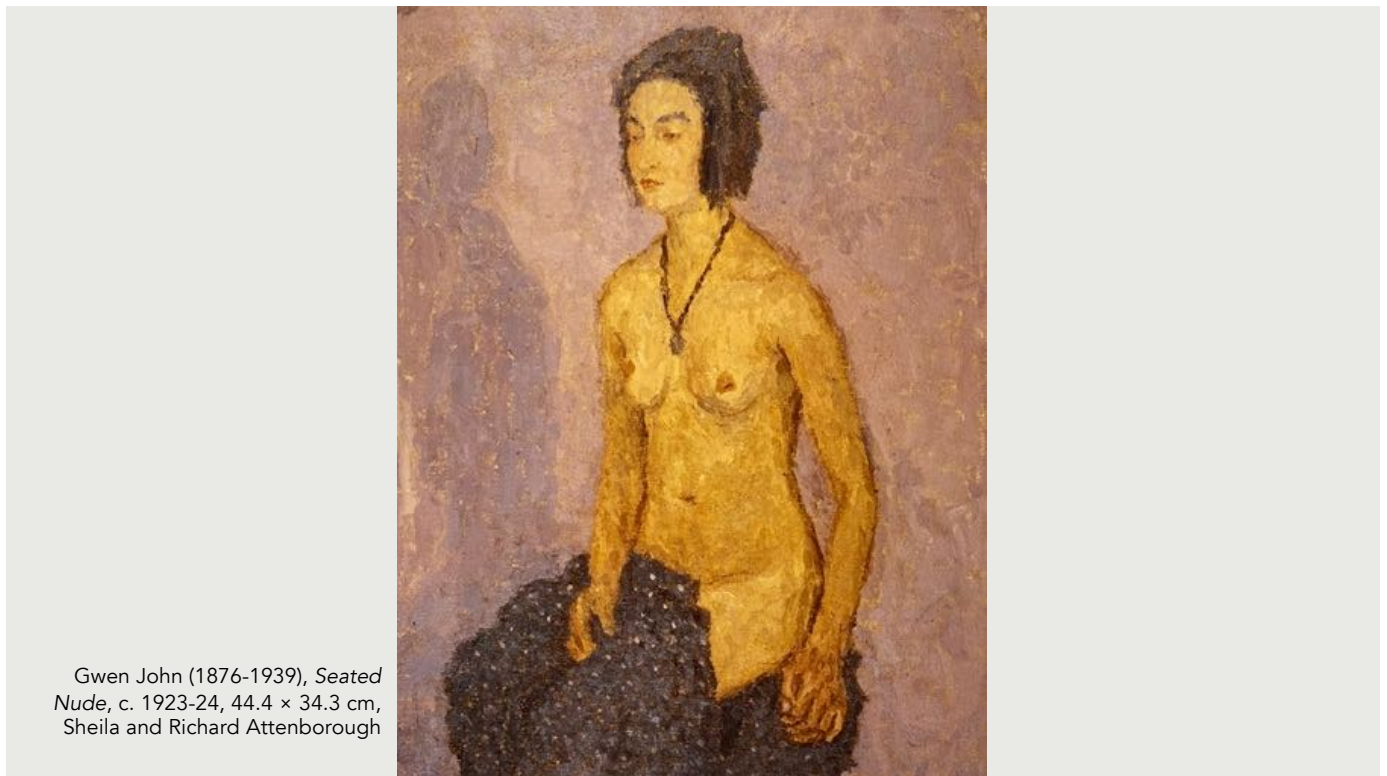
Somerset but grew up in Kent. He went to Oxford University for a year before working as a tutor in Odessa in the Ukraine. He then trained at the Hastings School of Art before going to the Slade from 1897 to 1901. In 1902 he went to Spain for a year to study Velázquez and Goya. There he met an American artist Grace Cornelia Canedy and they married and settled in London and had five children. In 1907 he met Walter Sickert and they founded the Fitzroy Group and the Camden Town Group. She left him in 1909 and took her three children back to Chicago and they later divorced. He then married (Dorothy) Sylvia Hardy, an artist. She had his child in 1917 and they married in 1918. He died in 1919 of the Spanish Flu and Sylvia married his brother in 1921.

#### **REFERENCES**

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/gilman-mrs-mounter-at-the-breakfast-table-n05317>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold\\_Gilman](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harold_Gilman)

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/six-of-the-best-how-harold-gilman-shaped-british-painting>



Gwen John (1876-1939), *Seated Nude*, c. 1923-24, 44.4 × 34.3 cm, Sheila and Richard Attenborough

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Seated Nude*, c. 1923-24, 44.4 × 34.3 cm, Sheila and Richard Attenborough

- The unidentified model **posed for six paintings several unfinished**. We know from her letter to John Quinn that in the autumn of 1923 she was working on this and another, now lost, nude painting. She finished soon after and then sent them both to John Quinn who acknowledged their receipt in March 1924.

Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Convalescent*, c.1923-24, The Fitzwilliam Museum



Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Convalescent*, c.1923-24, The Fitzwilliam Museum

- I mentioned the *The Convalescent* just now and it is the same model as *Girl in a Blue Dress*. It is **one of ten** very similar paintings of the same girl sitting in a room with soft, pale light.
- Gwen developed a **complex numbering system** for colours and tonal relationships that included poetic description of the colours. She wrote these numbers and descriptions on her many preliminary sketches. The code had proved difficult if not impossible to crack and as it included descriptions such as '**April faded pansies on the sands at night**' you can understand why.
- Gwen first painted a version of *The Convalescent* in 1919 for her friend, the American artist Isabel Bowser, for whom she had modelled. In a letter to another friend from the time she explains:
  - "I will finish the little painting. It is called ***The Convalescent***. I was going to say to Isabel, 'It doesn't matter about the title does it, Isabel? No doubt she was cured by Christian

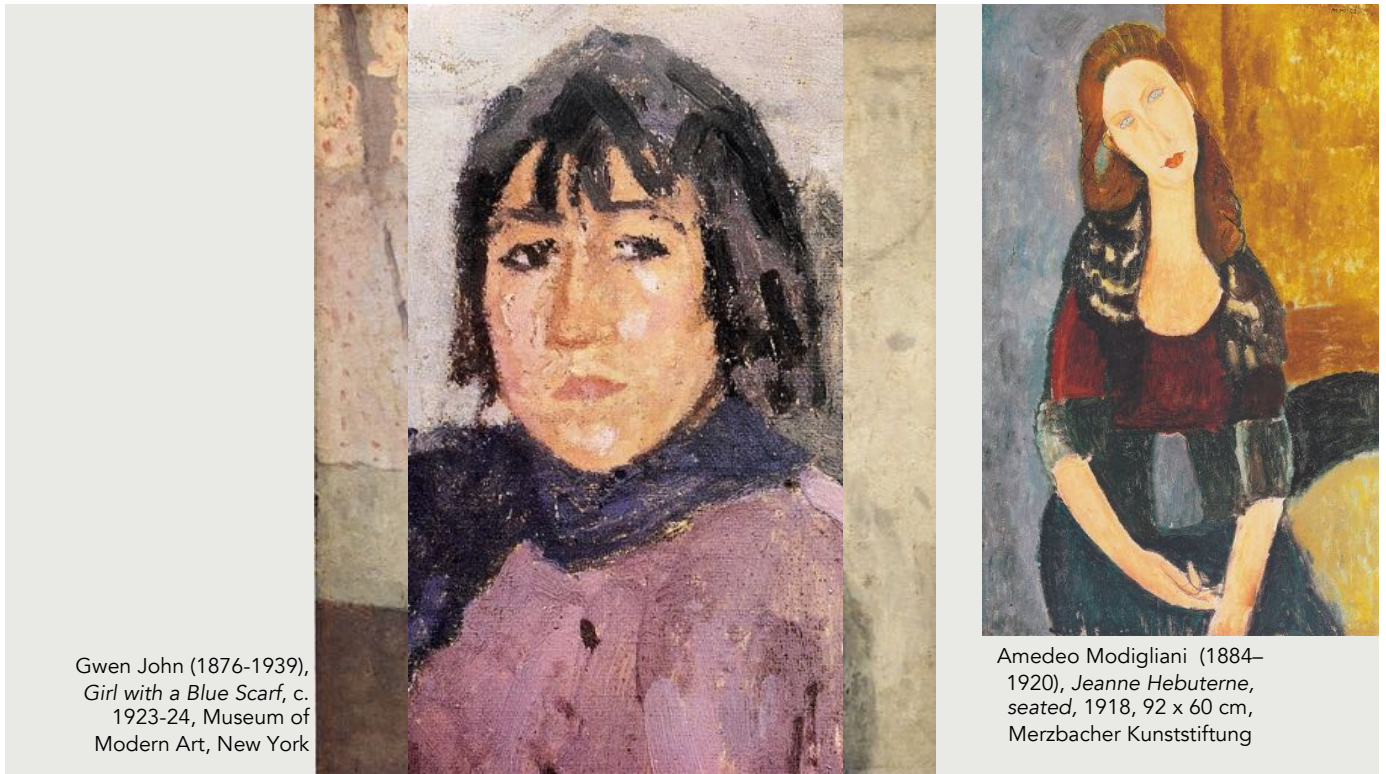
**Science.' That was a sort of joke."**

- The joke was an affectionate one as her friend had recently embraced Christian Science. Christian Science followers refused conventional medical treatments and believed in spiritual healing. Unfortunately the joke fell flat as her friend died of cancer before the painting was finished. **"It was the second death of a close friend in two years, for in November 1917 the great French sculptor Auguste Rodin, with whom Gwen was deeply in love, had died after a stroke."** [1]

#### **REFERENCES**

[1] <https://fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/objects-and-artworks/highlights/PD24-1951>





Gwen John (1876-1939), *Girl with a Blue Scarf*, c. 1923-24, Museum of Modern Art, New York  
 Amedeo Modigliani (1884-1920), *Jeanne Hebuterne, seated*, 1918, 92 x 60 cm, Merzbacher Kunststiftung

- **From about 1923 her paintings changed again** and her palette has a new mauvish cast and the contrast has strengthened. Paint is more boldly applied and dragged onto the canvas.
- (CLICK) She is still painting **single women** but their **outline is rougher**, their faces more stylised with high set eyes and well-defined noses.
- (CLICK) There are similarities with the work of Amedeo Modigliani of the late 1910s. She never mentioned him in her letters but she knew his work and he was a friend of her brother. (CLICK)

## REFERENCES

David Jenkins and Chris Stephens (Eds.), *Gwen John and Augustus John*, p. 178

<https://www.moma.org/collection/works/79624> (no commentary)



Gwen John (1876-1939), *The Japanese Doll*, 1920s, 50.5 × 42.5 cm, National Museum Wales

- This is one of two nearly identical compositions. It is thought that the sister of her patron John Quinn, **Julia Quinn Anderson** must have acquired it after **no earlier than 1928** four years after her brother had died. In that year Mrs Anderson wrote "**I am sorry the painting of the doll is not finished**".
- This makes it one of her last paintings as from **1930 her output dwindled** perhaps because of her **failing eyesight**.
- In December 1926, distraught after the **death of an old friend** (Rilke), she met and sought religious guidance from her neighbour, the neo-Thomist (Thomas Aquinas) **Catholic theologian Jacques Maritain**. She also met Maritain's sister-in-law, **Vera Oumançoff** (pronounced 'oo-man-soff'), with whom **she fell passionately in love. She would write every day** until Oumançoff insisted she only write once a week as she considered Gwen's passion to be incompatible with her spiritual welfare.

- The relationship ended in 1930 at Oumançoff insistence and in the last eight years of her life Gwen lived as a recluse. She only had her **cats for company** and **ate so little she became weak** and could hardly stand. **She preferred to give her little food to her cats.**
- Her last dated work is a **drawing of 20 March 1933**, and no evidence suggests that she drew or painted during the remainder of her life. In 1939 not wishing to live in another **war-torn country she travelled to Dieppe en route to England** but she fell ill on the way and died and was buried as a pauper in an unmarked grave.

#### **REFERENCES**

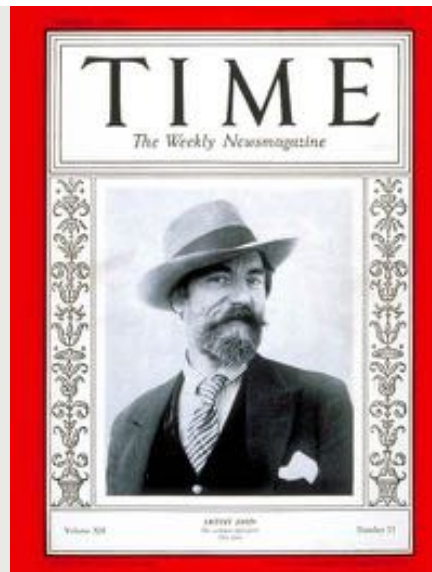
<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/bi-visibility-gwen-john-and-multiple-gender-attraction>

<https://www.crisismagazine.com/1995/gwen-john-art-and-faith-in-the-shadows-2>





Gwen John (1876-1939), *Self-Portrait*, 1907-09, private collection



Augustus John (1878-1961), *Time cover*, 1928

Gwen John (1876-1939), *Self-Portrait*, 1907-09, 44.8 x 34.9 cm, Tate  
 Augustus John (1878-1961), *Time cover*, 1928

- I think Augustus and Gwen John and the two individually best known brother and sister artists. This leads commentators to make comparisons. Conventionally, Augustus was regarded as flamboyant, sociable and outgoing whereas Gwen has been seen as quiet, introverted and preferring her own company. These differences have been projected onto their work. This may be misleading Augustus wrote "**She didn't steal through life, but preserved a haughty independence which people mistook for humility.**"
- Augustus was the **most famous British artist of the day** by the time he was **twenty-five**. His talent as an artist was compared with that of **Michelangelo, Gauguin and Matisse** and he became **legendary** for his bohemian lifestyle and celebrity circle of friends. Since his death his reputation has declined.
- By contrast **Gwen was largely ignored by the critics until about**

**1926.** More recently she has become a **celebrated painter of international renown** to the extent that the retrospective at the Tate in 2004 felt that they had to reclaim Augustus's reputation.

- Augustus once said "**Fifty years after my death [which was 2011] I shall be remembered as Gwen John's brother.**" He was right, she is now regarded as one of the most important British artists of the 20th century and he has been largely forgotten. However, there is now a **move by art historians to re-evaluate his work which we will examine in the next talk.**

### NOTES

- Brother and sister artists are unusual although not unknown. The most famous are perhaps Rosa Bonheur and her less well-known brother Auguste, an animal painter. John Brett, the Pre-Raphaelite-style artist and his sister Rosa Brett. Hilda Carline, first wife of Stanley Spencer, was an artist and had two brothers who were artists, Richard and Sydney. Marcel Duchamp had a sister Suzanne who was a Dada artist.
- Gwen appears quiet, self-contained and Augustus intense and out-going. To understand her art she should be seen as an international artist. She and her brother were conscious of being Welsh artists as there were few in London. They felt they were outsiders coming from another world. Gwen also spent 36 years of her 63 years in France.