



LAURA KNIGHT: THE PEOPLE'S PAINTER

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

- This talk is inspired by the exhibition at the Royal Academy in 2019 (2 Sep 2019 – 2 Feb 2020) and the associated book *Laura Knight RA: A Working Life* (£9.32). I will start with an **overview of her life** and then look at the **various subjects covered in the exhibition**.
- This painting is perhaps her **most famous** and I will talk about it later. Knight was known for painting in the **theatre and ballet**, and for being a **war artist**. She was also greatly interested in, and inspired by, marginalised communities and individuals, including Romani people, circus performers and, when she visited America, African-Americans.

BIO:KNIGHT

- **Laura Knight** (1877-1970, born Johnson, died age 92) 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 and she became one of the most successful and popular painters in Britain.
- 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 where she paid no fees and assisted her mother in class. She started teaching art when her mother became ill. She was only 15 and she won a scholarship and gold medal from the South Kensington Museum (which became the V&A in 1899).
- She gave private lessons to support herself and her sister, Sissie (Evangeline Agnes) when her mother, her other sister and her grandparents died.
- 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.
- 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.

- 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.
- 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.' 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."
- 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 was criticized for 'drawing like a man' as she used thick outlines and drew from the shoulder rather than the wrist.
- Created a Dame in 1929 and in 1936 became the first woman to be elected as an Academician since its foundation
- 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.

QUOTES

- In her 1965 autobiography *The Magic of a Line* she wrote: 'Even today, a female artist is considered more or less a freak, and may be undervalued or overpraised, and by sole virtue of her rarity and her sex be of better press value... Now that womankind are no longer born to hold a needle in one hand and a scrubbing brush in the other, what great things may not happen?'
- 'One of the greatest moments of Mother's life came when she found that I, a mere baby, was never so content as with pencil and paper; even before I could speak or walk, I drew. There was no question of my purpose in life.'

ARTIST PROFILE

Dame Laura Knight, Royal Academician

Born: 4 August 1877

Died: 7 July 1970

Elected ARA: 1 November 1927

Elected RA: 11 February 1936

Elected Senior RA: 1 January 1953

- Laura Knight was made an Associate Academician in 1927 and a full Academician in 1936. She was the first full Academician since the two founding female artists Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser. In 1965, she was the first female artist to have a solo retrospective at the RA. But despite her popularity among the male Academicians, Knight had to wait until 1967 – having already been an Academician for 30 years – until she was allowed to attend a dinner at the RA
- She was not the first to be made an Associate Academician, that was Annie Swynnerton (1844-1933) in 1922.
- In 1977, Elisabeth Frink (1930–1993) was the first female sculptor to become an Academician, over 40 years after Laura Knight became the first painter Academician.
- In the nineteenth century the annual Summer Exhibition always included works by female artists and in 1860 Laura Herford became the first woman to be accepted into the Royal Academy School, when she signed her application drawing with only her initials.
- The only other woman artist to be made a full Academician in her lifetime, that is over the next thirty-four years was her great friend Dod Procter, was elected a full Academician. This is despite the fact that one third of the works exhibited in 1936 were by women.
- 2011 saw the election of Eileen Cooper (b.1953) as the first female Keeper of the Royal Academy Schools, having primary responsibility for the Schools and students. The same year also saw the first female Professors, Fiona Rae (b.1963) (Painting) and Tracey Emin (b.1963) (Drawing). At the end of 2019 Rebecca Salter (b. 1955) became the first President of the Royal Academy.

THE DIFFICULTIES FACED BY WOMEN ARTISTS

- 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 totalled 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).

NOTES MADE AT THE RA EXHIBITION

LAURA KNIGHT (1877-1970)

- The exhibition at the RA was in one room which contained about 20 paintings period Lauren night was made a royal academician in 1936 but not allowed to attend until the annual banquet until 1967. *Lamorna Birch and his Daughter* period was shown at the summer exhibition in 1934 was damaged and is now lost.
- Annie Swynnerton was the first woman to be made an associate Royal Academician in 1926 but Laura Knight was the first woman to be promoted to full Royal Academician in 1936.
- The exhibition consists of works from the RA collection and most of the works are from 1920 to the 1970s. The exhibition contains three themes, her landscapes, her nudes and her images of ballet, theatres and circuses.

NUDES

- One of the works is a portrait of Laura Knight by her husband. It was painted when she was only 14 and before they married. The painting of two nudes was her diploma work which was presented to the Royal academy when she was made and academician.
- Laura Knight donated some 300 sketches to the Royal Academy. The works she donated are still in copyright. She destroyed many of her early works particularly those she drew and painted before 1920. She also drew nude men and men such as boxers and clowns but female nudes predominates. This is likely to be because of her experience as a student. Women students at the Nottingham School of art were not allowed to draw from the nude. They could only draw casts. Her future husband Harold Knight was a star student because of his nude drawing. When she went to Staithes in Yorkshire she drew many clothed figures. When she first went to Cornwall she drew bathers and locals would sit for her for a few pennies. However, she had to hire models from London to sit for her nude.
- Laura Knight was very sociable and loved mixing with people of all sorts. She loved mixing with other artists at the Royal Academy.
- Note that although her painting style is fairly fixed her drawing style various enormously.
- Note that in one of the sketches one figure is the same as one of the figures in Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*.

BALLET, THEATRE AND THE CIRCUS

- She developed a life long interest in performance, ballet, theatre and the circus. She started with ballet and managed to obtain a backstage pass and embedded herself in the company. Ballerinas wanted to pose for her but she didn't want that. She drew then in quiet moments when they were not aware of her presence, when they were waiting to go on stage, dressing or performing. Her theatre works are more detailed perhaps because actors move more slowly than ballerinas so she had time to draw them in more detail. Many of her sketches relate to paintings but these are not owned by the Royal Academy.

- She joined a circus troupe and toured the country.
- She was commissioned to paint ice dancing.

LANDSCAPE

- She drew and painted landscape but she is not as well known for this work.
- She wrote two autobiographies which were self-promotion and published at the same time as her becoming an academician and when she held a major exhibition.
- She had a poor upbringing and had to teach and sell works early on to earn enough for herself and her sister.
- The unfinished painting of Richmond Park was a commission.
- Malvern swimming pool was a hotel she stayed at where she used to draw the guests which many of them remember. She wrote that she used to spend afternoons scooping bumblebees from the pool to stop them drowning.

WWII

- During WWII she was commissioned to produce posters of women at work and her most famous is of Ruby Loftus.
- The sketch of a ploughgirl also became a poster.
- She was not commissioned to draw at the Nuremberg trial but when under her own cognisance. Her work was bought by the Imperial War Museum.
- She went to horse racing events with the gypsies although she turned up in her Rolls Royce but still seemed to get on with them.
- The election of Laura Knight as academician made it easier for other women to be elected and her friend Dod Procter was later elected. However, by the 1960s there were still only four of five women academicians.

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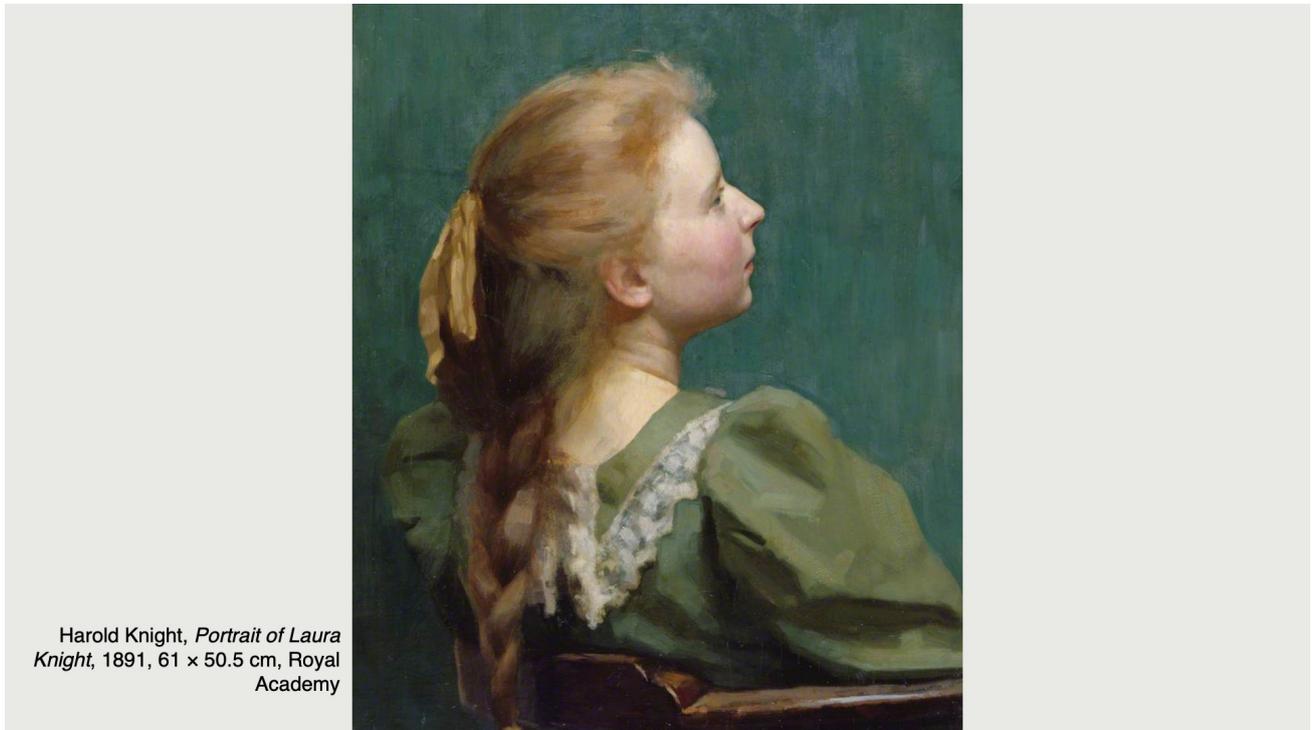
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- Anthony Spira, Fay Blanchard, Sophie Hatchwell, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Laura Knight: A Panoramic View* (Philip Wilson Publishers, 2021)
- Barbara Morden, *Laura Knight: A Life*



Harold Knight (1874-1961), *Portrait of Laura Knight*, 1891, 61 × 50.5 cm, Royal Academy

- Laura Knight wrote "**One of the greatest moments of Mother's life came when she found that I, a mere baby, was never so content as with pencil and paper; even before I could speak or walk, I drew. There was no question of my purpose in life.**"
- This is the earliest portrait we have of her painted in 1891 when she was 14. She was the youngest student ever to enter the Nottingham School of Art and this was painted by fellow student and star pupil Harold Knight who was 18. It seems they fell in love the moment they saw each other and they married 12 years later when she was 26 and he was 29.
- Her father had walked out on the family and left them with no financial support shortly after she was born. Her mother worked part-time teaching at the Nottingham School of Art and always had grand plans for Laura, even forecasting that one day she would become a Royal Academician. This was at a time when no woman had become an Academician since the two women founders Angelica Kaufmann and Mary Moser in 1768.
- She lived with her two sisters, her mother, grandmother, great-grandmother and uncle and lack of money was a daily nightmare. Her mother arranged for **Laura to spend a year in France with her aunt** when she was 12. It was a difficult period as she spoke no French but she was taught art by a local artist.
- While she was in France **her sister died** and Laura returned and her mother managed to enrol her at the **Nottingham School of Art** when she was 13 free of charge. She helped her mother teach. Her mother became **ill with cancer** when she was 15 and could not teach so **Laura took over her teaching duties**. Later she **won a scholarship and a gold medal**. She was left alone with her sister on very little money when her mother died, her other sister died and both her grandmothers.



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *A Mother and Child in a Kitchen*, 1905-08, 61 x 50.8 cm

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *A Mother and Child in a Kitchen*, 1905-08, 61 x 50.8 cm, sold at Christies in 2011 for £27,500

indistinctly signed 'Laura Knight' (lower left) and inscribed '66 Interior/Laura Knight' (on the stretcher)

- **In 1899 she moved with her sister and Harold Knight to Staithes, North Yorkshire**, to join the artist colony there. She could only afford a few pennies to pay children to sit for her. At this time she painted in these shadowy, muted tones. In this painting the mother is cooking on a range while her daughter sits shyly.
- **Harold Knight quickly established himself as a successful portrait painter** and it was his income that funded her early development. **They married in 1903 and decided they would both dedicate their lives to art.**
- **Laura was an outgoing, lively character always the life and soul of the party. Harold was a sober, stable character**, some said he was withdrawn and grumpy but others that he was a quiet, strong presence in Laura's life.
- They visited Holland a number of times, staying in an **artists' colony in Laren** (south-east of Amsterdam) and visiting the Rijksmuseum to see works by Rembrandt and Vermeer.
- This painting appears to have been painted between their first trip to Laren, in 1905, and their leaving Yorkshire to move to Cornwall in 1908.
- When in Staithes the Knights generally stayed with a Mrs Bowman. She lived in nearby Roxby, and the couple would walk over the fields every day down to Staithes, where they had their studios. Laura painted several oils similar in style to *A Mother and Child in a Kitchen*, using Mrs Bowman's cottage interior as a background."
- **At this stage many of her works are dark and sombre but they then moved to Newlyn...**

QUOTES

- 'It was [at Staithes] that I found myself and what I might do. The life and the place were what I yearned for - the freedom, the austerity, the savagery and the wildness. I loved it

passionately, overwhelmingly; I loved the cold and the northerly storms when no covering would protect you. I loved the strange race of people who lived there...'

REFERENCES

<https://www.christies.com/en/lot/lot-5451380>



Laura Knight, *The Beach*, c. 1909, 127.6 × 153.2 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Beach*, c. 1909, 127.6 × 153.2 cm, Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle

- **In 1907 they moved to Newlyn, Cornwall and this had a big impact on her art.** Her palette lightened from the conventional dark browns of the period to this bright Impressionistic style.
- "This large picture was painted from sketches made on the beach, and captures the **bright light and breeziness of the Cornish coast in summer**. It is one of the most important pictures Laura Knight produced during the time she spent at Newlyn. She was one of the most successful artists of her day. Children often featured in her paintings." [1]
- Laura Knight spent the summer of 1908 working on the beaches at Newlyn making studies for her large painting of children in bright sunlight. ***The Beach* was shown at the Royal Academy in 1909, and was considered a great success**, showing Laura painting in a more Impressionist style than she had displayed previously.

REFERENCES

[1] <https://collectionssearchtwmuseums.org.uk/#details=ecatalogue.299757>

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Boys (The Boys Newlyn Cornwall)*, 1910, 152.4 x 183.51 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Boys (The Boys Newlyn Cornwall)*, 1910, 152.4 x 183.51 cm, Johannesburg Art Gallery, South Africa

- Although it was based on a beach in Staithes the studies she made were in the open air at Newlyn. It was accepted by the Royal Academy and was a great success.
- Laura Knight was a member of the group of artists known as the **Newlyn School of painters**, based in Cornwall. The father of the Newlyn School was **Stanhope Forbes who settled there in 1884. Dod Procter arrived in 1907 and became a lifelong friend of Laura Knight who arrived the same year.** A group of artists including Laura Knight moved to the nearby village of Lamorna. **'Lamorna' Birch** and Alfred Munnings were there at the same time.

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Physical Training at Witley Camp*, c.1916-1917, 304.8 x 365.7 cm, Canadian War Museum



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Physical Training at Witley Camp*, c.1916-1917, 304.8 x 365.7 cm, Canadian War Museum

This Surrey camp was where many Canadian soldiers prepared for service on the Continent.

- Knight loved painting the seaside and coast but this was restricted during the First World War. She worked in a clandestine way but was forced to acquire a **permit to continue painting** the coastline.
- She began working as a war artist at this time, receiving a commission from the **Canadian government** to depict life in soldiers' training camps, an assignment she fulfilled with a series of works on boxing matches in Surrey, such as this one *Physical Training at Witley Camp*.
- Her husband Harold, a conscientious objector, was forced meanwhile to find work as a farm labourer.

NOTES

- "Witley training camp in England was the wartime home for many Canadian First World War soldiers and where they prepared for service in France and Belgium. Although an unusual subject for a female artist to choose, this boldly conceived study of boxers in an open-air ring at the camp displays the painter's love of sunlight, colour, and open air. The model for the figures, **Joe Shears**, was the Imperial Force's **bantam-weight champion** at the time." (Wikipedia)

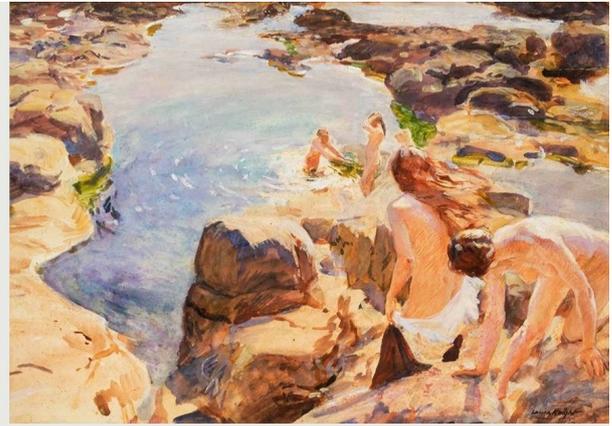
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<https://the-past.com/review/the-wartime-art-of-laura-knight/>

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Laura Knight, (1877-1970), *On the Cliff, Cornwall*, c. 1917, 63.5 x 76 cm, private collection



Laura Knight, (1877-1970), *The Bathing Pool*, 1912, 45.5 x 66 cm, private collection

Laura Knight, (1877-1970), *The Bathing Pool*, 1912, 45.5 x 66 cm, private collection

Laura Knight, (1877-1970), *On the Cliff, Cornwall*, c. 1917, 63.5 x 76 cm, private collection, sold by Sotheby's 2009 for £645,050.

- **She hired models from London** and studied the nude in the open air in Newlyn and this increased her confidence and enabled her to free herself from the rigidity imposed by continually drawing the nude from static plaster sculptures.
- She painted **women in the open air** on the rocks or cliff-tops around Lamorna. Although there was some resentment locally about the use of nude models, the landowner, Colonel Paynter of Boskenna, allowed Knight and other artists a free rein.
- This piece, ***The Bathing Pool***, painted in 1912, is almost certainly Lamorna, the bathers in a granite rock pool exposed by the low tide. The first painting she did of women on cliffs and bathing was ***Daughters of the Sun*** which was completed in 1911 and well received when **shown at the Royal Academy**, but was subsequently damaged and destroyed. We have black and white photographs and it was similar to *The Bathing Pool* painted the following year and a number of other paintings of women bathing.
- In recent years examples of Knight's plein-air compositions from Cornwall have attracted **high prices** at auction. This painting for example sold in 2019 for £132,000.
- (CLICK) She also painted a number of pictures of women on clifftops such as this one, *On the Cliff, Cornwall*, painted on the cliffs above Lamorna as the sun was sitting. The women are professional models, one of whom married Harold's brother. One is sewing and the other threading a needle. It was sold by Sotheby's in 2009 for £645,050, the highest price ever paid for a painting by Knight.

NOTES

- Lamorna Cove is about four miles from Newlyn and Boskenna Farm is about three miles from Lamorna Cove.
- Knight used three professional models from London who she summoned to Cornwall when she painted *Daughters of the Sun* in 1911. One of these models, an ex-Tiller-Girl named Dolly Snell who later married Harold's brother and became Mrs Edgar Knight.

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- <https://www.busby.co.uk/sale-lots/55687/Dame+Laura+Knight+RA%2C+RWS%2C+RE%2C+RWA%2C>



Laura Knight
(1877-1970),
Spring, 1916–20,
152.4 x 182.9 cm,
Tate, Chantry
Bequest 1935

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Spring*, 1916–20, 152.4 x 182.9 cm, Tate, Chantry Bequest 1935

- Knight was influenced by the **Newlyn School and by Impressionism**, (imagine Stanhope Forbes and Monet merged). She **insisted on realism** and although her **subjects are modern**—ballet dancers, gypsies and circus performers—she didn't experiment with abstraction or unusual effects. This made her one of the most popular artists of the time.
- Knight was inspired to paint landscapes during the Boer War (1899-1902) when she was staying in **Staithe**. She remembers her first view of primroses in the spring. She wrote "**I went there many times, hoping to make studies for a great work. There was to be everything that I know of spring in that big picture. All I learned there was the origin of a work called 'Spring' painted in Cornwall years later**".
- The location was Lamorna Valley and the **models were Ella and Charles Naper**. It was painted during World War One when it was **illegal to paint outdoors** anywhere near the Cornish coast. So, she would lie under a gorse bush making quick sketches in fear of being taken off to prison. She would then rush back to her studio and paint the next section.
- She first painted it **with the man, she then changed it to a boy**. It was exhibited for many years in England and internationally with the boy. Then in **Pittsburgh** the acidity of the smoky atmosphere from the Carnegie Steel Works destroyed the top layer so she had to remove the varnish to save it. She had to do some repainting as well and decided the boy was wrong and changed it back to the man again.
- More on her landscapes later but first her portraits.

NOTES

- Lamorna Valley is a wooded valley running down to the sea in Cornwall just west of Mousehole (pronounced 'mowzle') best known for the community of artists who set up here in the early 20th century. Artists such as Dod Procter, 'Lamorna' Birch and Laura Knight.
- Ella Louise naper (1886-1972) was an English jeweller, potter, designer and painter. She married the architect and painter Charles Naper in 1910. They moved to Lamorna in 1912 and during the First World War she collaborated with Knight on the design of several pieces of jewellery. She is the model Knight used for *Self-Portrait with Nude*.



PORTRAITS

- Let me start with a self-portrait that really brought her to the public's attention. The model was Ella Naper who we have just seen in Spring, the jewellery designer and successful artist.



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Self-Portrait with Nude*, 1913, 152.4 x 127.6 cm, National Portrait Gallery

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Self-Portrait with Nude*, 1913, 152.4 x 127.6 cm, purchased by National Portrait Gallery in 1970 for £700

- **The first instance in the history of art of a female artist actually engaging in life drawing. It was too daring for the Royal Academy who, believe it or not, rejected it.**
- **Painted in 1913 when she was 36 and it is perhaps her most famous and controversial painting.** This is a defiant painting as she shows herself in profile while painting a nude female figure from life.
- **She used mirrors to paint herself and the Ellen Naper** as seen from the point of view of someone entering the studio.
- It was first shown in Newlyn and was well received but was rejected by the Royal Academy. The Daily Telegraph art critic called it '**vulgar**' and suggested it '**might quite appropriately have stayed in the artist's studio.**'
- A woman artist painting a nude was very difficult during the nineteenth century as few art schools **allowed women students to attend life classes**. Women students painted themselves in the mirror and other women students but did not acknowledge this. It was one thing to paint a working class model another for a middle-class woman student to pose naked so their face was often hidden. One of the first schools to accept women artists in the life class was the Slade towards the end of the century.
- 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 was criticised for '**drawing like a man**' as she used thick outlines and **drew from the shoulder** rather than the wrist.
- In 2015 Simon Schama described this painting as a "**masterpiece**" and "**incomparably, her greatest work, all at once conceptually complex, heroically independent, formally ingenious and lovingly sensual.**"

REFERENCES

- https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Self_Portrait_with_Nude



1934 Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts. It shows shows Academicians, from left to right Frederick William Elwell, Harold Knight, Mark Fisher, Sydney Lee, Sir Frank Short, Richard Jack, Sir David Young Cameron and Dame Laura Knight. They are standing in front of Laura Knight's oil *Lamorna Birch and his Daughters*, standing in front of 1934 RA Knight's oil. *Lamorna University of Nottingham*

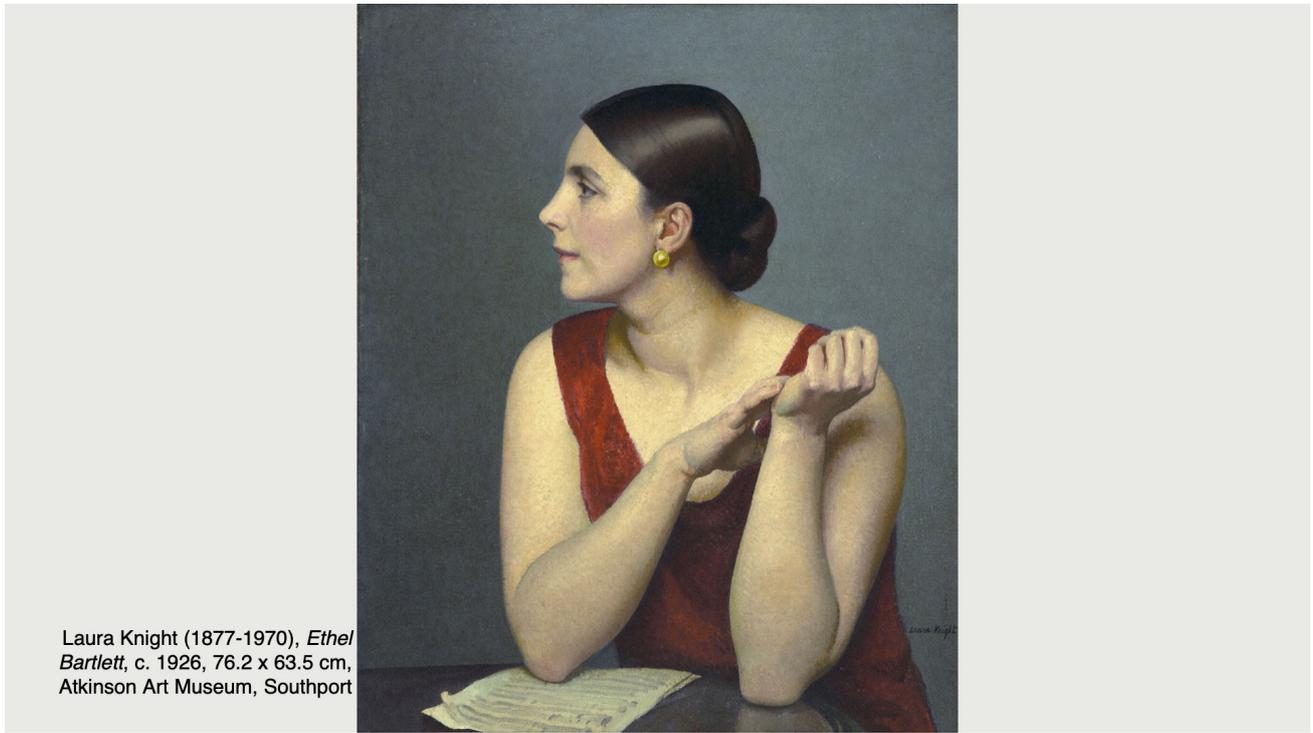
Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Lamorna Birch* (1869-1955), and *His Daughters*, 1916 and 1934, 215 x 261 cm, University of Nottingham

Photograph by an unidentified photographer working for Topical Press Agency from a group of eight relating to the 1934 Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts. It shows shows Academicians, from left to right Frederick William Elwell, Harold Knight, Mark Fisher, Sydney Lee, Sir Frank Short, Richard Jack, Sir David Young Cameron and Dame Laura Knight. They are standing in front of Laura Knight's oil *Lamorna Birch and his Daughters*.

- Knight started the vast painting *Lamorna Birch and his Daughters* in 1913, painting in a wood in the Lamorna Valley but then kept the painting unfinished in her studio until finally completing it in 1934, the same year Birch was elected a full member of the Royal Academy. (Knight became an RA two years later in 1936).
- **Samuel John "Lamorna" Birch** (1869–1955) settled in Lamorna in 1892 and met Knight when she arrived in 1907. There was another artist called Lionel Birch and Stanhope Forbes suggested he use the name Lamorna as he painted so many pictures of the Cove.
- **Fear of espionage** led to restrictions during the First World War including a ban on painting outdoors. However, we know from this painting that Knight sometimes ignored the ban.
- Lamorna was made a **Royal Academician in 1934 the year this was exhibited**. Lamorna is **not well known today but he was a very prolific artist** and it is said he painted more than 20,000 pictures over his lifetime. Knight reworked this earlier painting for the 1934 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition.
- (CLICK) **This photograph makes the scale** of the painting clear and it shows a group of Academicians on Varnishing Day. Her **husband Harold** can just be seen second from the left.
- Harold was a man of **iron principle** and when called up for military service in 1916, he registered as a **conscientious objector**, despite the frailty of his health and the inevitable abuse he suffered as a result. As a conscientious objector **he worked as a farm labourer** for the remainder of the war.

NOTES

- The painting shows friend and fellow artist Samuel John 'Lamorna' Birch with his two daughters Elizabeth Lamorna, 'Mornie' (1904–1990), and Joan Houghton (1909–1993). Both became painters.
- Lamorna Birch had a very poor upbringing and started work in a oilcloth factory that resulted in a recurring chest infection. He travelled to Cornwall in 1892 but his embarrassment at his lack of formal training meant that he did not settle in St. Ives or Newlyn but at lamorna Cove where he lived for the next 63 years. He exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1893 and became better known and a new community of artists settled around him at Lamorna. He rose at dawn every day and was extremely prolific producing a staggering 20,000 paintings. He became an ARA in 1926 and an RA in 1934.



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

- At the end of the First World War they **moved to London** and over the next decade mostly concentrated on painting **the ballet and the circus**. She also started engraving including a poster advertising tram travel for Twickenham and she continued to produce posters for London Transport throughout her life.
- This is one of her finest portraits from this period. The sitter was **Ethel Bartlett** (1896-1978) a **young pianist** whose beauty captivated 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.



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *A Child at the Baltimore Children's Hospital*, 1926-1927, 30.5 x 40.7cm

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *A Child at the Baltimore Children's Hospital*, 1926-1927, 30.5 x 40.7cm, Christie's European Art

- In 1922 she made her first trip to America and in 1926 Harold was commissioned to paint portraits of the surgeons in the Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore. Laura went with him and while she was there she focused on the marginalised residents, African-Americans. The hospital wards were racially segregated and she painted patients and staff in the wards containing African-Americans.
- The strength of this painting is that it is timeless. Many paintings are of a time either because of the clothes, the appearance or the painting style. This child is timeless with her intense gaze and innocent features.
- "Baltimore's Johns Hopkins Hospital opened in 1889 through the then-largest philanthropic bequest in American history with a mandate to serve the city's residents '**without regard to sex, age or colour.**' While it was one of the few leading hospitals in America that treated African Americans, the hospital was still segregated, and racist attitudes were undeniably a part of the relationship between the hospital and its patients." [1]
- Knight learned about the realities of African-American life from her friendship with Pearl Zelma Johnson, an assistant to Dr. William Baer who Harold had been commissioned to paint and who hosted them during their stay.

NOTES

- One of the other most stunning results was a portrait of Pearl Johnson, a long-serving Johns 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.

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



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

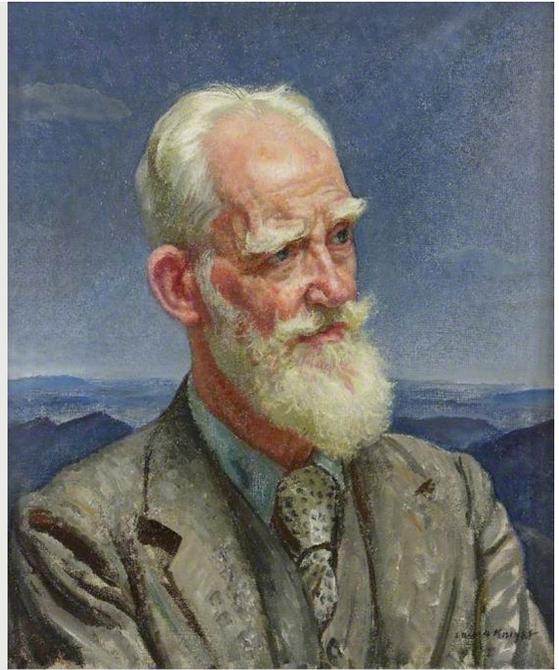
- In the mid-1930s Knight befriended and painted groups of gypsies at the Epsom and Ascot racecourses.
- Knight wrote (15 November 1957): 'He, a gentleman called Mr Smith, one wet day, at Iver, Bucks, in the camp there near the railway, **posed for me in a little lean-to tent** - just a corner in shelter, 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.'
- Knight was interested in the lives of Romany people and got to know them as well as painting them. She did not expect to be accepted by them and at Epsom she famously painted them from inside her antique Rolls Royce which was large enough to take her easel.

NOTES

- Later research has discovered that his full name is Guilderoy Smith.

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- <https://www.npg.org.uk/blog/searching-for-knights-gypsy-sitters>



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *George Bernard Shaw*, 1942,
76 x 66 cm, Hereford Art Gallery

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *George Bernard Shaw*, 1942, 76 x 66 cm, Hereford Art Gallery

- **From 1933 the Knights became regular visitors to the Malvern Festival (1929-1939)** which was devoted to putting on modern plays. During one visit they met its patron George Bernard Shaw and became good friends. She painted this portrait at the **Mount Pleasant Hotel in Malvern** and there is now a blue plaque on the hotel commemorating the time the Knights spent there.
- That takes up to the Second World War and I will cover that later but first her interest in the female nude...

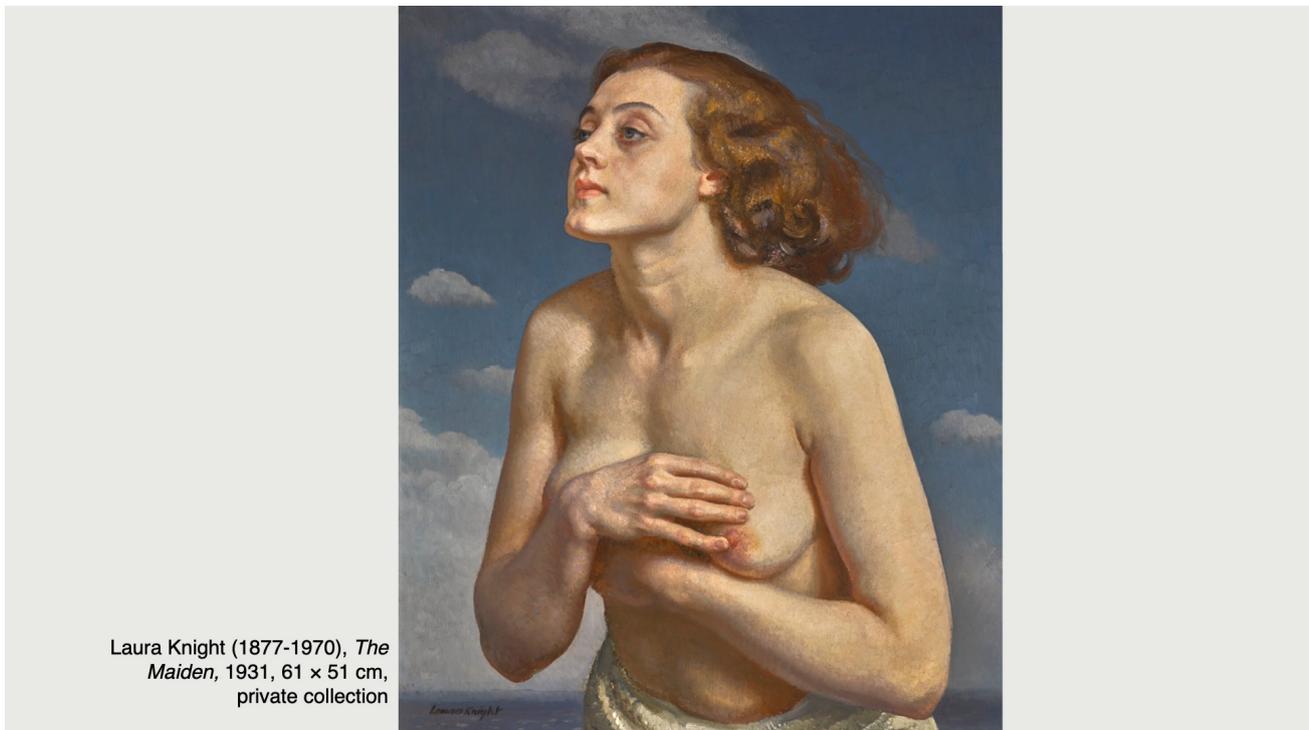
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THE FEMALE NUDE

- As a woman, Knight was excluded from life drawing classes and only allowed to study the nude from plaster casts.
- Later she employed female models and painted many female nudes. I assume the male nude would have been too controversial although she did specialise in painting and drawing semi-naked boxers.
- Knight continually fought her figurative training and she strived to rid her work of the stillness of her plaster-cast studies from art school. She spent a large part of her career striving to capture the complex figurative movement of performers within the theatre, circus and ballet



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Maiden*, 1931, 61 x 51 cm, private collection

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Maiden*, 1931, 61 x 51 cm, private collection

Sotheby's estimate 25,000 — 35,000, sold for £56,250, 2017

- **The sitter is Eileen Mayo** (1906-1994), an artist and designer who worked in England, Australia and New Zealand. Her early life was marred with tragedy and in 1927, without family and in dire financial circumstances, she came close to drowning herself in the Serpentine. However, her fortunes suddenly changed when she met Laura Knight, who employed her as a model and she subsequently appeared in many of her iconic paintings.
- As a result she became much in demand and found herself surrounded with prosperity and fame and this portrait became the centre of attraction in the Royal Academy exhibition. Eileen became much in demand in the 1930s by Laura's contemporaries, including Dod Proctor, Vanessa Bell, Mark Gertler and Duncan Grant, who described her as 'his muse'. She was recognised later in life, actually one week before her death aged 87, by being made a Dame.

NOTES

- "The human figure always held a central place within Laura Knight's career - most emphatically seen when Knight boldly announced her arrival on the artistic scene with her *Self Portrait*, 1913 (National Portrait Gallery, London). In a male-dominated world, and when women were denied access to nude models, with this portrait Knight demonstrated her personal emancipation. In her career that followed, Knight's keen interest in diverse characters, often women and often from the margins of society, resulted in some of the most striking portraits of her generation. In paintings such as the present and comparables including *Dawn* (1933, Royal Academy Collection), Knight again defiantly celebrates the female form and her individual spirit.
- To add further poignancy to the painting, the sitter is Eileen Mayo D.B.E. R.A. (1906-1994), an artist and designer who worked in England, Australia and New Zealand. Recognised with a Dame-hood at the end of her life, her early life was marred with tragedy. In 1927, without family and in dire financial circumstances, she came close to drowning herself in the Serpentine. However, her fortunes were changed through her meeting with Laura Knight, who employed her as a model and subsequently appeared in many of her iconic paintings,

Blue and Gold (1927), *The Golden Girl* (1927) and *Dressing for the Ballet* (1927). She also appears with Laura in the Pathé film 'Mrs Laura Knight - The Famous Artist' in 1927.

- A strikingly, beautiful young woman, Eileen became much in demand in the 1930s by Laura's contemporaries, including Dod Proctor, Vanessa Bell, Mark Gertler and Duncan Grant, who described her as 'his muse'. The story of Eileen's dramatic turn in fortunes was told in an article in *The Milwaukee Sentinel* 1st June 1928: 'Saved from suicide; snatched from existence worse than death - starving, friendless, discouraged, Eileen Mayo tells how she battled with despair and suddenly found herself surrounded with prosperity and fame, her portrait the centre of attraction in the Royal Academy exhibition in London.' In *The Maiden*, we see a liberated Eileen gloriously rendered under a Cornish blue sky. " (Sotheby's)

BIO:MAYO

- **Eileen Mayo** (1906-1994) was born in Norwich and educated in Yorkshire and trained at the Slade. She was a teacher Saint Martin's School of Art and Sir John Cass college. She illustrated books and exhibited at the Royal Academy. For a while she was a well-known model. She married Dr Richard Gainsborough in 1936 but the marriage ended in 1952 and she migrated to Australia where she designed six postage stamps. In 1962 she moved to New Zealand where her mother and sister had lived since 1921. She was made a Dame for services to art in 1994 a week before her death aged 87.



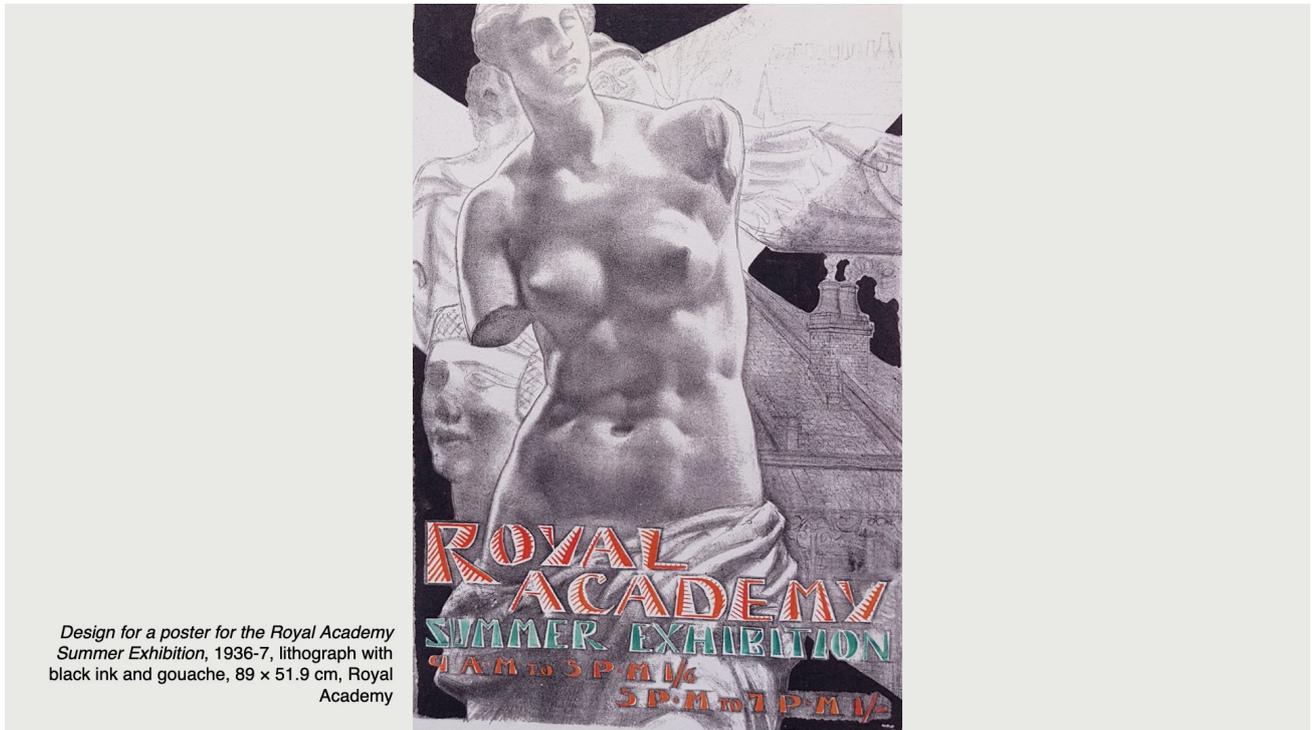
Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Dawn*, 1932-33, 75 x 59 cm, Royal Academy

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Dawn*, 1932-33, 75 x 59 cm, Royal Academy, diploma work accepted 1936

- Laura Knight did not conform to gender expectations and **campaigns 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. She **rejected demureness** and characterised herself as domestically incompetent, she said she "**couldn't boil an egg**".
- This was her Diploma work for the Royal Academy. Every Academician is expected to produce a Diploma Work before they receive their diploma. The **two bare-breasted models are a deliberate statement to the Royal Academy that she can do what any artist can do – male or female**. Note however, that Knight draped the women below the waist so as not to create **too 'overt a challenge'** to the Academy.
- Knight was acutely aware of the gap in her training as she was barred from studying the nude in life classes. When she and Harold moved to Cornwall she **started to hire models, often dancers** she invited down from London and friends such as her fellow artist Ella Naper. She went further than just doing life studies and **started to draw dancers in action**. Later she **started sketching ballet performances** and rehearsals and made the human figure the main focus of her work.
- She soon realised that her **earlier life drawings** were, in her words, "**timid, stuttering, laboured**" and she gradually mastered what she called "perfection of balance and line" and "**in the joy of line for its own sake; the infinite possibilities of composition as exemplified by the human body in movement.**"

NOTES

- "New Royal Academicians are awarded a Diploma that has been printed by hand from the same copper plate since 1769. ... And fittingly, once the newly elected RA has donated a work – known as a Diploma Work – to [the Royal Academy] Collection, they receive an elaborate document, signed by the Sovereign." (Royal Academy website)



Design for a poster for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, 1936-7, lithograph with black ink and gouache, 89 x 51.9 cm, Royal Academy

- She was only the second woman to be made an Associate Academician and the first woman to be elected a Royal Academician. She was also the first woman to serve on the hanging committee of the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition in 1937 and she designed the poster.
- It is interesting that she chose as the central image the **Venus de Milo** which is in the **Louvre**. As I said she was not allowed in the life class and was **forced to copy plaster casts like this one**. She wrote in 1936 "**The hatred of those plaster figures stays with me to this day— I never got any benefit out of their study, and through working from them so much a woodenness came into my work that took years to eradicate.**" It is therefore interesting to speculate what motivated her to use a plaster cast for the central figure of her design for the exhibition catalogue, perhaps another jibe at the Royal Academy.



BALLET, THEATRE AND THE CIRCUS

- In the 1910s Knight travelled up from Cornwall to see as many performances as she could of **Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes**. She wrote "**it gave me the feeling of being born again in a new and glamorous world**".
- From then on she used every opportunity she had to sketch and paint around the ballet and the theatre.

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Ballet Girl and the Dressmaker*, c.1930



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Ballet Girl and the Dressmaker*, c.1930, sold at Sotheby's for £322,000 (estimate £100,000-£150,000)

- This is a ballerina called **Barbara Bonnar**; described as a ‘...**a vital and sparkling young creature, [who] was rehearsing for a show at the time and many of the sittings had to take place in the early morning.**’ [1]
- Knight’s own dressmaker, Miss Fergusson, posed for the woman making the alterations to the dress; ‘her hands and type were perfect.’ [1]
- ‘...this painting displays no self-conscious artifice. The dancer is caught mid-glance looking left, her body arrested in movement, while her dresser fixes a flounce on her skirt. Notwithstanding the delicate colour harmonies, the pink tights and ballet shoes and petal-like net of the skirt, here there is authority, power and control.’ [2]
- Knight designed a **clever composition**; ‘...of **two interlacing pyramids**. To me it is **more difficult to arrange two equally important figures** together than three. However, my pyramids worked and the picture went through from start to finish without the slightest alteration, one of those lucky ones that paint themselves without disagreement with the painter.’ (Laura Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 1936, p.322)
- It was **commissioned by H. Earl Hoover** in 1930 when he visited Knight's studio. He saw her ballet picture *Motley* and wanted a smaller picture and he asked Knight to paint Bonnar.

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- [1] Laura Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 1936, p.322
- [2] Barbara C. Morden, *Laura Knight – A Life*, 2013, pp.173-174
- <https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2018/victorian-pre-raphaelite-british-impressionist-art-118132/lot.80.html>



Ballet Studies: Anna Pavlova, pencil, 35.5 × 22.2 cm

Portrait of Anna Pavlova, 1911, V&A

Mme (Anna) Pavlova, 1920, 33 × 18.5 cm

Pavlova and Novikoff, taking a curtain call

- After the First World War Diaghilev returned to London and she immersed herself in the world of dance making **many sketches of Anna Pavlova who she found particularly compelling**, she wrote, "**I know her every step and gesture in every dance she did**".
- **Anna Pavlova** was one of the most famous ballerinas of all time. With her large eyes, long neck, high cheekbones and dark hair, Pavlova's looks typified everyone's ideal of a classical ballerina. Born in St Petersburg in 1881, Pavlova was inspired to dance after seeing a production of the ballet *The Sleeping Beauty*. She trained at the Imperial Theatre School but by 1906 she was associated with the revolutionary ideas of Mikhail Fokine, who choreographed the famous **Dying Swan for her**.
- Laura Knight was fascinated by the theatre, ballet and the circus, and was **thrilled when she first saw Pavlova dance** with her partner Michael Mordkin, probably in London during their 1910 tour. Even when she lived in Cornwall, Laura Knight spent months in London every year and loved watching the ballet at the Empire Theatre and the Palace Theatre.
- The drawing on the left is undated and may have been executed at the Palace Theatre season in 1911 when Pavlova was partnered by Laurent Novikov, or later when Laura Knight sketched her for a book at her house in Hampstead .



Laura Knight (1877-1970), No. 1
Dressing Room, 1947, 151 x 126 cm,
Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool

Laura Knight (1877-1970), No. 1 *Dressing Room*, 1947, 151 x 126 cm, Grundy Art Gallery, Blackpool

- She was always fascinated with performance and spectacle and took a keen interest in dance and theatre from childhood. Knight's nudes are either in action or standing and if seated they are usually doing something such as **applying make-up or preparing their hair**.
- This painting was arranged in Knight's studio and **features Eileen Mayo** (1906-1994), the artist we saw previously in *The Maiden*, here in the role of a ballerina. It was **originally painted in 1927** for the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition that year. She **painted it in a hurry** so she could travel to **meet Harold in America** where he was working on an assignment. **It was ignored by the Academy and criticised for its sketchiness**. In 1931 it was included in her American touring exhibition and **damaged** so she cut it down and completely repainted it. This is the **final result which was exhibited at the Academy in 1947**.

REFERENCES

Anthony Spira, Fay Blanchard, Sophie Hatchwell, Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Laura Knight: A Panoramic View* (Bloomsbury USA, 2022), p. 82



Laura Knight (1877–1970),
A Ballet Dancer, 1930s,
59.5 x 46 cm

Laura Knight (1877–1970), *A Ballet Dancer*, c. 1932, 59.5 x 46 cm

- **In 1919**, she obtained permission '**to work wherever I liked in whichever theatre the Ballet was playing**'. She became **friends with the Russian ballerina Lydia Lopokova** (1892-1981) who allowed her to use her dressing room as a studio.
- In this painting the ballerina is taking a moment to compose herself before leaving her dressing room for the performance.

REFERENCES

- <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/23581/lot/94/>



Laura Knight (1877–1970), *A Theatre Dressing Room*, c. 1935, 74.3 × 62.9 cm, Glasgow Museums Resource Centre (GMRC)

Laura Knight (1877–1970), *A Theatre Dressing Room*, c. 1935, 74.3 × 62.9 cm, Glasgow Museums Resource Centre

- Knight was a regular at the London theatres throughout her life and sketched backstage regularly.



Laura Knight (1877–1970), *Ballet*, 1936, 63.8 × 76.5 cm, Lady Lever Art Gallery

Laura Knight (1877–1970), *Ballet*, 1936, 63.8 × 76.5 cm, Lady Lever Art Gallery

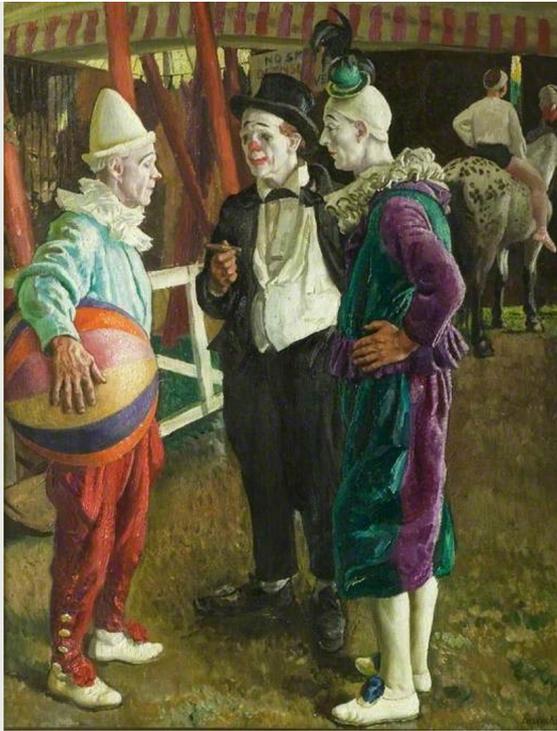
- One of Knight's biographers commented that '**Laura was undoubtedly happiest when painting informal scenes backstage.**' These intimate encounters led to Knight forming close friendships with fellow females in the arts.
- She wrote, '**During the 1920s and 30s, when the seasons spent by the Diaghilev Ballet in London were frequent, I could have been found back-stage every show, trying to draw all the wonderful subjects I saw.**'
- She once commented: '**I firmly believe the most valuable study I have ever had was in my attempt to draw the Ballet. Never before had I tried to make the pencil speak in a language of its own.**'



Laura Knight
(1877-1970), *The
Grand Parade:
Charivari*, 1928, 99
x 125 cm, Newport
Art Gallery

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Grand Parade: Charivari*, 1928, 99 x 125 cm, Newport Art Gallery

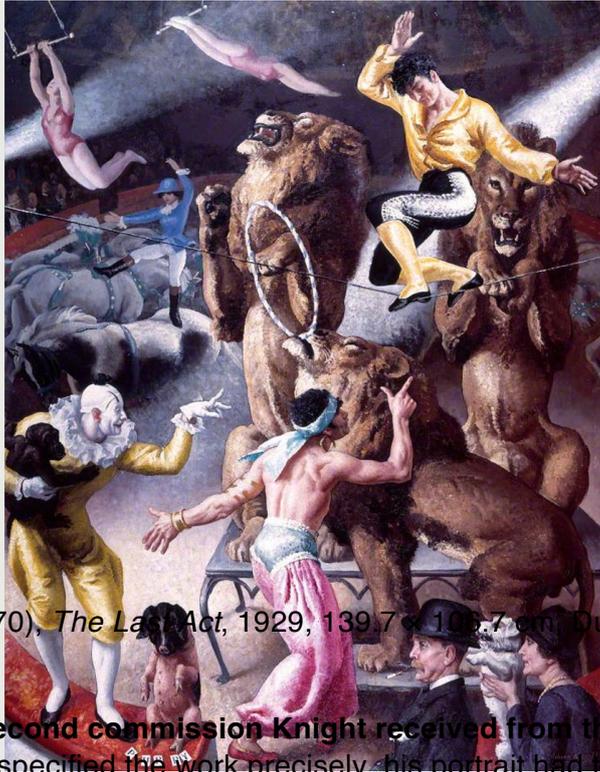
- **After the ballet her best known subject was the circus.** Around **1920 Knight visited Bertram Mills Circus in Olympia.** This painting was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1929 and it depicts almost the **entire circus cast.**
- From 1929 to 1930 she accompanied Bertram Mills Circus and Great Carmo's Circus around Britain. She wanted to devote her time entirely to drawing scenes from daily life under the big top. She learnt to paint at great speed directly onto the canvas without any preliminary drawings in order to capture the moment as the performers rarely had time to pose.
- Most of the characters depicted in this painting can be identified by name and include the clown Whimsical Walker (Thomas Walker, 1851–1934) at the centre, the clown Joe Craston behind him, and the terrier 'Blinkers' sitting between his legs.



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Three Clowns*, purchased 1934, 77 x 63.5 cm, New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Three Clowns*, purchased 1934, 77 x 63.5 cm, New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester

- Paintings such as the one were more successful as she had time to sketch and do drawings. This mean the picture was less flat and more modelled.
- The clowns in this painting were her friends Randy, Marba and Joe Bert.
- She wrote, she "**became Circus—accepted in Circus as Circus for good and all.**"



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Last Act*, 1929, 139.7 x 106.7 cm, Dundee Art Gallery

- This work was the **second commission Knight received from the circus impresario Major Atherley**. He specified the work precisely, his portrait had to be in one corner with his housekeeper holding up his dog 'Blinkers' to look at lions performing without a cage. All the animals had to be represented over life-size and very fierce. There had to be horses running round, a wire-walker and a trapeze artist overhead. Joe Cranston is on the ring fence with the ape that only he and its keeper could touch and beside him is a pig spelling out the major's pet name P-U-P-P-Y in cards with letters on them. The central figure is Togare controlling the lions.
- Knight described this painting as a **contrived, decorative fantasy and she did not want it exhibited**.
- In 1934 Knight developed a series of circus designs for the Modern Art for the Table tableware range produced by Clarice Cliff.



WORLD WAR II

In September 1939 she produced a recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army. During the Second World War, Knight was an official war artist, contracted by the War Artists' Advisory Committee on several short-term commissions.



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

- I am starting with her **most famous war painting** and one of her most famous paintings, *Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech-ring*.
- During the Second World War Knight worked as a war artist. 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.
- 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 carried out only by men and 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.**

- 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),
Corporal J. M. Robins, 1941, 91.4
x 60.9 cm, Imperial War Museums

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

- This is another work **commissioned by the War Artists' Advisory Committee**. The Committee asked her to paint a **group of medal-winning women** but Knight refused and painted this individual portrait.
- 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.'
- Robins was awarded the **Military Medal** for the courage she showed.



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

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

- 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.

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

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



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

- ***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**.
- 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.

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



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

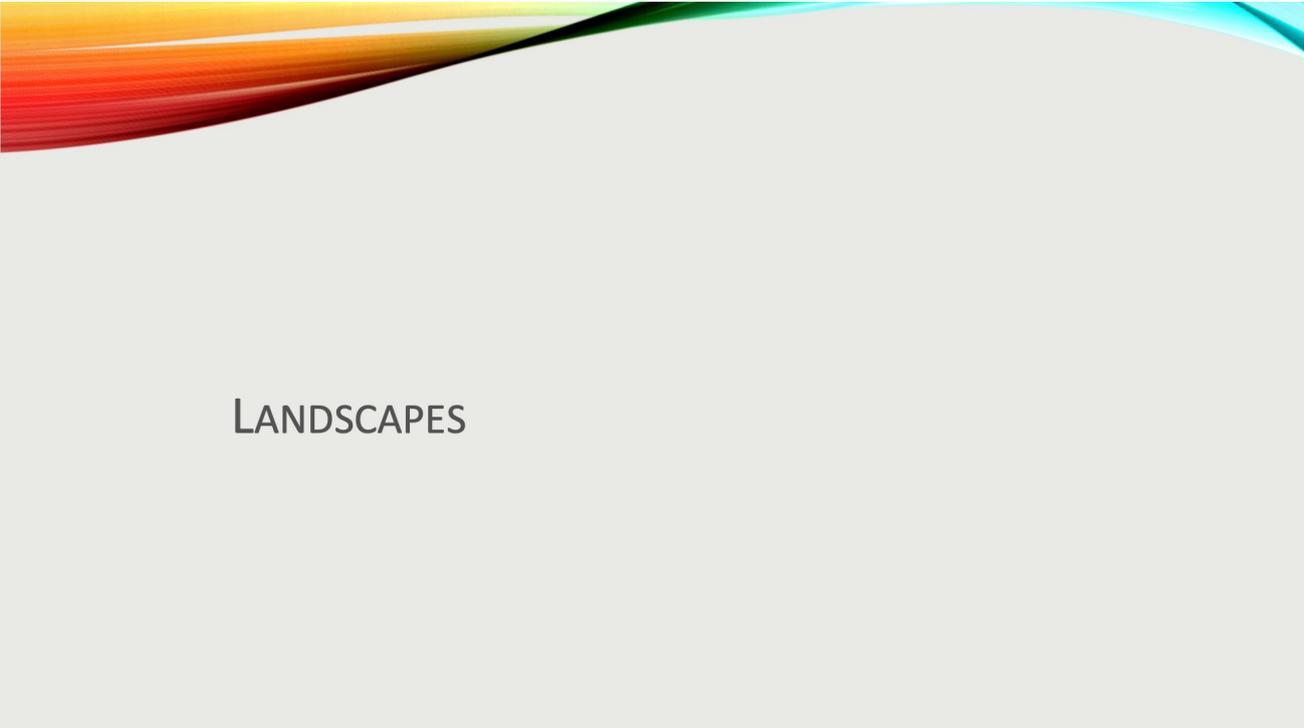
Laura Knight (1877-1970), *The Nuremberg Trial*, 1946, 182.8 x 152.4cm, Imperial War Museum

- **After the war Knight proposed to the War Artists' Advisory Committee that she paint the Nuremberg war crimes trials.** The Committee agreed, and Knight went to Germany in January 1946 and **spent three months** observing the main trial from inside the courtroom. The result was the large oil painting, *The Nuremberg Trial*.
- 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.
- This form of symbolism is very unusual for Knight. Like Augustus John, Stanley Spencer, L. S. Lowry and Vanessa Bell their naturalistic, figurative painting was founded on their late Victorian training and the **'isms' of modern art** conflicted with this training in **accurate observation** and drawing. But here she has combined her accurate observation with her imagination.
- Her naturalistic painting style and her popularity resulted in her being scorned by trendy critics who found ways to try to put her down. **Kenneth Clarke sneered at Laura Knight's work** and described it as **'commonplace'** because she had been trained in Nottingham rather than London.

NOTES

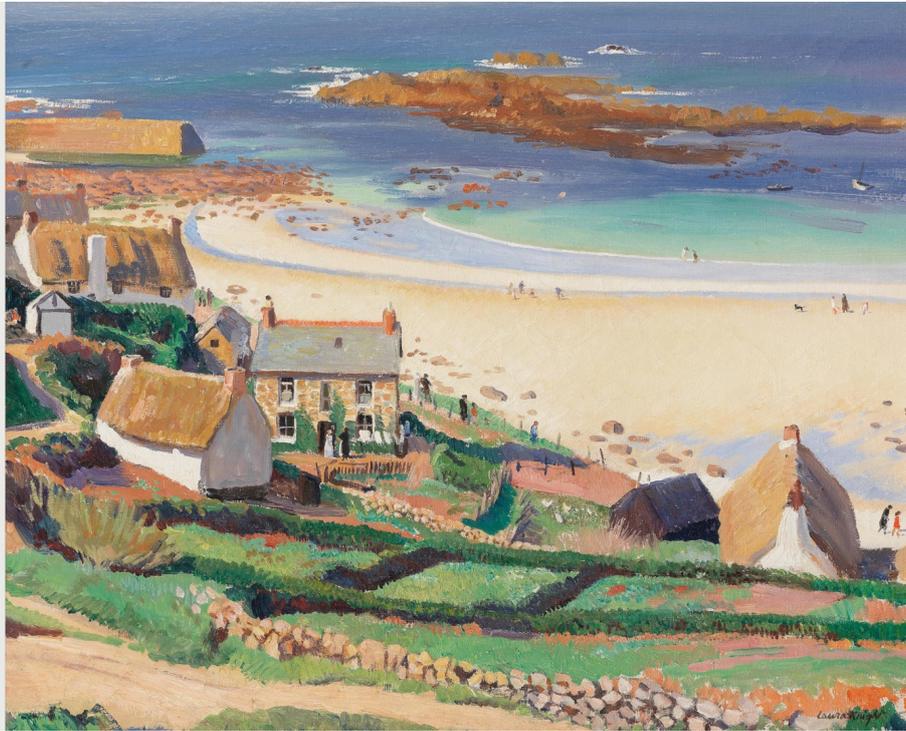
- Imperial War Museum, "Knight was appointed a 'war correspondent' for this commission and made a special BBC broadcast from Nuremberg. She gained special access to the broadcasting box just above the prisoners where she was able to make charcoal studies of the main protagonists amongst the lawyers and 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.”



LANDSCAPES

Throughout her life Knight painted landscapes. She destroyed many of her early landscapes at Staithes. She said she often warmed herself by burning canvases on her stove. But she learnt from this experience and Cornwall inspired her to produce landscapes such as *Spring* which we have seen. Her early landscapes often includes human figures but her later work is pure landscape as we shall see.



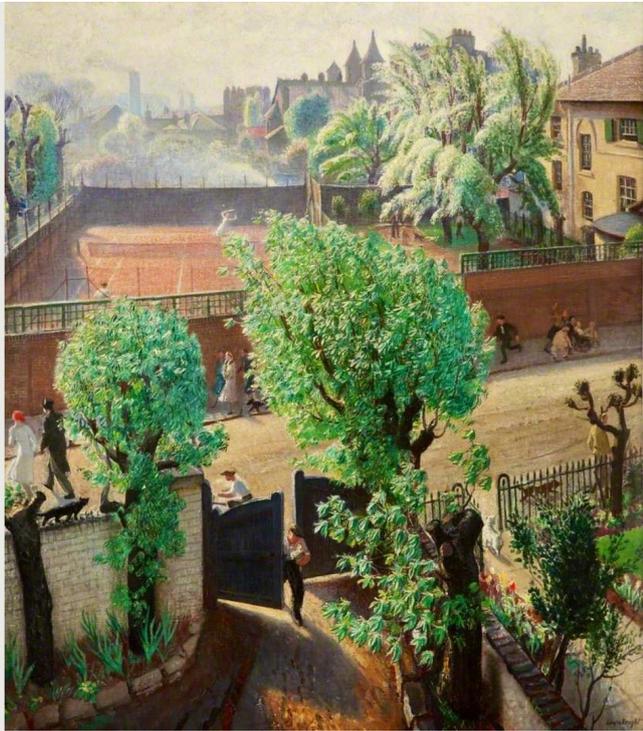
Laura Knight
(1877–1970),
Sennen Cove,
Cornwall, 1922,
51 x 61 cm

Laura Knight (1877–1970), *Sennen Cove, Cornwall*, 1922, 51 x 61 cm, private collection

- This is an early landscape painting of Sennen Cove.
- As I said they first went to Newlyn, Cornwall, in late 1907 they were made welcome by Stanhope Forbes, father of the Newlyn artists colony, and their circle of friends included many of the original artist settlers such as Walter Langley and Frank Bramley, as well as Sir Alfred Munnings, who was to become close friends with the couple.
- They returned to **live in London in 1919** but would retreat to **West Cornwall each summer**, painting in **Sennen, Lamorna and Mousehole** (pronounced 'mowzle').
- This painting sold at Bonhams in 2021 for £500,250.

REFERENCES

- <https://www.bonhams.com/auctions/26838/lot/16/>



Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Spring in Saint John Wood, London, 1933*, 130.2 x 115.6 cm, Walker Art Gallery

Laura Knight (1877-1970), *Spring in Saint John Wood, London, 1933*, 130.2 x 115.6 cm, Walker Art Gallery

- "This is the view from **Knight's studio at 16 Langford Place in North London**. The painting is full of the spirit of spring. Leafy trees sway above people enjoying being outside ... This suburban setting shows people and nature in harmony." (Walker Art Gallery)
- The picture is full of activity a couple cross the road and he is wearing a top hat, someone is coming in the gate with a package, there is a dog next door, someone over the road is running and there are various groups of people with someone waving in one group. Over the road a man and a woman are playing tennis in their garden. All the trees have fresh green growth but there is a bonfire and in the distance chimneys belching out smoke.
- (CLICK) This is a photograph of the house they lived in. They bought the house in the early 1920s and it was recently (2018) on the market for nearly £7 million. She owned the house until her death in July 1970 aged 92. The house dates from 1770 and is one of the oldest in St John's Wood.

Laura Knight (1877–1970), *Sundown*, 1940-47, 61 x 91.5 cm, Wolverhampton Art Gallery



Laura Knight (1877–1970), *Sundown*, 1940-47, 61 x 91.5 cm, oil on canvas, Wolverhampton Art Gallery

- As we have seen, Knight worked as an artist for the Nazi War Trials. The Malvern hills of England acted as a much wished-for contrast to the emotional tension of the Trials. **"I am beginning to long for the time to arrive when I have done my work here and can be back with you, Harold, in England"** she wrote to her husband.
- When she returned she described how she was unable to forget the horror of Nuremberg but that "nature herself blots it out".
- Unlike her Cornish landscapes her later landscapes are unpopulated as she feels confident enough to describe the land on its own. Here an intense sunset fills the painting, cloaking the hills in a misty gloom.

REFERENCES

- https://www.wolverhamptonart.org.uk/collections/getrecord/WAGMU_OP301
- https://www.google.co.uk/books/edition/Laura_Knight/sz1AEAAAQBAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=laura+knight++sundown&pg=PA196&printsec=frontcover



Laura Knight
RA (1877 -
1970), *A Misty
Sunrise*, 1956,
RA Collection

Laura Knight RA (1877 - 1970), *A Misty Sunrise*, 1956, RA Collection

- Here we have a dawn. She wrote that she "**got a rage for painting dawn**" particularly when a thin mist cloaked the land.
- In this landscape, again **painted in the Malvern Hills**, a large **scot's fir branch** in the immediate foreground is boldly silhouetted against bright sunlight and leads the eye down across a **mist-shrouded valley**. She has painted thinly in oils so that it resembles one of her watercolour paintings.

SUMMARY

- There is so much to say about her life that I would like to end with this short summary.
- She was the youngest student to enrol at Nottingham School of Art.
- She was the first woman to be elected a Royal Academician in 1936 (Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser were founders).
- She was the first woman to have had a retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy.
- In 1928 she won a silver medal at the Amsterdam Olympics for Art
- 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.
- 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).
- She exhibited at the Royal Academy every year from 1903 to her death in 1970 (67 years) except for 1918 when she was ill and 1922 when she was in America. In total she exhibited 284 works (plus a further 176 at her retrospective exhibition) more than any other artist and **she kept on painting and exhibiting up to her death in her 93rd year**. And despite being

sneered at by the critics she was an extremely popular artist with the general public.

- She covered far more subjects and media than most artists including oil and watercolours, print, including soft etchings, aquatints, dry point, mezzotint, linocut, woodcut, lithographs, posters, theatre and ballet costume design, design for glassware, ceramics, jewellery and enamels.
- Thank you.

NOTES

- "Laura and Harold Knight came to know Malvern during the 1930s through visits to the Black Hill home of the theatre director Sir Barry Jackson. They would often spend the Summer there when attending **Jackons's Malvern Theatrical Festival**. After the Second World War, the Park Hotel at nearby Colwall became their pied-à-terre. Harold Knight died there in 1961.
- The countryside around the **Malvern Hills** came as a revelation to Knight and in her autobiography she recalled: '**[I]t took years and years for me to become sufficiently familiar with the immense beauty of that landscape** before I even dared to make the least record of such visual indulgence. As I write I live again, basking in the first rays of the sun rising over the Bredon Hill to dry up the floating strands of mist hiding the flatter country to the west'.
- Some of Laura Knight's first paintings of the landscape around Malvern were sunrises executed in watercolour that were observed initially from the windows of hotel rooms overlooking the Severn Valley, and later from a studio 'on the heights' half-way up Hereford Beacon. Knight's 'rage for painting dawns' was accompanied by a **fascination with the effects of mist**, as is evident in many of her Malvern landscapes: '**September month is the best time**', Knight explained, ' - in contrast to the suns and clouds "doing their stuff"; strands of grey mist wreath the landscape, the trees appear to have no roots, and church spires no naves to prop them up.' (Royal Academy)