

The Davies Sisters: Curating their bequest in Wales

Background Notes

Oliver Fairclough - 23 March 2022



Figs.1-2 Gwendoline and Margaret Davies, photographs of about 1910

Introduction

The theme of this session is the private collecting and public display of art. We will focus on the great collection formed by Gwendoline and Margaret Davies (Figs 1 & 2), primarily between 1908 and 1923. I will introduce these two sisters, and explore their motives for collecting, before looking at how and what they bought. We will also examine what the sisters did with their pictures, who saw them, and the impact these had. In the second half of the 20th century, the collection became a public one, passing to the National Museum of Wales in 1952 and 1963. We will consider its wider reception then, and how this has changed over time. We will end by looking at two temporary exhibitions drawn from the Davies collection, one at the National Museum in 2007, and another that toured in the United States in 2009-10, that sought to redefine it for the 21st century.

Gwendoline Davies (1882–1951) and Margaret Davies (1884–1963)

Together with their elder brother David (1st Lord Davies from 1932), the sisters inherited great wealth from their grandfather David Davies (1818–1890). He had made a fortune from the deep mining of coal in the Rhondda valley, and its export around the world from the docks he built at Barry, near Cardiff. Their father, Edward Davies (1852–98), had found responsibility for the family's industrial empire exhausting and died at only forty-five. He had married his first cousin, Mary Jones, who died in 1888, when their daughters, always known in the family as Gwen and Daisy, were just six and four years old. Both families were fervent Calvinistic Methodists, a strict form of non-conformity now known as the Presbyterian Church of Wales, and taught the sisters that wealth was a sacred trust and charity a religious obligation. They were all broadly speaking Welsh nationalists, and active in politics and education.

The sisters were largely educated at home, though they travelled widely in Europe before 1914. Neither was to marry, and their lives were profoundly affected by the suffering they saw during the 1st World War, while working for the French Red Cross. In 1919 Gwendoline Davies decided to establish a place where ex-soldiers and others could learn craft skills in peaceful surroundings, and the sisters bought Gregynog Hall (a few miles from their Montgomeryshire home). Their plans for Gregynog grew to include music and literature, as well as the visual arts, and the promotion of international peace and social harmony. During the 1920s and '30s, Gregynog was the venue for a music festival and many conferences attended by educators, politicians, and welfare campaigners. The Gregynog Press, one of the finest private presses of the day and the only element of their "craft colony" to be realized, published a run of fine books between 1923 and 1940. Gwendoline Davies died in 1951, but her sister Margaret continued the Gregynog tradition of fostering art and music until 1963, bequeathing the house to the University of Wales.

The Davies Collection

The sisters began to collect paintings in 1908, focussing primarily on 19th century European art. Their first purchases were landscapes by Camille Corot, and sea paintings by J M W Turner (Fig.3). They collected collaboratively but not jointly –



Fig.3 Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), *The Storm*, 1840-5, oil on canvas, 32.5 x 53.8 cm, bought by Margaret Davies in 1908 for £5,775.

each work being owned individually. An important influence on them was Hugh Blaker (1873-1936), their former governess's brother, an artist and curator of the Holburne Museum in Bath. However, they had other advisers and both had themselves studied art history. Margaret was an amateur painter and engraver – and as Gwendoline wrote 'The great joy of collecting anything is to do it yourself, with expert opinion granted, but one does like to choose for oneself.' More works by Turner and Corot were acquired over the next couple of years, together with scenes of peasant life by the Realist Jean-François Millet. Their taste remained relatively conservative until 1912, when, encouraged by Blaker, they became interested in French Impressionism, then still largely ignored in Britain, and they bought three recent paintings of Venice by Claude Monet for £3,900. During 1913 and in the opening months of 1914, the sisters added five more late works by Monet, including *Water Lilies* of 1905 (Fig.4), 1906, and 1908, as well as the iconic painting most closely associated with them—Renoir's *La Parisienne* (Fig.5) , bought by Gwendoline Davies for £5,000. They also bought six sculptures by Rodin including a full-size bronze version of *The Kiss*.



Fig.4 Claude Monet (1840-1926), *Waterlilies*, 1905, oil on canvas, 81.9 x 101 cm, one of the three 'Waterlilies' bought in Paris by Gwendoline Davies in 1913 for £3,370.



Fig.5 Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841-1919), *La Parisienne*, 1874, oil on canvas, 163.5 x 108.5cm, bought by Gwendoline Davies in 1913 for £5,000.

Having acquired over 90 works at a cost of about £110,000, the Davies sisters had by 1914 assembled one of the finest collections of European modern art in the British Isles, rivalled only by that of Hugh Lane. It was rich in the art the sisters preferred, landscapes, and scenes of rural life. They particularly prized the expressive handling of paint, which they found in Turner and Monet, though they saw similar qualities in other now forgotten figures. Their collecting resumed during the latter part of the First World War, while they were in France, and in February 1918 Gwendoline made the most important purchases of her life—two landscapes by Cézanne (Fig.6).



Fig.6 Paul Cézanne (1839-1906), *The François Zola Dam*, c.1877-8, oil on canvas, 54.2 x 74.2 cm, bought by Gwendoline Davies in 1918 for £2,500.

Cézanne had been shown in London back in 1905, but had been virtually ignored by British collectors. The sisters continued to collect after the war, adding more favorites, such as works by Daumier, Turner, and Augustus John. Margaret extended their holdings of Impressionism with two oils and a group of drawings

by Pissarro, while Gwendoline acquired two more outstanding post-Impressionist works in 1920, a Cézanne *Still Life* and *Rain -Auvers* (Fig.7), one of the first paintings by Van Gogh to enter a British collection. Their appreciation of Cézanne led them to Derain and to Vlaminck, but here their taste for the modern faltered, and between 1919 and 1923 they also bought a number of old master paintings. Then Gwendoline decided that she could no longer buy art 'in the face of the appalling need everywhere'. Margaret though began to collect again in 1934, buying mostly modern British art over the next 30 years.

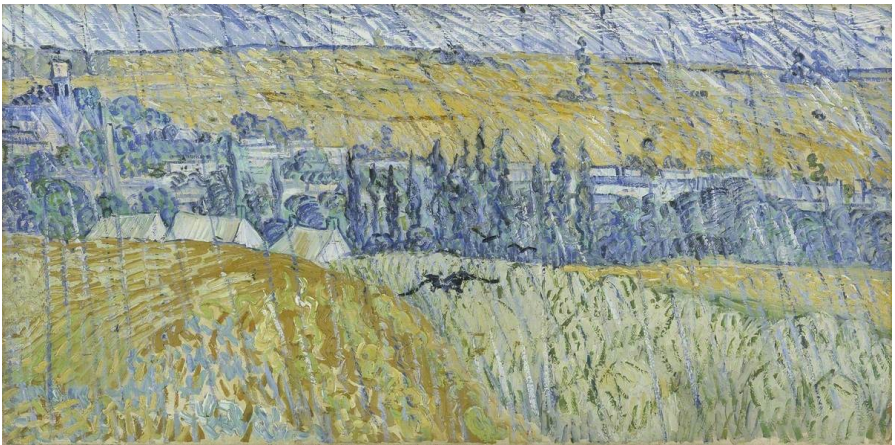


Fig.7 Vincent van Gogh (1853-1890), *Rain – Auvers*, 1890, oil on canvas, 50.2 x 100.3 cm, bought by Gwendoline Davies in 1820 for £2,020.

Presenting the Collection

Although the Davies sisters had assembled one of the most progressive art collections in Britain by 1920, their paintings mostly hung, unseen, in their family home Plas Dinam, and in their London flat. However, they lent generously to exhibitions, apparently feeling they had a moral and social duty to do so. In 1913, much of what they had then acquired was shown anonymously in *A Loan Exhibition of Paintings* at the National Museum of Wales (Fig.8).



Fig. 8 'A Loan Exhibition of Paintings', Cardiff, 1913.

They also 'defrayed the expenses of the exhibition and the lectures connected with it in the hope that the Welsh people will derive pleasure and profit from them'. In 1918 twenty-one French works, including their Cézanne landscapes were shown at the Victoria Art Gallery in Bath. Others, including paintings by Manet and Monet, were lent to the National Eisteddfod of Wales in Barry in 1920, and the Cézannes were included in Roger Fry's exhibition of Modern French Art at the Burlington Fine Art Club in 1922, where they inspired Samuel Courtauld's passion for the artist. Works were also lent to museums for longer-term display – to the Tate and to the Victoria and Albert Museum, as well as the National Museum of Wales. Much of the collection came with them when they moved to Gregynog in 1924, and was hung throughout its public rooms, where it was enjoyed the many visitors to the house during the 1920s and '30s. It then went into hibernation during the war and its aftermath, until Gwendoline died in 1951, bequeathing 109 paintings, watercolours and sculptures to the National Museum. Their arrival was widely reported in the press, and transformed the range and significance of the art collection. They inspired a generation of Welsh art students during the 1950s. The arrival of Margaret's 151 works in 1963 had a similar impact on the museum's audiences, and brought new government funding to extend its modern collections.

Nevertheless, by the end of the 20th century, the Davies collection had been in the public domain for forty years, and its initial impact had receded. Their great-nephew Lord Davies also felt that the memory of the sisters' wider philanthropy had been forgotten, and agreed to give the National Museum access to their personal papers in his care. These formed the core of a research project that revealed much new information about the sisters' lives and the formation of their collection. This in turn underpinned an exhibition in Cardiff in 2007 'Things of Beauty' which put the collection in the broader context of the sisters' lives and philanthropy. Then in 2009-10, the sisters were introduced to an American audience when 58 of their paintings and drawings were shown in the exhibition 'Turner to Cézanne' which toured to Washington and four other US cities. We will conclude with an analysis of the curatorial decisions that underpinned both exhibitions.

Oliver Fairclough, Keeper of Art, Amgueddfa Cymru-National Museum Wales, 1998-2015

Some Further Reading

Oliver Fairclough (ed.), *Things of Beauty*, Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 2007

Trevor Fishlock, *A Gift of Sunlight*, Llandysul: Gomer, 2014

Kenneth McConkey and Anna Gruetzner Robins, *Impressionism in Britain*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, 1995

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