

A Portrait of the Artist: William Orpen (1878 -1931)

Background Notes

Dr Antonia Whitley - 9 December 2015

“It is my business in life to study faces. It is also my lot in doing my job to get to know automatically what is in the mind that is behind the face, and I do not hesitate to say that there is no such thing as real beauty of face without beauty of mind. And there is a lot of both kinds of beauty to-day.”

(from P.G. Konody & Sidney Dark, *Sir William Orpen – Artist & Man*, 1932)



Myself and Venus 1910



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William Orpen was a virtuoso artist. He is said to have painted 600 portraits in his career. Before the first war, he was one of the best-known and most sought-after society portraitists, seen by some as Sargent's natural successor. He enjoyed huge prestige. His technical gifts were obvious and abundant and his sensibility seemed fresh and sometimes funny.



Lady Idina Wallace 1915



The Mirror c.1900

It was '**The Mirror**', exhibited at the New English Art Club in 1900, that brought Orpen to the notice of the public and established his reputation at the age of twenty-two. The model is Emily Scobel, Orpen's then fiancée. While making reference to Van Eyck's mirror in the 'Arnolfini portrait', (see the reflection of the artist sitting at his easel), the image also brings to mind Velázquez's inclusion of himself in 'Las Meninas', as well as being in the tradition of English genre painting.



Orpen spent the war initially as a soldier and then as an official war artist. The second of these two roles demanded a radical change from the type of painter he had been before the war. Orpen did not recoil from the realities he encountered when painting on the Somme and he was an astute observer of everything around him. Staying on in France longer than other official war artists, he became one of the most prolific painters ever to be sent to the Western Front.



Bombing Night 1918



Poilu & Tommy 1917

After the war, he returned to his previous career, which for awhile was as successful as it had been before the war. But he fell out of favour and, in 1931, he died aged only 53. For a while, his name had currency, however his detractors regarded him as a meteoric figure who had sold out to social success; they dismissed his work as flippant, derivative and passé.

How was that possible given that he painted with such verve and insight? Through an appraisal of some of the key themes affecting his life, I want to propose a different reading of this misunderstood but supremely talented artist.



List of some images to be shown:

The Revolutionary, 1902
The Nell Gwynne Public House with A. John, c.1900
Captain John Shawe-Taylor, 1908
The Man from the West, c. 1915
Homage to Manet, 1909
Sowing New Seed, 1913
Winston Churchill, 1916
Sir Douglas Haig, 1917
Marshal Foch, 1918
Vere Foster Family, 1907
Major A. N. Lee in his hut office, 1918
Refugee & A Spy: Yvonne Aubicq, 1918?
Zonnebeke, 1918
Dead Germans in a Trench, 1918
Mad Woman of Douai date, 1918
Paris Peace Conference, 1919
To the Unknown British Soldier in France, 1921-28
Blown up Mad, 1917
Grace, 1907
On the Beach, Howth, 1910
Evelyn St George & Interior at Clonsilla, c.1912
Early morning, 1922
Sunlight 1925
John McCormack, 1923
Orpen as Chardin, 1907-23
Self-portrait with Sowing New Seed, 1913
Ready to Start, 1917
The Dead Ptarmigan, 1909
The Jockey, 1909
Self-Portrait, 1924



Gardenia St George with Riding Crop by William Orpen, almost certainly painted in the summer of 1912, was sold in 2001 for £1.8 million, then the most expensive Irish painting ever sold at auction.

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