

Pictures of Women: Gwen John

Background Notes

Chris Humphreys – 19 October 2016



Self Portrait c1899 Oil paint on canvas 61 x 37 cm

Painted soon after her stay in Paris where she had studied at the Academie Carmen under James McNeill Whistler. It is one of the few works by a woman student at the Slade during the 1890s to have survived.



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Gwen John 1876-1939

A brief outline of her life and career

'Intensity' - 'this quality, so uncommon in English painting, she retained all her life, and it was present in everything she did' (Allan Gwynne-Jones)

Born 1876 in Haverfordwest, Wales. Father a solicitor, mother an amateur painter. Augustus John, her brother, born 1878. Mother dies in 1884 and family move to Tenby. Educated by governess and later on at school. In 1895 aged 18 studies at the Slade School in London where her brother Augustus is also a student. Wins prize for figure composition and certificate for figure drawing. In 1898 visits Paris with two friends from the Slade, Ida Nettleship and Gwen Salmond. Stays in Montparnasse and studies at James McNeill Whistler's Academie Carmen. Between 1899 and 1903 she lives in London.

'Whistler's fastidiousness in technique was an enduring example to Gwen, who always carefully planned the arrangements of colours on her palette as a vital preliminary stage before applying them to the canvas.'

1900 Exhibits Portrait of the Artist in London. Continues to exhibit at the New England Art Club (NEAC) in London. In 1902 sells self-portrait to Frederick Brown of the Slade. In 1903 has a joint exhibition with her brother at the Carfax Gallery. Travels to France with Dorelia McNeill. Stays in Toulouse with Dorelia and paints several portraits of her. 1904 With Dorelia she moves back to Paris, living in Montparnasse, she works as an artist's model and works for Auguste Rodin, with whom she has an affair.

Gwen John – from her notebooks 'I don't live when I spend time without thought.'

1908 exhibits at the NEAC, her portrait of Chloe Boughton-Leigh is highly praised. In 1910 she corresponds with the American art collector John Quinn. He becomes a patron of her work.

Gwen John writing 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.'

1913 Girl Reading at the Window sold to John Quinn exhibited at Armory Show in New York. Received into Catholic Church and begins series of paintings of Mere Marie Poussepin, foundress of Dominican Sisters convent at Meudon where Gwen John lives. Begins series of paintings in church.

1914-18 During the war stays in Paris and holidays in Brittany. In 1917 Rodin dies. Gwen John makes a series of drawings of children in Pleneuf in Brittany. 1919 Makes her debut as an exhibiting artist at Salon d'Automne with nine drawings and a painting of Mere Poussepin. Begins series of The Convalescent paintings. In 1920 there are more exhibits at Parisian salons, she meets Matisse, receives a stipend from Quinn in return for some of her work.

Attributed quote of Gwen John – 'My religion and my art, they are all my life.' and her description of herself as 'God's little artist' repeated in her notebooks.

In 1921 meets Quinn in Paris and also meets Picasso and Braque. In 1922 five paintings of hers appear in exhibition Seven English Modernists at Sculptor's Gallery in New York, alongside works by Augustus John, Wyndham Lewis and Jacob Epstein. Between 1923 and 1926 her work is exhibited at various prestigious Parisian venues. John Quinn dies in 1924. 1926 Solo exhibition at the New Chenil Galleries. Large number of paintings on religious subjects.

John Quinn's companion Jeanne Robert Foster sitting for her portrait by Gwen John – 'She (Gwen) cannot endure having the pose changed.....She takes my hair down and does it like her own ---I feel the absorption of her personality as I sit. She is more myself than I am when I am with her.'

1927-1939 Continues to live and work in France. Maintains contacts with brother and friends. Still active as an artist. Dies in Dieppe in 1939.

Augustus John on 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.'

Bibliography

Gwen John and Augustus John Editors David Fraser Jenkins and Chris Stephens (Tate Publishing, 2004) (Catalogue of Exhibition 2004-5) Focus is on David Fraser Jenkins' opening essay 'Mutual Differences' and Lisa Tickner 'Augustus's Sister: Gwen John: Wholeness, Harmony and Radiance' and to the various notes on paintings within the catalogue.

S. Roe, Gwen John: A Life (Chatto & Windus, 2001)

English Art 1860-1914: Modern artists and identity Editors David Peters Corbett and Lara Perry (Manchester University Press, 2000) – with reference to Alicia Foster's essay 'Gwen John's Self-Portrait: art, identity and women students at the Slade School' and also 'English modernism in the cultural field' by Lisa Tickner.

G. Greer, The Obstacle Race (Secker and Warburg, 1979)

A. Foster, British Artists Gwen John (Tate Publishing, 1999)

For those interested in the texts mentioned, I would recommend reading Sue Roe's biography, for an understanding of John's life, and the Catalogue of Exhibition 2004-5 as precursors to any of the other books. Alicia Foster's book is excellent too and offers valuable insight into individual works. The Catalogue has some highly illuminating essays on Gwen John and 'feminist' readings on her work.



**A Corner of the Artist's room in Paris 1907-09 oil on canvas
Painted at 87 Rue du Cherche-Midi top floor room where she lived from the spring
of 1907 to 1909.**

An interior may reflect some part of the artist's life and identity, the wicker chair and pine table can be seen as 'cliches' of artistic life, in being light and portable, but they also point to a simplicity and lack of ostentation. As an artistic prop the wicker chair was to feature in many of the artist's paintings.