Pallant House Gallery

Gwen John
Art and Life in London and Paris

Room 10.1

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This exhibition has been made possible as a result of the Government Indemnity Scheme. Pallant House Gallery would like to thank HM Government for providing Government Indemnity and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and Arts Council England for arranging the indemnity.

Gwen John [1876–1939) lived and worked in the most exciting times and places in the story of European art, in London in the 1890s and in Paris in the first decade of the 20th century. Her work was sought after, and by the 1920s she was so admired in Paris that the American poet Jeanne Robert Foster wrote, ‘everyone knows of Miss John … and the Salon takes all she will send them.’

Yet, Gwen John has often been misrepresented as a recluse, with little connection to the world around her.

Independence, and at times, solitude, were important to her, but her archive also reveals a sociable artist, enjoying life in the art world amongst the great figures of her time. In Paris she got to know the artists James McNeill Whistler and Auguste Rodin, and the writer Rainer Maria Rilke, and throughout her life she also maintained close friendships with a circle of now lesser-known women artists such as Mary Constance Lloyd and Ursula Tyrwhitt, whom she met during her early years in England.

Her’s is a story of connection, not isolation. It is the story of a woman who was part of the culture of her age and was certain she would find a place within history - ‘I cannot imagine why my vision will have some value in the world - and yet I know it will.’

Curated by Dr Alicia Foster in association with Pallant House Gallery. An illustrated biography accompanies the exhibition and is available to purchase in the Pallant House Gallery Bookshop.

[Landing)

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Facsimile of Self-Portrait
c.1900
Printed facsimile
National Portrait Gallery, London

This portrait is unfortunately too fragile to travel from its home at the National Portrait Gallery. It is likely to be the first painting that Gwen John ever exhibited at the New English Art Club (NEAC), London, in 1900. Although the NEAC was considered progressive, women were in the minority among exhibitors. This portrait is a powerful statement of artistic identity and intent. It brings together the conventions of old master self-portraits with a modern woman's dress, and tonal subtlety developed through John's training in Whistler's studio in Paris in the winter of 1898-9. A Parisian artist's colourman stamp on the back of the canvas also dates it to this period.

Augustus John [1878–1961)

Gwen John and Frederick Brown
1895-8
Pencil and wash on paper, heightened with white
Private Collection

Gwen John's younger brother Augustus, who was also at the Slade, made this sketch of his sister training with the Professor Frederick Brown. Augustus has made Brown something of a caricature. A book of his Slade sketches now in UCL collections includes drawings with similar exaggerated features. Gwen John is drawn with subtlety, head tilted back assessing, one hand holding her palette, the other tensed in anticipation.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Winifred John in a Flowered Hat
1895-8
Charcoal on paper
Private Collection

Winifred John moved to London to stay with Gwen and Augustus, though to study music rather than art. She sat for her sister many times during the 1890s, and this portrait drawing reveals their shared love of fashion. Winifred had a particular fondness for elaborate hats. In an oil from the same period, Gwen John painted her sister in a pose taken directly from a portrait by James McNeill Whistler, who was revered at the Slade, and who Gwen would train with during her first trip to Paris.

Elinor Monsell [1879-1954)

Gwen John Standing at an Easel
c.1895-8
Red chalk on paper
Private Collection

This drawing of Gwen John at the Slade School of Fine Art, London, by her fellow student Elinor Monsell captures her command and brio as she works. Women students of this period faced the added encumbrance of their restrictive costume – the floor-length, full skirts and corsets that made up respectable attire – not an easy feat in a crowded, messy studio. Monsell was struck by Gwen John, and was still writing to her much later, after she had moved to Paris, telling her how much she admired her.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Girl in Blue
1910-20s
Oil on canvas
Private Collection
Courtesy of Offer Waterman, London

This is a portrait of one of Gwen John's favourite models, whose face is recognisable but whose identity remains unknown. It was painted in the artist's rooms at 29 Rue Terre Neuve, Meudon, a village by the Seine on the outskirts of Paris. Although the setting is an interior, it could not have been painted anywhere but the French capital. The attic window is evocative of the garret life for which artists there were famous. The monumental figure in blue, with her air of intense stillness, owes a debt to the art Gwen John saw in her adopted home, not least the work of Cézanne.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Young Woman Holding a Black Cat
c.1920-5
Oil on canvas
Tate: Purchased 1946

The same model who posed with sewing sits with one of Gwen John's much-loved cats in this portrait. Gwen John sent a version of this composition to be exhibited at the Salon d'Automne in 1921. In the early 1920s, her work was known and admired in Paris, so much so that she was invited to send work to the Salon without having to pass before a selecting jury, and a dealer told her to 'name her price' for a picture.

[Fabric Photograph)
Unknown Photographer

Gwen John Life Modelling
Mid-late 1900s
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru
The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth
Reproduced by permission of the Gwen John estate
NO PHOTOGRAPHY

Walter Sickert [1860-1942)

The Old Hôtel Royale, Dieppe
1894
Oil painting on wood
Pallant House Gallery (John Morrish Bequest, 2013)

Sickert made many paintings of the coastal town of Dieppe, his home during various periods, and a place frequented by artists and visited by Gwen John from the 1910s into the 1930s. Here the long building of the hotel punctuated by rows of windows and painted in low tones creates a distinctive and mysterious mood, as in the nocturnes or night scenes of Sickert and Gwen John's mentor, James McNeill Whistler.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Houses at Meudon
Late 1920s
Gouache on paper
Private Collection

Gwen John had always loved walking in Meudon and its surroundings, thinking nothing of staying out overnight when she had travelled too far to return to her bed. When she finally bought a home of her own in 1929 at 8 rue Babie, she would still sometimes sleep in her garden. It was during these evenings outside that she began to make drawings of night scenes.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Rue Terre Neuve, Meudon
1920s
Pencil and gouache on paper
Private Collection

Gwen John continued to experiment with a new brand of paint, with a colour wheel which mapped out tonal variations, and with a new, more subdued palette, to create what she termed ‘atmosphere’. Her late notes are full of lists of colours and what they could be used for, including one of October 1932: ‘Streets at Night, Brun transparent.’

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Meudon at Night
1920s
Pencil and watercolour on paper
Sara G. John
NO PHOTOGRAPHY

This is one of a series of drawings of the Meudon streets after dark. Meudon was known for its prettiness and attracted day trippers from nearby Paris, but Gwen John avoided the obvious tourist views and instead painted its empty streets at night, summoning up a spectral, moonlit scene from only a few close tones.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

View with Archway
1920s
Watercolour and gouache over pencil
Private Collection

This is unique among Gwen John's outdoor scenes for bringing together illumination with dark shade, as she usually favoured a uniform light and atmosphere in her work. The scene is likely to be at Meudon, with a group of figures, perhaps nuns from the local convent, sitting at the foot of the tree.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Nocturne Dieppe
c.1925
Watercolour on paper
Jack Wakefield

In September 1939 Gwen John took the train from Paris to Dieppe. Her health was failing. She may have felt that the sea air would help or perhaps knowing that her illness was terminal, she wanted to visit the town one last time. She collapsed on arrival and was taken to hospital, where she died. Though she was buried in the town's Cimitière Janval, the graves were exhumed to make room for the dead soldiers of the Second World War. Her present resting place is unknown.

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London to Paris

In 1895 Gwen John enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art and moved to 23 Euston Square in central London. With its constant crowds, noise and movement, her new home was a long way from the quiet coastal town of Tenby, where she grew up. Gwen John was one of four children. Her father was a solicitor, and his wife, an amateur artist.

Gwen John's younger brother Augustus had enrolled at the Slade a year earlier, and until the early 1900s they would share lodgings. One such location was 21 Fitzroy Street, a boarding house that was occupied by a changing population of art students.

The tutors at the Slade encouraged a deep knowledge of anatomy and a vigorous drawing style. The Slade was considered the most advanced art school in England and, unusually, it permitted women to work in the life room.

After she graduated in autumn 1898, Gwen John made her first visit to Paris, with two Slade friends, and enrolled at James McNeill Whistler's Académie Carmen. The artistic training she received in Paris and her love of the city stayed with her for the rest of her life. Although John returned to London where she began to exhibit, she was drawn back to Paris. In 1904, following an intrepid walking tour through France with Dorelia McNeill, she returned to the French capital for good.

[Central Case)

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Portrait Group (recto)
1897-8
Watercolour and pencil on paper
UCL Art Museum, University College London

Life in a student house in London - probably 21 Fitzroy Street - is vividly represented here. In the 1890s men and women living and studying together away from home was an unprecedented and exciting phenomenon. Gwen John depicts some of her London circle: her brother Augustus leaning on the mantelpiece, Rosa Waugh (sister of Edna Clarke Hall, founder of a women's art school and political activist) standing at left, Gwen John's sister, Winifred John, and Michel Salaman (Slade student) seated at the table. The figures through the window are thought to be Gwen John and Ambrose McEvoy, who was also at the Slade.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Studies after Raphael (verso)

1897-8
Black and red chalk on paper
UCL Art Museum, University College London

Gwen John likely made this copy after an old master drawing in the British Museum. Recent research by Dr Lydia Miller has revealed that this was not, as was previously thought, by Michelangelo, but Raphael. Slade students were often sent into London to study from the museum collections. This could present a challenge for young women as it was not always deemed acceptable for them to travel in the city unchaperoned. The drawing is inscribed by fellow Slade student Edna Clarke Hall (née Waugh) who noted that Gwen John gave her the double-sided work.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Copy after 'A Lady Reading a Letter

with Musicians Behind (The Duet)'
by Gabriel Metsu
c.1896-8
Oil on canvas
Sara G. John
NO PHOTOGRAPHY

This is a copy of a painting in London's National Gallery. In an era before accurate colour reproduction, the only way to study the full nuance of a painting was to set up your easel before the original, something Slade students were encouraged to do. It is fascinating to see elements of Gwen John's lifelong concerns demonstrated here so early and with such skill: the use of close tones and the subject of the interior setting with a female figure. Her love of Dutch painting was shared with others at the Slade.

Henry Tonks [1862–1937)

Annotated Demonstration Drawings

c.1908
Pencil, chalk and ink on paper
UCL Art Museum, University College London

The Slade tutor, Henry Tonks, had been a surgeon, and emphasised anatomical correctness in his teaching. He would insist that his students understood the structures of the body. Only through knowing the direction of the bones, he would say, could you properly depict the contours of the human form. This was to be expressed through vigorous line rather than the polished stippling technique taught at other art schools. The rigour of his teaching, and the fact that women were allowed into the life room (albeit a separate one from male students) means that they made up two-thirds of the student body in the 1890s.

[Case)

Ida Nettleship [1877–1907)

Sketchbook
Late 1890s
Private Collection

This drawing of Gwen John by her friend and fellow Slade student Ida Nettleship may have been made while they were both in Paris in the winter of 1898-9, accompanied by a third student, Gwen Salmond. Ida was the daughter of the artist John Trivett Nettleship and her mother, Ada, was a theatrical costumier. During the Paris visit, Ida wrote to her mother about the pleasures of independent life that the three women were experiencing: training in the ateliers and drawing each other.

[Case)

Unknown Photographer

Slade School Country Picnic

April 1899
Facsimile of original vintage bromide print
National Portrait Gallery, London

Sitting on a cart horse in a row, and facing backwards, are (in order) William Orpen, Augustus John, and Gwen John. The other Slade students include Edna Waugh (later Clarke Hall) who stands, hatless in the centre of the cart. The trip to the countryside was organised by Augusta Everett, a distant relative of Orpen's and landlady of 21 Fitzroy Street, where Orpen and the Johns all lived for a time.

Edna Clarke Hall [1879–1979)

Atalanta
1899
Pen and ink and wash on paper

UCL Art Museum, University College London

By the time she made this drawing, the teenage Edna Waugh was married. She had won a Slade scholarship in 1897, and her work was much admired, but expectations of her role as a wife would hamper her art thereafter. Composing scenes from classical myth was part of Slade training. Waugh had earlier made a watercolour of *The Rape of the Sabines* for which she used herself as a model - though this was not admitted at the time - something she might also have done here.

Ida Nettleship [1877–1907)

A Study of a Nude Male Figure
1895
Black chalk on paper

UCL Art Museum, University College London

Very little of Ida Nettleship's art survives. She became a close friend of Gwen John's at the Slade, and was a prize-winner herself. She stopped painting following her marriage to Augustus John in 1901, and died following the birth of her fifth child at the age of only thirty in 1907. This drawing reveals her talent, which was incisive and honest rather than idealising. It also comments on the treatment of women students at the Slade who were not allowed to see the male nude in its entirety.

Elinor Monsell [1879–1954)

Female Nude, Standing

1897

Black chalk on paper

UCL Art Museum, University College London

Elinor Monsell had come from Ireland to train at the Slade, where she became friends with Gwen John. Here she pictures the female nude as a poetical and classical figure, far removed from the working-class woman posing naked in the studio. Monsell became known as a graphic artist. Her woodcut logo for the Abbey Theatre, Dublin, which was produced in collaboration with WB Yeats shows the Irish mythical Queen Maeve and is still in use today. Monsell married Charles Darwin's grandson and taught his cousin, Gwen Raverat, engraving.

Augustus John [1878–1961)

Study of a Male Nude
c.1895
Black chalk on paper

UCL Art Museum, University College London

Like his sister, Augustus John's talent was honed and celebrated at the Slade. Both the siblings won school prizes for their work. His undeniable skill in drawing led to comparisons with Michelangelo, and he quickly established a reputation as one of the leading young artists of the time. He and his sister, Gwen, were very close as students, sharing lodgings, friends, and life in London.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Landscape at Tenby with Figures
c.1896-7
Oil on board

Tenby Museum and Art Gallery Collection

Although Gwen John was born in Haverfordwest, Wales, she was brought up in Tenby. It was here that she returned during the holidays from the Slade School of Fine Art, where she was training with her younger brother Augustus. This is one of her earliest surviving oil paintings, and it shows Tenby Harbour from the North Sands. The young woman with the hat in the foreground was modelled by her sister, Winifred, who joined her siblings in London to study music.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Dorelia in a Black Dress
c.1903-4
Oil on canvas

Tate: Presented by the Trustees of the Duveen Paintings Fund 1949

In 1903, Gwen John travelled to France for a second visit, this time in the company of Dorothy McNeill, who adopted the name ‘Dorelia’. She was a south London typist who was living in Fitzroy Street and taking art classes. She would become Augustus John’s mistress and lifelong partner. The two women undertook a walking tour in France which saw them travel from Bordeaux to Toulouse. It was here that Gwen John painted a series of portraits of her companion which show a clear debt to Whistler. She also painted Dorelia at this time as a student with a pile of books, emphasising her intellectual life and Gwen John’s own love of literature.

Augustus John [1878-1961)

Bliss - Portrait of Dorelia McNeill
c.1903
Oil on canvas

Private Collection

This is believed to be the first ever oil portrait by Augustus John of Dorelia, the woman who was to be his muse and mother of four of his children. Its seductive sensuality – her flushed cheeks and flowers – makes a telling comparison to Gwen John's oil portrait of the same sitter. Although Gwen John captures Dorelia's beauty, she creates an image of cool self-possession and containment. Dorelia returned to England and Augustus in 1904, while Gwen John stayed in Paris, making her life there from then on.

Ambrose McEvoy [1877–1927)

The Engraving
1900-1
Oil on canvas

Private Collection
Courtesy of Martin Beisly Fine Art, London

McEvoy and Gwen John were united in their fascination with the female figure in the interior. Though he was later to become a society portrait painter, she was to remain focussed on this subject for the rest of her career. It may have been McEvoy who first told John about the work of the American artist, James McNeill Whistler. Though Whistler was revered at the Slade, and had a studio in Fitzroy Street, McEvoy knew him personally, and had been influenced by his meticulous tonal painting technique.

Ambrose McEvoy [1877–1927)

Gwen John
1901
Oil on canvas

Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales

During the late 1890s and early 1900s Gwen John and Ambrose McEvoy were close and worked in a similar vein. Research by Dr Lydia Miller has revealed just how much McEvoy learnt from Gwen John, sketching from her work as if to understand her process more fully. Here he paints her in a brooch and shawl similar to those she wore in a self-portrait of the period.

James McNeill Whistler [1834–1903)

Harmony in Rose and Green: Carmen
1898-9
Oil on canvas

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

Whistler's Académie was run by (and named after) one of his favourite models: Carmen Rossi. He painted her as a demonstration piece for his students. Rossi was a sharp operator, attempting to charge the women students more than the men, selling Whistler's work clandestinely, and conducting an affair with the young heiress (and later literary salonnière) Natalie Barney, whose mother was studying painting at the Académie.

James McNeill Whistler [1834–1903)

A Paris Model
1895-9
Oil on canvas

The Hunterian, University of Glasgow

In the autumn of 1898, just after leaving the Slade, Gwen John travelled to Paris for the first time with two of her student friends: Ida Nettleship and Gwen Salmond. John and Salmond trained at Whistler's new painting Académie, just off the rue Notre Dame des Champs, which snakes down between the Jardin du Luxembourg and Montparnasse Cemetery. Whistler's insistence on planning the palette completely before any painting began, and the importance of tonal relationships above all, would stay with Gwen John for the rest of her life.

Walter Sickert [1860-1942)

The Rue Notre-Dame des Champs, Paris: The Entrance to Sargent's Studio
1907

Oil on canvas
The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Presented by the Christopher Sands Trust, 2001

Like Gwen John, Walter Sickert had trained at the Slade and then with James McNeill Whistler. Sickert became Whistler's assistant throughout the 1880s and stayed with him in Dieppe. They were close and worked alongside each other from the same model, though they were later to become estranged. Critics during Gwen John's lifetime remarked on the affinity between her work and that of Sickert. Here, he has painted a Parisian street that Gwen John knew well. Whistler's Académie was around the corner and many artists had their studios here.

Edna Clarke Hall [1879–1979)

Still Life of a Basket on a Chair
1900
Oil on canvas

Tate: Presented by the executors of the late
Mrs M.H. Fearnley Sander 1990

It is a measure of Gwen John's growing reputation as a painter, even by this early stage, that her
fellow Slade student Edna Clarke Hall asked her to tutor her work in oils. The composition – likely set up by John herself – includes elements that appear in some of her later Paris work: a straw hat, wicker work, and a chair. On another occasion John sent a young female pupil to draw the most corrupt
Roman emperors in the British Museum, revealing her wicked humour.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Portrait of Dodo
1903-4
Red chalk on paper

The Gibson Family Collection

In this second drawing, Dorelia has an assessing, angled gaze. The different facets of this sitter's personality and her striking appearance fascinated the John siblings. While she was in France with Gwen John, Dorelia tried to elope with another artist. Gwen John and her brother both pressured her to return to Augustus who was already married to Ida Nettleship. This caused a scandal in their circle but seemed entirely natural to the Johns.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Portrait of Dorelia at Toulouse
c.1903-4
Red chalk on paper

The Trustees of the British Museum

By the time of their French travels in 1903, Gwen John's brother Augustus had become infatuated and begun an affair with Dorelia. Dorelia's enigmatic persona was to inhabit his art from then on, and, at this time, his sister's. Gwen John portrays Dorelia here as a pensive rather formal presence. The two women both earned their living on their journey making and selling portrait drawings. A rare fragment of a portrait drawing probably by Dorelia survives in the National Museum of Wales.

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‘I want to flourish’

When Dorelia McNeill left Paris in 1904, Gwen John remained. For a while she lived in an apartment belonging to her Slade friend Mary Constance Lloyd before taking the first of her own rooms. She embraced life in the art world. She modelled to support her independent existence

and visited museums, exhibitions, and the Bon Marché department store (at the end of her street). She told her brother Augustus that she did not want to return to Britain. Paris was where she would flourish.

Her 'day job' as a model brought her to the studio of sculptor Auguste Rodin. There she posed for the memorial to James McNeill Whistler and she and Rodin became lovers. Through Rodin she met the poet Rainer Maria Rilke and learned of the work of Cézanne, whom she greatly admired. She witnessed Rodin making his astonishing life drawings, which helped to shape her own work.

However, it was the subject of the interior that increasingly preoccupied her. Gwen John sent her paintings back to London to show at the New English Art Club, where a critic described 'interior fever' taking hold amongst contemporary artists. In Paris the first exhibition of the Peintres d'Intérieurs (Interior Painters) group took place in 1905 and included Pierre Bonnard and Édouard Vuillard. Gwen John's work is part of this milieu, whilst having its own distinctive, intense power.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

La Chambre sur la Cour (The Courtyard Room)

1907-8

Oil on canvas

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

This was painted in Gwen John's room at 7 rue Saint-Placide, her first independent home in Paris. It brings together some elements of Dutch interior painting, which she had admired since her Slade days, with identifiably Parisian décor: the hexagonal tiled floor, the lace curtain and courtyard window. She wrote to a friend, Charles McEvoy (brother of Ambrose), that because of her décor, 'I am Parisienne.' She sent the painting back to London where it was shown with her French title at the New English Art Club in 1908. John was admired by a critic for capturing 'the colour that ordinary life wears.'

Vilhelm Hammershøi [1864-1916)

Interior with Writing Table and a Young Woman
1900
Oil on canvas
Private Collection

The interior with a single female figure fascinated a number of modern artists in the early 20th century, connecting to art history while also being redolent of modern life and ideas of selfhood. Hammershøi became known for his enigmatic women occupying austere rooms. Gwen John may have known about him through her friend, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke (Rodin's secretary for a time in the 1900s) who admired Hammershøi, or through her sister-in-law Ida Nettleship's family, who befriended Hammershøi in London and showed his work in a private exhibition at their home.

Pierre Puvis de Chavannes [1824–1898)

Etude pour le 'Pigeon'
(Study for the 'Pigeon')
After 1871
Charcoal on paper
Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris

Gwen John revered Puvis de Chavannes. This study was made in response to the siege of Paris in 1871. The female figure symbolises the survival of the city and comes to represent Paris itself. The figures in Gwen John's paintings of this period, with their smooth hair and plain dress (not at all fashionable Belle Époque style) may have been influenced by her knowledge of Puvis' work, and intimate her wish to be understood as part of the grand tradition of French modernism.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

A Lady Reading
1909-11
Oil on canvas
Tate: Presented by the Contemporary Art Society 1917

This painting brings together some overtly modern French elements with a figure that recalls Renaissance religious art. The red checked fabric was a feature in other interior painters' work by artists like Pierre Bonnard. Gwen John wrote to her friend Ursula Tyrwhitt that the head of this woman was copied from a head of the Virgin by German Renaissance artist Albrecht Dürer. It marks the first emergence of her desire to make a modern art that engaged with the Catholic faith, to which she converted in 1913.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris
c.1907-9
Oil on canvas
Sheffield Museums Trust

The attic room had become a cliché of artistic life by the time Gwen John painted her room under the eaves of 87 rue du Cherche-Midi. Elements of this composition: the wicker chair and window in the eaves were a staple of such images. Yet Gwen John evokes a radiant atmosphere that transcends her commonplace subject matter. Despite this being an interior, the presence of the world outside the window is intimated in the flowers on the table and the parasol.

Édouard Vuillard [1868–1940)

Madame Vuillard Knitting at a Window
c.1920
Oil on board
Private Collection

Gwen John owned a book of art criticism that featured Vuillard, and his fellow *intimiste*, Pierre Bonnard. Their interiors share fascinating characteristics with hers: the windows, lace curtains and solitary female figures, and the emphasis, in Vuillard's work, on the poetry of tone, or 'nuance'. While Bonnard and Vuillard painted bourgeois family homes cluttered with pattern and objects, Gwen John favoured a different kind of space, which she described as 'simple' in taste. It was this simplicity that she termed 'artistique.'

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Ophelia: Portrait Imaginé (Imagined Portrait)
c.1910
Black chalk, grey wash, and white gouache on thin, smooth, brown wove paper
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Among Gwen John's Paris circle were other artists from Britain, including Maude, known as 'Grilda', Boughton-Leigh who had trained at the Slade, and Grilda's sister, Ellen Theodosia, who adopted the name 'Chloë.' Both women employed Gwen John as a model and posed for her on their visits to Paris, and it is Chloë who appears in this drawing. Gwen John was an avid reader. She often painted women with books but this is a unique drawing of a literary character: Ophelia, from Shakespeare's *Hamlet*. John may have added the title in 1928, when she gave the drawing to Véra Oumançoff.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Autoportrait à la Lettre
(Self-Portrait with a Letter)
c.1907-9
Pencil and watercolour on paper
Musée Rodin, Paris

Gwen John gave this drawing to Auguste Rodin. It brings together the technique she developed having seen his drawings with their armatures of lines washed in with watercolour, and the deep connection she felt with him. The letter she holds is doubtless one of the hundreds she wrote to the sculptor, some of which were written as a fantasy self, a French artists' model named 'Marie' writing to her sister 'Julie' about her 'Mâitre', master, (in actuality, Rodin himself).

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Chloë Boughton-Leigh
1910
Oil on canvas
Leeds Museums and Galleries. Bought, 1955

This is one of three paintings that Gwen John made of Chloë Boughton-Leigh. It shows her with a somewhat assessing gaze, dressed in a chic, simple dress. Gwen John had sent an earlier portrait of Chloë to the New English Art Club in London where it was admired as ‘one of the greatest achievements in the exhibition’. She sent this painting to her new patron John Quinn in New York. He was a leading collector of modernism and eminent lawyer. Quinn wrote to her of it: ‘I think it is finer than anything of that kind that Whistler ever did.’

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Portrait of a Lady
c.1910
Pencil and wash on paper
Swindon Museum and Art Gallery

This is one of a series of drawings of the same sitter, whose costume and hairstyle in each sketch suggests that they were all made in Paris at the same time. The sitter is likely to be Grilda (Maude) Boughton-Leigh, sister of Chloë.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Portrait of a Lady Reclining
c.1910
Pencil and watercolour on paper
Stephen Ongpin Fine Art, London

Thought to be a portrait of Grilda (Maude) Boughton-Leigh, this drawing is part of a record of the Boughton-Leigh sisters' friendship with Gwen John that was to last throughout her life. The Boughton-Leighs were from a cultured upper-class family whose main home was Brownsover Hall, near Rugby. They shared with her their work as artists, a love of cats, and in 1916, Chloë, like Gwen John, converted to Catholicism.

Augustus John [1878-1961)

Portrait of Gwen John
c.1907
Charcoal pencil on paper
The Gibson Family Collection

By the mid-1900s, Augustus John was living with both his wife, Ida Nettleship and Dorelia McNeill. The two women decamped to Paris where they saw Gwen John regularly, while Augustus divided his time between London and France. Here, he portrays his sister, who Dorelia described as ‘always elegant’, dressed for life in the French capital. Gwen John would buy ostrich feathers, fabrics and ready-made clothes from the Bon Marché department store. She took great care in her appearance: ‘artistique’, as she put it, and *not* bohemian like her brother.

Paula Modersohn-Becker [1876-1907)

Nude with a Mirror (Self-Portrait)
1906
Pencil on paper
On loan from Leicester Museums and Galleries

Among the many artists who flocked to Paris in the 1900s was the German painter Paula Modersohn-Becker. She lived in the same Montparnasse area of Paris as Gwen John and they had a mutual friend in the Prague-born poet, Rainer Maria Rilke. Both women also met and admired the work of sculptor Auguste Rodin, though it was Gwen John who was to become his lover and model. Here Modersohn-Becker experiments with sketching herself naked. The female nude was, for many women artists of this time, both an important subject in modern art but also intimate and personal.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Self-Portrait, Nude
c.1909
Pencil and gouache on paper
Private Collection, Courtesy of Patrick Bourne & Co. London

In order to survive financially during her early years in Paris, Gwen John worked as a life model for other artists. She had no qualms about posing naked. In this drawing – one of a number she made of herself as a female nude during this period - she brings together her identity as an artist with her naked body. As with Paula Modersohn-Becker's sketch, this small drawing marks a seismic moment in modern art. The setting is an ordinary room – Gwen John's own. She makes clear that this is a real woman, and not intended to be allegorical or symbolic.

Mary Constance Lloyd [1884–1974)

Gwen John
1905
Oil on canvas
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru

The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Mary Constance Lloyd trained at the Slade with Gwen John, and, like her, moved to Paris in the early 1900s to build her career. The two women remained close for the rest of their lives. Lloyd made her name as a painter and designer of interiors and was a friend of the designer Eileen Gray and the Bloomsbury artist, Duncan Grant. This painting is likely to have been made at her apartment. John's great niece, Sara John, remembers Lloyd's Parisian flat as 'rather chic' in shades of pale grey. The yellow cover of the book Gwen John is reading suggests it is a French paperback.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Woman Dressing
ca.1907
Grey wash and chinese white on medium, slightly textured, brown wove paper
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

The figure in this drawing may be the Finnish sculptor and printmaker Hilde Flodin, who was a friend of Gwen John. Like her, she modelled for Auguste Rodin, but Flodin also trained with him and worked as an assistant in his studio. In her letters to Rodin, Gwen John described Flodin agreeing to model for her. The subject of the figure, supposedly caught in an unguarded moment in a private room – rather than in a formal pose and separated from her environment – creates a sense of modernity: transient and immediate.

Édouard Vuillard [1868–1940)

Modèle Assise dans un Fauteuil, se Coiffant (Model Seated in a Chair, Combing her Hair)
c.1903
Oil on paper on board
Pallant House Gallery

(Accepted by HM Government in Lieu of Inheritance Tax from the estate of Lord Hutchinson and allocated to Pallant House Gallery, 2019)

The figure in an interior had become a fascination for many artists during the 1900s. In 1905, a year after Gwen John settled in Paris, the first group exhibition of Peintres d'Intérieurs took place and included Édouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard. A book of art criticism owned by Gwen John features both artists, and critics during her lifetime noticed her affinity with Vuillard in particular. Here, even though the setting is a studio and not an ordinary room like Gwen John's (she did not have a separate studio at this stage of her career), the model is shown as an element of her environment, the two united in tonal harmony.

Auguste Rodin [1840–1917)

Head of Gwen John
(Head of Whistler's Muse)
c.1906
Plaster
Private Collection, Courtesy of Browse & Darby, London

Augustus John suggested to his sister that she approach Auguste Rodin to ask for modelling work. By this time Rodin was the most famous sculptor in the world, with grand studios in central Paris and at his home on the outskirts, in the village of Meudon. Gwen John became his model and the pair became lovers. Gwen John modelled for Rodin's commission, a memorial for her old teacher, Whistler, who had died in 1903. This is a small-scale cast of the head of the memorial, known as, 'Whistler's Muse'. The full body version now stands in the garden of the Musée Rodin, Paris, a building which was the sculptor's studio during his lifetime.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Head of a Young Woman
c.1904-6
Grey wash on paper
Yale Center for British Art, Yale University Art

Gallery Collection, The James W. (B.A., 1933, M.A. 1935) and Mary C. Fosburgh Collection

This is a portrait of the Finnish sculptor and printmaker Hilda Flodin who lived in Paris from around 1903 to 1906. Flodin and Gwen John met in Rodin's studio and the two became friends, though Gwen John felt some rivalry with Flodin over Rodin's affections. Gwen John wrote to Rodin about how she and Flodin had visited Suresnes, on the banks of the Seine, where they drew each other. Flodin returned to Finland in 1906.

Auguste Rodin [1840–1917)

Deux Femmes Enlacées
(Two Women Embracing)
1908
Graphite, watercolour and gouache on paper

Musée Rodin, Paris

Rodin made thousands of drawings of the female nude in the 1900s. He believed them important enough to exhibit on their own. Some are explicit, as if the process of making them had become, for him, the equivalent of a sexual act. Gwen John described modelling for him naked with Hilda Flodin, an erotic encounter from which he made drawings.

Auguste Rodin [1840–1917)

Nude Woman Lying on her Back
c.1900
Graphite with watercolour on paper
The Trustees of the British Museum

Auguste Rodin [1840–1917)

Femme sur le Ventre, vers la Droite, Dressée sur les Mains, Jambes Pliées
(Woman on her Stomach Facing Right, Upright on Hands, Legs Bent)
1900

Graphite and watercolour on vellum paper
Musée Rodin, Paris

Rodin's concern was only with his models' bodies in his life drawings, which he depicted with uninhibited, raw physicality. The faces and individual identities of these women, if shown at all by Rodin, are summarily sketched and of little importance. The poses he demanded were challenging. Gwen John wrote to him that she had initially felt trepidation about modelling in this way, although, she said, she had come to feel confident that she could do so, because, as she put it 'I am supple.'

Auguste Rodin [1840–1917)

Nude Female
c.1900-17
Graphite with watercolour on paper
The Trustees of the British Museum

The astonishing fluidity and deceptive simplicity of Rodin's drawings were admired by his contemporaries. Paula Modersohn-Becker saw them at his Meudon studio in the mid-1900s, and was astonished by them. She believed them to be the greatest of his works. Gwen John's own drawing style changed in response to her deep knowledge of this new aspect of his art. She observed Rodin regularly first-hand and with her own work became more fluent and economical.

Auguste Rodin [1840–1917)

Femme Nue Assise de Face, Jambes Croisées, les Mains à un Pied
(Naked Woman Seated Facing Forward, Legs Crossed, Hands on one Foot)
After 1905

Graphite on vellum paper

Musée Rodin, Paris

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Cat

c.1904-8

Graphite and watercolour on paper

Tate: Presented by Miss Mary Constance Lloyd 1957

Gwen John's work offers a critical aside on Rodin's animalistic depictions of his female models. The image of the woman attending to her toilet – washing, tending her body or hair – had been a feature of modernism, from the work of Edgar Degas to Rodin himself. Gwen John, instead, gives us a cat licking itself clean. Uncontrollable in character, sensual and fluid in movement, these animals are notoriously difficult to capture in art.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Cat
c.1904-8
Graphite and watercolour on paper
Tate: Purchased 1940

This cat was a pet that Gwen John acquired with Dorelia McNeill when they arrived in Paris in 1904, following their walking tour through France. They named the cat (who was female) Edgar Quinet, after the boulevard on which they were staying. When Dorelia returned to England, Gwen John kept the cat. When it went missing in 1908 she was devasted. Her drawings of Edgar Quinet give the animal more individuality and presence than Auguste Rodin gave the women life models in his drawings.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Cat
c.1904-8
Graphite and watercolour on paper
Tate: Purchased 1940

[Central Cases)

Pierre Bonnard [1867–1947)

(Left) Le Café
1915
Graphite on paper

(Centre and right):
Le Bol de Lait (The Bowl of Milk)
c.1919
Graphite on paper
Tate: Purchased 1992

Along with his colleague Édouard Vuillard, Pierre Bonnard was part of the Peintres d'Intérieurs group who first showed in Paris in 1905. These sketches are for Bonnard's paintings *Le Café* and *Le Bol de Lait.* They include elements that also appear in Gwen John's work from the late 1900s: the window, the female figure, and even the red checked fabric that appears in her *A Lady Reading*. This fabric was seen as a standard component of French domestic style, and Gwen John's friend Mary Constance Lloyd was later to exhibit a design based on this pattern at the Paris Salon.
Ursula Tyrwhitt [1872–1966)

Head of Gwen John
c.1907
Terracotta
The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Presented by Ursula Tyrwhitt, the artist, 1965

Ursula Tyrwhitt became friends with Gwen John when both were at the Slade. Although Tyrwhitt stayed in England, she visited John in Paris many times. Tyrwhitt made a career for herself as a painter, often of flowers, and Gwen John's letters to her are all about their mutual work, and the processes of painting, exhibiting and selling. This is the only known surviving example of her sculpture, a sensitive portrait of her friend which Tyrwhitt took to show Auguste Rodin for his critique.

Pallant
House
Gallery

Gwen John
Art and Life in London and Paris

Room 14

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From War to a New World

In 1911 Gwen John moved to Meudon, a village on the outskirts of Paris, where Rodin also had a home and

studio. She kept her room in central Paris and would travel to work there daily. Her new life was made possible by an important patron, the American collector of modernism, John Quinn. He paid her regularly and ensured she was included in the International Exhibition of Modern Art, known as the 1913 Armory Show in New York.

When war came in 1914, and Paris suffered bombardment and turmoil, Gwen John refused to leave. She would still go in to the city to paint. She also helped British soldiers, acting informally as a translator for the wounded. The war changed her art. Wartime interiors such as the *Brown Teapot* series are stripped of signs of comfortable domesticity, they are dark in tone, and uniquely for her, windowless. However, her celebrated series known as *The Convalescent* can be seen as symbolic of post-war recovery. The atmosphere has lightened, and the sitter, as the title implies, will be well and strong again.

When the Parisian salons re-opened after the war, Gwen John began to exhibit there and achieved great success. One dealer told her she could ‘name her price’. She showed paintings but also drawings of children, which were much admired. These works were tender yet unsentimental. They chimed with a longing for rebirth and fresh beginnings after the conflict.

Spencer Gore [1878–1914)

Interior, 31, Mornington Crescent, London
1910

Oil on canvas
Leeds Museums and Galleries
Bought (Corporation Fund), 1950

Gwen John's fascination with the interior was shared with artists back in London, notably the Camden Town Group, formed in 1911. This group of artists included Spencer Gore, Walter Sickert, and briefly Gwen John's brother Augustus and they painted 'ordinary' rooms in close tones. In this painting, Gore includes a basket chair and a cat, both regular features of Gwen John's paintings, but he depicts the female figure as part of a cluttered, cosy vision of domesticity, something Gwen John would never do.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Study for 'The Brown Teapot'
c.1915-16

Oil on canvas

Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales

In 1914, war broke out in Europe. Gwen John was living in Meudon on the outskirts of Paris, but kept her room in the city centre at 6 rue de l'Ouest as a studio, and travelled regularly to work there, despite the enemy bombardment. This is likely to be a view of that room, which looked out onto the Cour des Miracles, where there was a network of artists' studios.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Brown Teapot

c.1915-16

Oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Unlike Gwen John's pre-war interiors, the room here is stripped bare of all but the signs of culture: a pot of paintbrushes on the mantelpiece and a closed book. Unusually for the artist, there is no sunlit window. Instead, the dark tonality of the painting is redolent of the straitened life and darkened atmosphere of wartime Paris.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Japanese Doll
1920s

Oil on canvas
Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales.
Purchased through the assistance of Art Fund and Derek Williams Trust

After the conflict ended, Gwen John's interiors were filled with light once again. This painting was made in her rooms at 29 rue Terre Neuve in Meudon. The Japanese doll is reminiscent of her early teacher, Whistler, who populated his work with women in traditional Japanese costume. In Gwen John's hands this subject becomes a doll placed on a table. A major exhibition of Japanese Fine and Decorative Arts in Paris in 1922 might have inspired the composition.

Mary Constance Lloyd [1884–1974)

Still Life with Fan
c.1920

Oil on canvas
The Charleston Trust

Gwen John and Mary Constance Lloyd remained close friends throughout their adulthood. Like John, Lloyd established her career in Paris, showing at the Salons, and stayed there for the rest of her life. The fan in this painting may have been designed by Lloyd herself. She did not only exhibit paintings, but also designs for interiors and decorative objects.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Girl in a Blue Dress
c.1914-5

Oil on canvas
Private Collection

In Paris, Gwen John's fascination with the female figure in an interior continued. Her works became more monumental and intense, an effect which contrasts the modest scale of her work. This is one of a series of eight almost identical paintings that Gwen John made of a Meudon neighbour whose name is unknown. The stark composition with its pared back palette, and the creation of works in series, reveal the influence of Paul Cézanne.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Seated Woman (The Convalescent)
c.1910-20

Oil on canvas
Ferens Art Gallery: Hull Museums

In two further paintings in *The Convalescent* series, Gwen John added a book held reverently by her young sitter wrapped in white cloth. In Christian painting, women were often depicted with sacred texts in this way, as in Rogier van der Weyden's painting *The Magdalene Reading* (c.1440), which Gwen John could have seen in London's National Gallery.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Convalescent
c.1923-4

Oil on canvas
The Syndics of the Fitzwilliam Museum, University of Cambridge

Gwen John used the same model as in *Girl in a Blue Dress* for a series of ten closely related paintings, one of which she titled herself, *The Convalescent*. These paintings are often understood biographically, as a close friend in Paris, the artist Isabel Bowser, was terminally ill in 1919, whilst John was working on them. Yet Gwen John's title suggests that she wanted her painting to be understood as an image of recovery, something longed for in France just after the war.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Convalescent
1918-19

Oil on canvas
Tate: Bequeathed by Mrs Rhoda Symons 1937

This version of *The Convalescent* was owned by British actor and musician Rhoda Symons. Symons was the wife of the poet, Arthur Symons, and sister of Gwen John's friend, Isabel Bowser. The atmosphere is light and delicate, with the spotted wallpaper and pink cup. The smooth hair and long plain dress of the sitter may have been inspired by Puvis de Chavannes' images of a woman with a similar appearance. Chavannes' model symbolised the survival of the city of Paris following the siege of 1870-1 and a drawing of this subject is on display in the previous room.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Study of a Girl
1918

Black chalk and watercolour on tan paper
The Whitworth, The University of Manchester Gift from A E Anderson via The Art Fund

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Breton Girl Wearing a Hat
Late 1910s
Charcoal and wash on paper
Sara G. John
NO PHOTOGRAPHY

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Seated Girl with Hands in Lap (Odette Litalien)
1918-9
Charcoal and wash on paper
Sara G. John
NO PHOTOGRAPHY
Gwen John [1876–1939)

Girl with Hands Crossed on her Lap
c.1920

Charcoal on grey paper, stuck onto second sheet grey-brown paper
The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford
Presented by Mrs Ursula Tyrwhitt, 1964

In 1918 and 1919, Gwen John stayed in Pléneuf, in northern Brittany, where she took rooms in the Chateau de Vauclair, near to the sea. She made many drawings of the children of the area which she considered to be just as important as her paintings. When the Paris salons opened again in 1919, she began to show these drawings with some success. The advertisements for the 1919 Salon d'Automne featured children drawn by the artist Charles Manguin. Gwen John's portraits with their beguiling freshness and honesty were in sympathy with this wider post-war interest in the image of the child, symbolising a longed-for new beginning.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Two Dolls
Late 1910s

Black chalk on tinted paper
Patron of the Gallery

Gwen John made several drawings of dolls, and included them in some of her paintings. One of her drawings of two dolls was inscribed ‘Dorothy et Dodo’, a tongue-in-cheek reference to Dorelia McNeill who was famous by the 1910s as Augustus John’s beautiful muse. Her birth name had been ‘Dorothy’, while her intimates knew her as ‘Dodo’ – both less glamorous names than her adopted ‘Dorelia’.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Arthur Symons
c.1921

Charcoal on paper
Victoria and Albert Museum

The poet and critic Arthur Symons was the brother-in-law of Gwen John's close friend Isabel Bowser. He made his name contributing to the fashionable periodical *The Yellow Book* and editing *The Savoy* magazine in the 1890s, working with illustrator Aubrey Beardsley and writer WB Yeats. Symons believed there was 'genius' in Gwen John's work. In 1920, she met him and his wife in Paris, and the following year she made a rare journey back to Britain to stay with them.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Jacques Maritain
1927

Charcoal and wash on paper
Julian Barnes

The distinguished Catholic philosopher Jacques Maritain was a neighbour of Gwen John in Meudon. She visited his home and made a number of portrait drawings of him. She became enraptured by his sister-in-law, Ukrainian-born Véra Oumançoff, who was described by Maritain as independent, well-read, and with a good sense of humour (like Gwen John herself). For a time, Gwen John made a weekly gift of a drawing to Oumançoff.

Walter Sickert [1860-1942)

One of Madame Villain's Sons
c.1904

Oil on canvas
The Charleston Trust

This portrait was painted in the coastal town of Dieppe, an artists' haunt at this time. Like Gwen John, Sickert was a frequent visitor to Dieppe, and he lived there permanently between 1898 and 1905. Sickert's sharp-eyed attention to the physical awkwardness of this boy, as in Gwen John's drawings of children, paradoxically heightens the touching effect of the painting. A critic writing for *The Times* in 1958 described Gwen John as 'the feminine counterpart, not of her brother, but of Sickert.'

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Boy with a Blank Expression
1928

Charcoal and gouache with white chalk on paper
The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Bequeathed by Miss Anna Hornby N.E.A.C., 1996

Gwen John preferred to portray female sitters. However, her rare portraits of boys (and men) are remarkable for their sensitivity. She seems to have found them moving herself. She inscribed one such drawing ‘le Petit garson [sic] Sentimental’ (touching or sentimental little boy) before she gave it to Véra Oumançoff in 1928.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Boy with Clasped Hands
1921

Charcoal on grey paper, stuck on second sheet
of brown-grey paper
The Ashmolean Museum, University of Oxford. Presented by Mrs Ursula Tyrwhitt, 1964

Paul Cézanne [1839–1906)

Head of a Boy
1881-2
Oil on canvas
Private Collection

In her catalogue for the only solo exhibition during her lifetime at London's New Chenil Galleries in 1926, Gwen John quoted Maurice Denis on Cézanne. Cézanne had used his portraits of his young son to develop a radical new painting technique, stripped of extraneous detail and revealing the physical reality of the medium, even leaving areas of the canvas 'unfinished'. Gwen John was to bring these discoveries into her own painting.

[Central Case)

Maurice Betz [1898–1946)

Petit Stèle pour Rainer Maria Rilke
Book 9 from Gwen John's Personal Library
1927
Book
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru
The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

This is one of several books on the poet Rainer Maria Rilke that was owned by Gwen John. She met him at Rodin's studio in Paris in the 1900s and they became friends. He gave her books and invited her to peruse his library. He remained important to her. Even after his death in 1926, she continued to address him in her private notes, writing 'Rilke! Hold my hand!... Teach me, inspire me.'

Arthur Symons [1865–1945)

Knave of Hearts
Book 88 from Gwen John's Personal Library

1913
Book
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru
The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Symons inscribed this volume of his verse to Gwen John and pasted in a hand written manuscript of one of his poems. Like John, Symons had known Rodin, and he was a friend of John's patron, John Quinn. Symons bought drawings from her, and Gwen John also sent him two hand-made albums of watercolours to be held and leafed through like a book rather than framed on a wall.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Au Bon Marché Notebook
Early 1930s

Notebook
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru
The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Gwen John had known the Bon Marché department store since her earliest years in Paris. It was just down the street from her first room in 1904 at 7 Rue Saint-Placide. Thirty years later, in a notebook from the shop, she jotted down train times to Dieppe, and her thoughts on faith and her work, including her desire ‘To enter into Art as one enters in (sic) Religion.’

Henri Charles Manguin [1874–1949)

Poster for the 1919 Salon d’Automne
1919
Printed facsimile

Gwen John exhibited at the Salon d'Automne when it re-opened in 1919 following the First World War. Over the next five years she showed at four different salons in Paris. A new friend, the American poet, Jeanne Robert Foster (who she met through John Quinn) wrote that everyone in Paris knew Gwen John's name, and the salons would take anything she sent them.

Gwen John
Art and Life in London and Paris

Room 10

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‘I must be a Saint in my work’

Gwen John’s conversion to Catholicism in 1913 did not mean a turn to conventional religious images and academic painting. Instead, she searched for new methods with which to bring faith to life in her art. In her catalogue foreword for her solo exhibition in London in 1926, she quoted the leading modern French religious artist, Maurice Denis, who had championed the joining of art and Catholicism in experimental ways.

Working from a tiny, cheaply-printed prayer card, Gwen John created an ambitious series of paintings of the founder of an order of nuns who were her neighbours in Meudon. She also painted young women of the religious order, whose individuality she noted in contrast to their old-fashioned clothes and poses. In church John made a series of small gouache and watercolour drawings of worshippers. These are reminiscent of the work of Denis, with simplified dark lines filled with flat areas of colour.

In her later years, Gwen John became interested in the landscape and flora of Meudon. She painted the view from her studio window, the streets and surrounding countryside. Since her walking tour through France, back in 1903, with Dorelia McNeill she had thought nothing of covering miles on foot and even sleeping out when necessary, and this she continued to do. Her late paintings of night scenes suggest the lasting presence of her early mentor, Whistler, in her artistic imagination, and the freedoms that she found in her life in France.

She died while visiting the seaside town of Dieppe on 18 September 1939.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Grasses
1920s
Pencil and watercolour on paper
Sara G. John
NO PHOTOGRAPHY

In her working notes Gwen John would often relate plants to specific paint colours, as an *aide memoire*, to help her remember the colour of what she had sketched, and a way of thinking through colour combinations. Here, colour is freely washed over the drawing, escaping the lines and creating a sense of the wild unkemptness of nature.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Green Leaves in a White Jug
c.1920-5
Gouache on paper
Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales

Flowers can have a symbolic language in art. In 1924 Gwen John wrote to the American poet Jeanne Robert

Foster, ‘My love for you is like a little plant, nearly nothing but green leaves but some little white wild flowers on it.’ Five years later, she was to give a version of this gouache to Véra Oumançoff, to whom she wrote ‘Je vous aime comme j’aime les fleurs’, ‘I love you like I love flowers’.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Study of Pansies and Daisies
1910
Pencil and watercolour on paper
Private Collection

Gwen John’s notes on flowers sometimes read like a poem or incantation: ‘Cyclamen and straw and earth…faded

primroses and dandelions (on straw and earth), on nasturtiums. Milky bl[e]uets [cornflowers]. Grey and yellow plaid,' and 'smoky corn and wild rose, faded roses (3 reds) nuts and nettles.'

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Still Life with Flowers
Probably 1920s
Watercolour on buff paper
The Court Gallery, Somerset

Gwen John's friend, the poet Rainer Maria Rilke, would try and find the equivalent of the colours he saw in his poetry,

describing the blue of a faded hydrangea in a sonnet as the colour of a washed-out pinafore or old letters. Gwen John was still thinking of him long after his death, writing in 1931 ‘I am recueillie [calm and collected], am I not? When I think of Rilke or my work?’

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Vase of Flowers
1920s
Oil on board
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru
The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Gwen John also made several oil paintings of flowers, similar small and simple arrangements to those that appear in her works on paper. They were probably picked by the artist locally, or perhaps in her own garden, which she acquired in 1929 when she bought a property at 8 rue Babie. Her old friend, Ursula Tyrwhitt, became known as a flower painter. Although Gwen John tried to persuade her to share a joint exhibition, this never came about.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Girl in Profile
Late 1910s
Oil and chalk on canvas
Lent by Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales
Gift of Contemporary Art Society Wales

This is a rare example of Gwen John painting an oil portrait of a sitter in profile. The gouache and watercolour drawings that she began to make of the congregation at church in Meudon at this time are often in similar side-on poses. Such compositions meant that one simple outline could describe the features, and pictorial space could be designed as areas of flat colour, something advocated by Maurice Denis, an artist whose ideas were important to Gwen John.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Three Girls in Church
c.1928
Gouache on paper
Jack Wakefield

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Girls in the Church
1920s
Gouache on paper
The Gibson Family Collection

Gwen John [1876–1939)

A Nun seen from behind
1920s
Gouache on paper
Julian Barnes

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Two Women in Profile
c.1920s
Gouache on paper
Jack Wakefield

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Two Girls sitting on Red Chairs
c.1928
Gouache on paper
Jack Wakefield

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Back View of a Nun and a Girl in Church
1920s
Gouache on paper
The Gibson Family Collection

After Gwen John converted to Catholicism in 1913, she attended church regularly in Meudon where she drew the other congregants, including the nuns of the nearby Dominican convent and the orphaned girls for whom they cared. She was influenced by the ideas of Maurice Denis, who was attempting to reinvent Catholic art in France in the early-twentieth century and make it modern, bringing experimental techniques to religious subject matter.

The Meudon priest objected to Gwen John drawing rather than praying during services, telling her that this was a sin. Her friend, Véra Oumançoff, suggested that just because the priest had said so, this did not mean it was true. In any event, Gwen John persisted, using her time in church to reinvent her drawing. Her sketches were simplified, and often painted over afterwards in the studio with dark outlines and flat areas of opaque colour.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Portrait of a Young Nun
Late 1910s
Oil on canvas
Private Collection (Courtesy of Piano Nobile)

This is one of two known portraits of this young nun, whose name may have been Soeur (Sister) Babette. She is not wearing the contemporary habit that would usually cover her hair, but a copy of the costume worn by the founder of the order Mère (Mother) Marie Poussepin (1653-1744), which Gwen John had made. This, or its sister portrait, was included in Gwen John's solo exhibition in London in 1926. She wrote to her old Slade friend Michel Salaman, 'I value it for something in the little face a little sulky or sad.'

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Mère Poussepin
Probably late 1910s
Oil on canvas
Southampton City Art Gallery

Around the time of her conversion to Catholicism in 1913, the local Meudon order of Dominican nuns commissioned Gwen John to paint their founder Mère Marie Poussepin. Gwen John only had a small black and white prayer card of 1911 as source material, but was able to create this radiant presence, full of life and power. She made six portraits of this subject. The art historian and later, Tate director John Rothenstein, believed these to be the very best of Gwen John's paintings.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Mère Poussepin
Probably late 1910s
Oil on canvas
The Henry Barber Trust
The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, Edgbaston

Gwen John felt the Mère Poussepin portraits were a breakthrough in her art, perhaps because she had relied on her imagination and hard-won technique rather than the presence of a sitter. One of them was bought from the convent by John Quinn, who described it as ‘a beautiful jewel.’ He compared his version positively to the paintings by Picasso he had just bought. In 1922, Quinn’s Mère Poussepin was shown in the exhibition ‘Seven English Modernists’ at The Sculptor’s Gallery in New York.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Nun
c.1915–21
Oil on board
Tate: Purchased 1940

There are eight paintings of this young nun from the Meudon convent, who may have been named Soeur (Sister) Marie-Céline. As with John's other Dominican sitter, Soeur Babette, there is a fascinating tension between the human presence of the young woman and the stiff conformity of the old-fashioned costume.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

A Nun with Hands Folded on a Book
c.1915
Charcoal on grey paper
The Trustees of the British Museum

In this drawing which depicts the same sitter as in *The Nun,* the smile in her eyes unites her and us as viewers in complicity. A smile is a fleeting expression which can look artificial in art. Here, its inclusion is a measure of John's enormous skill. She has captured the smile vividly and it is rare to find such an image of a woman of Faith.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Rue Terre Neuve, Meudon, Paris
Late 1910s-1920s
Pencil and watercolour on paper
The Whitworth, The University of Manchester

The Rue Terre Neuve where Gwen lived for twenty years led towards Meudon's observatory terrace with its spectacular vista of Paris and its landmarks, the Eiffel Tower and Sacre Coeur. Although Gwen John would often walk there, and take friends to enjoy the view, she would never paint such a clichéd vision of the city and its environs. Here she paints the street from one of her windows, high above.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Rue Terre Neuve, Meudon, Paris
1915-20
Oil on canvas
Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Gwen John made two oil paintings of this scene, one with a woman and child walking in the street, and this second painting featuring an old woman with an outsize walking stick, summarised wittily with a few strokes of paint. The landscape paintings she made in Meudon are built from a small group of light, fresh tones around the central motif of a passage, similar in their controlled construction to some of Cézanne's work.

Paul Cézanne [1839–1906)

Le Sentier (The Path)
c.1890
Watercolour and pencil on paper
Bernard Jacobson Gallery, London

Cézanne was a huge influence on the generation of artists who followed him. He offered a new path in making art, honouring nature but willing to explore vigorous new processes of painting and drawing. Here the path is barely sketched, the colour applied in patches, the bare white paper dominates. There is an emphasis on structure and media being visible rather than concealed under a polished, illusory surface that Gwen John was to build on.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Girl in Mulberry Dress
1923
Oil on canvas
Southampton City Art Gallery

Using the same model as in *La Concierge*, Gwen John painted nine portraits of a young woman in a mulberry-coloured dress. The stack of stretchers behind the model show that the setting is an artist's studio. The patchy appearance of the surface was intentional, influenced by what Maurice Denis termed 'the mystique of the unfinished' in Cézanne's work.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

La Concierge
c.1924
Oil on canvas
Private Collection

This was one of six paintings Gwen John exhibited at the Salon des Tuileries in 1924. It was painted in her Meudon rooms at 29 Rue Terre Neuve, though the sitter remains unknown. The unsmiling female figure is reminiscent of Cézanne's portraits of women. The volume on the table evokes Gwen John's own love of literature. Books feature in her paintings from her earliest work to mature portraits such as this.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Portrait of a Young Woman wearing a Red Shawl
Late 1910s-1920s
Oil on canvas
Private Collection

There are four known versions of this painting in which Gwen John simplified the costume and background of the sitter to visible dabs and dashes of pigment, throwing into relief the exquisite delicacy of the head. She had begun to mix chalk into her paint and the canvas ground to create this opaque, textural, yet luminous effect. The equivalent in her works on paper are her turn to gouache as a medium. The ‘unfinished’ look of the patchy, pale background is intentional.

Gwen John [1876–1939)

Woman in a Red Shawl
Late 1910s-1920s
Oil on canvas
Private Collection

In this version of the composition Gwen John created a more consistent effect. The clothes are more uniform in tone, there appears to be a curtain in the background, and even a curl of hair carefully drawn by the sitter's left ear. The hands are slightly distorted, to give an added weight and balance to the figure. Seeing the two paintings side by side makes clear how such a simple composition, repeated, could be the vehicle for formal experiment.

Gwen John [1876-1939)

Seated Nude
c.1923-4
Oil on canvas
Private Collection
Courtesy of Hazlitt Holland-Hibbert

Gwen John had begun her training in London at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1895. Part of the motivation for women students choosing to study there was permission to work in the life room, something denied to them in many other art colleges. When she settled in Paris in 1904, Gwen John earned her living for a number of years as an artist's model. Her own drawings and paintings of the female nude always emphasise the individuality and self-possession of the sitter, even when she is naked.

[Central Cases)

Gwen John [1876–1939)

The Victorian Sisters
Late 1920s

Pencil and gouache on paper
Private Collection

Gwen John repeated this composition of Ste Thérèse and her sister many times, with differing levels of detail. She was no longer interested in an illusion of reality, but in the design of the drawing which was made of flat heavy outlines, perhaps in emulation of the work of Georges Rouault, who she admired.

Facsimile of a Prayer Card of Ste Thérèse of Lisieux and her Sister, Owned by Gwen John
Gwen John Papers: Item 14
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Gwen John experimented with ways to unite her new faith and her art, and began to work from printed images of female Catholic holy figures to develop compositions. She was particularly devoted to Ste Thérèse, who was only three years her senior, but who had died young and achieved sainthood.

Crucifix from Gwen John's personal collection
Silver
Tenby Museum and Art Gallery Collection

The artist's conversion to Catholicism in 1913 was to change her art for good. She became part of a wider cultural movement to bring Catholic belief and modernism together.

Facsimile of Mère Poussepin Prayer Card
Gwen John Papers: Item 3
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Gwen John used this small, cheaply printed image of the founder of a Dominican order of nuns near her home in Meudon to develop a series of full-scale portraits in oil, a great achievement which she considered a breakthrough in her work.

Maurice Denis [1870-1943) **and**
Adolphe Hatzfeld [1824-1900)
Facsimile of L'Imitation de Jesus Christ
(The Imitation of Jesus Christ)
1903

Pages 102-3
By permission of the British Library

Maurice Denis' wood engravings for the Imitation of Christ were part of his life's work: to unite contemporary art and Catholicism. For him, a truly modern religious art meant new approaches had to be developed. Faith was not just a matter of the appropriate subject – holy figures and Bible stories – but also of style, technique and media. His radically simplified graphic art, and his depiction of events from the New Testament in modern settings and dress, were to influence many artists.

Facsimiles of Rough Sketches and Notes: mostly made in the Reading Room of the Grands Magasins du Louvre
Originals 1930s
Gwen John Papers: Items, 25, 52-3, 69, 71, 81

Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Although she had moved to Meudon in 1911, Gwen John regularly travelled into the city thereafter, to exhibit, meet friends, and visit galleries. Even much later, in the 1930s, she would visit the grands magasins (department stores) and sketch in their reading rooms and cafés. Sometimes she drew other visitors in the shops. She also used their paper to experiment with compositions which repeat across the page like frames of film. Her patron, John Quinn, had given her a Kodak camera in the early 1920s, and although she did not use that in her art, she was interested in multiples of the same image, and worked from mass media printed material – prayer cards, magazine images and photographs.

Facsimile of View of Meudon from a Postcard Owned by Gwen John
Gwen John Papers: Item 66
Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru / The National Library of Wales, Aberystwyth

Far from being a retreat from the world, Meudon, just outside Paris, was a noted beauty spot with fine views over the city. Artists including Berthe Morisot and Alfred Sisley had painted there, and Rodin had a villa and studios. Gwen John loved the area and would paint it, too.