Case 32 2013/14: a painting by Gwen John, *a portrait of the artist’s sister, Winifred*

Expert adviser’s statement

Reviewing Committee Secretary’s note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England Website

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

1. Brief Description of item(s)

   - What is it?

   A painting by Gwen John of her younger sister Winifred. The work was probably painted in 21 Fitzroy Street, London where John lived from January 1897 to summer 1898 when she was a student at the Slade School of Fine Art.

   - What is it made of?

   Oil on canvas

   - What are its measurements?

   45.7 x 40.6 cm

   - Who is the artist/maker and what are their dates?

   Gwen John (1876 – 1939)

   - What date is the item?

   c. 1897-8

   - What condition is it in?

   I have not seen the work since it was exhibited at Tate Britain in 2004, but I believe it to be in good condition.

2. Context

   - Provenance

   Collection the artist until c. 1901; to Louise Salaman (Mrs E W Bishop) who possibly purchased it from the New English Art Club exhibition in Spring 1901; to private collection by descent.
Key literary and exhibition references

Exhibitions:

New English Art Club Spring 1901, no. 102 (as Miss Winifred John)
Paintings and Drawings by Gwen John, The New Chenil Galleries London, 1926, no 43 (As Winifred)
Gwen John Memorial Exhibition, Matthiesen Ltd., London, 1946, no. 3
Gwen John 1876-1939, Matthiesen Gallery London, 1961, no. 3
Gwen John, Arts Council 1968, no. 3
Gwen John 1876-1939, Anthony D’Offay, London, 1976, no. 1
Gwen John 1876-1939, Anthony D’Offay 1982, no. 2
Gwen John: An Interior Life, Barbican Art Gallery, London, 1985, no. 1
Gwen John and Augustus John, Tate Britain, London, 2004, no. 2
From Victorian to Modern, Djanogly Art Gallery Nottingham, 2006, no. 5.

Literature:

Alison Thomas, Portraits of Women: Gwen John and her Forgotten Contemporaries, Cambridge, 1994, p. 64

3. Waverley criteria

- Which of the Waverley criteria does the item meet? (If it is of ‘outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art learning or history’ which area of art learning or history).
- Very briefly why?

Waverley Criterion 2 – Aesthetics. Is it of outstanding aesthetic importance?

Gwen John is acknowledged as one of the outstanding British artists of the early decades of the twentieth century. Her surviving oeuvre is small due to her focused and painstaking method of working, and oil paintings from the period 1897 - 1898, when she produced her first fully resolved works, are exceptionally rare. Only two major works exist from this period Portrait of the
Artist’s Sister Winifred and Portrait of Mrs Atkinson c. 1897-8 (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York).

Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred is an exceptionally fine example of John’s early style when she painted in thin layered glazes before she adopted the dry mosaic-like application of paint that characterizes her later work. Despite its early date the work already demonstrates key features of her later oeuvre such as the subject matter of a single female figure in an interior, a restricted tonal palette and asymmetric composition. It has been shown in every major exhibition of the artist’s work.

Waverley Criterion 3 – Scholarship. Is it of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history?

Gwen John has had a central position in recent reassessments of the history of late nineteenth and twentieth-century British art. She is one of a number of significant early twentieth-century women artists including Vanessa Bell and Laura Knight who are now being given their proper place in the narrative of British art, and whose life and work allows a closer examination of the networks and discourses that shaped the careers and oeuvres of women artists, and their significant contributions to aesthetic and social debates in the period. Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred is an exceptional example of John’s early practice that illuminates the beginnings of her interest in key subject matter of female sitters in domestic interiors at a moment when these subjects were both an important site for the development of modernist practice – in the work of male artists such as James McNeill Whistler, Edouard Vuillard and Pierre Bonnard – and when the relationship between women and interior space was a key subject in the cultural arena. Examination of the treatment of this subject matter by female artists such as John and Bell allows a more nuanced understanding of the aesthetic and cultural issues at stake.

The importance of increased access to art education for women artists in this period is also a significant area of investigation for scholars. Painted while John was an art student, Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred is also an important example of late nineteenth-century art school practice and the ways in which an increased visibility for women artists was driven by access to art education through institutions such as the Slade School of Fine Art where women artists were able to train on equal terms with men and to develop connections which gave them greater access to exhibiting opportunities and patronage.
DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

What does it depict?

The painting depicts the artist's younger sister Winifred in an interior, probably 21 Fitzroy Street, London, where Gwen John lived with her brother Augustus from January 1897 to summer 1898. Winifred is shown half-length wearing a black hat trimmed with brown fur or feathers, a red scarf, a brown and black cape and black gloves. There is an open book in front of her. In three-quarter profile, her head turns to meet the gaze of the viewer as she adjusts the fastening of her glove. The background is indistinct but suggests that she stands in front of a brown panelled door.

What does it tell us about that period?

At the turn of the century in Britain and France the *Intimiste* portrait interior was a key subject for artists. Derived from the work of Whistler, Bonnard and Vuillard the subject was adopted by British artists such as Walter Sickert, Philip Wilson Steer and Henry Tonks and became a key genre at the exhibitions of the New English Art Club. This domestic subject matter became a significant vehicle for avant-garde practice in Britain in the early twentieth century through the works of the Camden Town Group and the Bloomsbury Group. John’s work played an important role in developing this idea of the significance of the domestic interior as a site for depicting the interior life of the individual, alongside criticism such as that of Maurice Denis who, among others, argued that artists should strive to present the human *vie intérieure* in their work. (Alicia Foster, *Gwen John*, London 2004, p. 7) A review of her work at the New English Art Club in 1925 demonstrates how this connection was recognised by contemporary viewers: ‘In looking at these pictures you forget all about painting and are brought into almost painful intimacy with the subjects – as if you had overheard a conversation of critical moment in the lives of the speakers.’ (*Athenaeum*, 3 January 1925).

John’s work was also in dialogue with redefinitions of femininity in the Edwardian period when the figure of the ‘New Woman’ in novels and plays of the 1890s epitomised the quest for autonomy through education and work. (Foster, pp. 12-13) John’s presentation of her female sitters such as Winifred and Dorelia and in her own self portraits as confident and empowered individuals through their assertive poses and rational clothing echoed the agitation for equal opportunities and enfranchisement for women by suffragist groups, and the increasingly public identity of women artists as they studied and exhibited alongside men. Art education played a key role in the greater public profile of women artists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Slade School of Fine Art was particularly significant in this respect, Gwen John being the most important of a group of talented female students who studied at the school in the 1890s. These included Louise Salaman, the first owner of *Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred* and Ida Nettleship and Gwen
Salmond with whom John spent six months living in Paris and studying at Whistler’s Académie Carmen after leaving the Slade.

Who made it/painted it/wrote it?

Gwen John 1876-1939

No. of comparable items by the same artist already in the UK, in both public and private collections?

John produced only six oil paintings in the period 1895-1898. Major examples are not currently held in any British public collection, the earliest major work by John in a public collection is the National Portrait Gallery’s Self Portrait of 1900. Two early minor works: Portrait of Winifred, c. 1895 and Landscape at Tenby with Figures, c. 1895-8 are in the collection of Tenby Art Gallery and Museum. Two further paintings: Copy after ‘The Duet’ by Gabriel Metsu, c. 1895-8 and Young Woman with a Violin c. 1897-8 remain in private collections. The only other major work of this period Portrait of Mrs Atkinson c. 1897-8 is in the collection of the Metropolitan Museum of Art New York.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

Significance of figures associated with the item(s): maker/client/owners?

Gwen John is now recognized internationally as one of the most significant British artists of the early twentieth century. She was unusual as a female artist in being recognised during her lifetime as a major artist by a select but important group of fellow artists and collectors, showing at the Carfax Gallery, New English Art Club, Paris Salon and New York Armory Show and attracting the attention of important patrons such as John Quinn. Reappraisal began soon after her death with a memorial show in 1946 and articles by Wyndham Lewis (1946) and Sir John Rothenstein who described her as ‘one of the finest painters of our time and country’ (Modern English Painters, 1952, p. 133).

Her work was rediscovered by a wider public through exhibitions and scholarship in the 1980s. This initially examined her highly focused painting practice in which her acute observation, restricted tonal range and repeated motifs were considered to produce an intensity in her work which was read as evidence of the presentation of a private interior life on canvas. More recently her public life, her connections in the London, Paris and New York art worlds and her engagement with contemporary theories of art and redefinitions of female identity have been analysed to emphasise her pivotal role in dialogues between Britain and France and the wider social connections of her art. Her work has had considerable significance to feminist scholarship in its validation of domestic subject matter and formal qualities which have been interpreted by some scholars as essentially feminine, but which have also been placed by others in a broader context of Intimiste painting in Britain and France and the distinctive contribution made to this by women artists such as John.
Significance of subject-matter?

*Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred* draws on a tradition of *Intimiste* painting in Britain and France. It acknowledges this artistic lineage, demonstrating John’s admiration of James McNeill Whistler’s painting *Miss Agnes Mary Alexander* c.1873 (Tate) by quoting its figure’s pose and sharing its restricted tonal range and single dash of bright colour. However it also transcends these influences and is an exceptional early example of John’s key subject matter. It represents the earliest fully resolved manifestation of the aesthetic preoccupations that would dominate John’s own practice, female figures in interior settings, the plain background, off-centre placing of the figure and the subtle exploration of a restricted tonal range, punctuated by a dash of scarlet as seen for instance in *Dorelia in a Black Dress*, c. 1903-4 (Tate) which has a similar composition and palette. John used this subject matter to present independent female characters, engaging both with the redefinition of the status of women in the period, and echoing her own commitment to independent artistic practice in removing herself from domestic ties in Britain and participating instead in the Parisian art world.

Significance of materials/process/usage?

John’s surviving oeuvre is small due to her focused and painstaking method of working, and oil paintings from the period 1897 - 1898, when she produced her first fully resolved works, are exceptionally rare. *Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred* is an exceptionally fine example of John’s early style when she painted in thin layered glazes before she adopted the dry mosaic-like application of paint that characterizes her later work. Despite its early date the work already demonstrates key features of her later oeuvre such as the subject matter of a single female figure in an interior, a restricted tonal palette and asymmetric composition. In 1926 Mary Chamot described the strong visual impact of the work: ‘Winifred shows a daring splash of colour in a sober setting and a piece of amazingly sound painting of detail in the treatment of the open book’ (Chamot, p. 885)

Is/are the item(s) of local/regional/national importance?

The item is of national importance as a key early work which lays the foundation for the artist’s later practice.

Summary of related items in public/private ownership in the UK

Key to the reassessment of the careers of women artists such as John and the important role that they played in both public areas of the art world and in formal developments in the twentieth century is the full representation of all aspects of the artists’ work in public collections in the same way as their male peers. The two major repositories of John’s work in Britain are the National Museum and Galleries of Wales and Tate, neither of whom have a work from this crucial early part of her career. However, later works such as *Self Portrait* 1900 (National Portrait Gallery) and *Dorelia in a Black Dress* 1903-4 (Tate)
that are clearly related in their compositions and technique are in UK public collections.

Art education played a key role in the greater public profile of women artists in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The Slade School of Fine Art was particularly significant in this respect as documented by the collections of the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London who hold one of the best collections of work by female artists in their student prize collection including a life drawing attributed to John and the watercolour *Portrait Group* also painted at 21 Fitzroy Street and includes the figures of Augustus and Winifred John, Rosa Waugh and Michel Salaman. The door just seen in the right background of this work is similar to the one that forms the background of the *Portrait of the Artist’s Sister Winifred* and the wallpaper is the same as that in the background of *Portrait of Mrs Atkinson* c. 1897-8 (Metropolitan Museum of Art) supporting the theory that all three works were painted in the same location at around the same time.