

Exhibitions



24. *Aphrodite wounded by Diomedes*, by Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres. c.1805. Oil on panel, 26.6 by 32.6 cm. (Kunstmuseum, Basel; exh. Musée des Beaux-Arts, Orléans).

25. *Portrait of Winifred Knights*, by Colin Gill. 1921. Pencil on paper, 43.8 by 32.4 cm. (Liss Llewellyn Fine Art, London; exh. Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne).

fabricque du personnage (Actes du colloque de l'École du Louvre 25th-28th April 2006), Paris 2009, pp.195 and 199.

4 É.-J. Delécluze: *Louis David, son école et son temps, souvenirs*, Paris 1855, pp.297-98.

5 The oval reproduction, technique and size of the latter in the catalogue (p.58; fig.22) need correction: the portrait is painted on a rectangular panel measuring 29 by 22.8 cm., and is reportedly dated on the back, *an 12* (1803-04); see the fundamental study by P. Conisbee in G. Tinterow, C. Hale and É. Bertin: "'Portraits by Ingres, image of an epoch": reflections, technical observations, addenda, and corrigenda', *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 35 (2000), pp.208-09; the complete panel is illustrated, p.199, fig.3.

Portrait of an Artist

Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne

11th September 2021-
26th February 2022

by **KENNETH MCCONKEY**

It says much for the perspicacity of the art dealers Sacha Llewellyn and Paul Liss that an exhibition of the scale and quality of this can be mounted from their stock at the Laing Art Gallery. It is a show that focuses not on just one but on over fifty artists. Whereas most art trade competitors elect to pick and choose the works they buy, the exhibition organisers, publishers and Fine Art dealers Liss Llewellyn have, in recent years, cornered the market in the acquisition of early twentieth century British artists' works after their death,

either directly from artists' estates or from private collections. Many are women painters, who overlapped with the concurrent exhibition at the Laing, *WOW: Women Only, Works on Paper* (closed 4th December).¹ Since both were based on studio contents, these two exhibitions enable a fuller understanding of modes of conception, from the *premier idée* to finished work. In addition to paintings, a typical Liss Llewellyn online catalogue can contain scraps and sketches, 'squared-up' drawings in all media, prints and even etching plates and although there are few in the present selection, there are rather more in the substantial exhibition catalogue, which, with its extra illustrations of paintings that the Laing could not display, is a formidable act of stocktaking.²

The catalogue, like the exhibition, is arranged around five themes: 'Working Space', 'The Artist's Entourage', 'Artists by Artists', 'Self-portraits' and 'Allegories of Creation'. The sheer range of works available to the organisers permits generalisations about the life a young artist of the Edwardian and inter-war periods could expect. There are paintings of dingy rooms with bed-sit furniture, suburban back gardens glimpsed from upstairs windows, friends who pose for free, soirées, self-portraits – in short, everything one might expect to find in

the bohemia of the age. Into this *melée*, the Laing has inserted works from its own collection by John Singer Sargent, William Orpen, Malcolm Drummond and Duncan Grant, the final two being pillars of the British modernist mainstream supporting the art-historical artifices known as 'Camden Town' and 'Bloomsbury'. These appear together with many others in the self-portrait and artists' entourage sections.

Yet it is elsewhere that the exhibition forges a new path in telling us about things we sometimes forget. Learning experiences are not confined to the life room in an art school and a humble pine dresser or sash window have much to reveal about conceptions of form and space. A pair of discarded slippers can be a voyage of discovery for Albert de Belleruche (c.1890; cat. no.5), as much as the quizzical faces of Staffordshire flatbacks are for Margaret Gere (c.1910; no.16) or Evan Charlton (no.26). Then, from the second half of the first gallery onwards, models appear in private sessions and visitors inhabit the empty rooms and back gardens. A simple narrative begins to emerge from the miscellany of works included in the exhibition, and long purposeful looking becomes the objective in studies by



William Strang and paintings by Edward Halliday and Evelyn Dunbar of family, friends and others. Fifty years and a World War separate these artists, but some objectives are shared.

These works lead inevitably to self-portraits that close with a striking early 1960s drawing by David Tindle (1963; no.306) – one of the most recent works in the exhibition. Taken as a whole, and looking back to the turn of the century, style and accessories convey context almost as much as self. Suits and ties predominate among the men, and women, although their hemlines rise from the floor, are much less formal. Orpen, who opens this section in Balzacian bathrobe and Chardin's silken mobcap, is dressed for the occasion in Laing's *Self-portrait*, (no.236; Fig.26), his stance being echoed in self-portraits by Robert Austin and Joseph Simpson. For penetration however, there is the vestigial Winifred Knights (no.261) in a small pencil study of 1920, **in which the subject's disembodied eyes, nose and mouth hover on the page [OK]**.

Along the way a sub-plot has begun to emerge. Central to the concerns of Liss Llewellyn are the works of Knights, Colin Gill and Thomas Monnington, which feature in several sections of both exhibitions. All three were among the first Rome scholars at a time when Slade School Neo-Primitives were vocal visually in their admiration for Piero della Francesca, Paolo Uccello and Botticelli's predellas. Fused with the decorous Classicism of Puvis de Chavannes, a scholasticism, almost Jesuitical, was emerging. Their Italian training equipped them, and later students of the British School in Rome, for grand mural commissions, the subject of an interesting survey in which the dealers collaborated with Alan Powers and others in 2013.³ Some of the works featured in this survey reappear in the Laing exhibitions – notably Knights's cartoon for her masterpiece, *The deluge* (1920; Tate), with its echoes of Carpaccio, and Gill's drawing of Knights (no.163; Fig.25) that led to the late insertion of her figure in his *Allegro* frieze of 1921 (private collection) shown in the exhibition *Winifred Knights (1899-1947)* at the Dulwich Picture Gallery, London, in 2016.⁴ This remarkable drawing, a

26. *Self-portrait*, by William Orpen. 1908. Oil on canvas, 92.8 by 72.1 cm. (Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne).

centrepiece in the second room and cover illustration for the catalogue, aims to transfix the viewer. Standing in front of it at first one is inclined to whisper 'Ingres', before the thought evaporates as one notes that Gill's line lacks the swift dash of a sleeve that takes the eye from head to hand in an Ingres portrait. Slow and sensuous, Gill's Medusa, staring out from under a wide-brimmed hat, is more engulfing.

Of course, there are echoes of Orpen and Augustus John, but a lingering at Anticoli Corrado and a Tuscan pilgrimage shine through.

Works by Knights, Gill and Monnington direct us towards friends and followers who wanted to make art for public spaces – the likes of Charles Mahoney, Stanley Lewis and Alan Sorrell, who feature in the final section of the exhibition. Among these



Exhibitions

'Allegories' one painter, Charles Sims, stands apart from the muralists. A precocious Edwardian fantasist, in 1926, two years before he threw himself from the Leaderfoot Viaduct at Melrose, Sims had begun to paint **'Spirituals' (no.355; Fig.27), a sequence of semi-abstract mystic-religious works that [OK?]** were unlike paintings that anyone had ever seen before and critics struggled.

Only a few years earlier his resplendent portrait of Sibyl Rocksavage (private collection) had been 'picture of the year' at the Royal Academy of Arts, London. But the death of a son in the First World War, the scene of deserted trenches and devastation at Arras, his dalliance with Vivienne Jeudwine and the break-up of his marriage, left him lonely and in the state of depression, which led him naked out into a harsh and jagged universe. It was as if those boys from El Greco's *Laocoön* (1610–14; National Gallery of Art, Washington) had escaped the sea serpent and risen into the tempestuous sky above Toledo to be buffeted, bruised and devoured. Life's fundament was gone. Even Orpen's amusing letters were not enough to encourage him and according to Sims's

27. My pain beneath your sheltering hand, by Charles Sims. c.1926–28. Tempera on canvas, 91 x 68.6 cm. Liss Llewellyn Fine Art, London; Laing Art Gallery, Newcastle upon Tyne.

friend, Harold Speed, the 'poor tortured spirit' was 'laid bare'. Speed concluded shortly after Sims's death, 'To be an artist is to have no sense of shame, his business is the revelation of himself to the world; and his hope (generally realized) is that nobody will understand it'.⁵

It is true that many of the artists represented in these exhibitions are not household names, but this, for the present reviewer, makes them more interesting. All provide fragments of a life. It may seem unnecessary to say it, but each picture represents a time when someone looked at their surroundings, their friends or into themselves, and in the act of making an image, recorded a moment of human fitfulness. No lens can do this, only the hand. Sickert, Spencer, the Nashes, Burra, Bawden and Ravilious are now so familiar that it is easy to forget that they spring from a large and varied conspectus and that the realisation of where the stylistic battles of the future will be fought is not granted to many. In all its complexity, the Laing Art Gallery exhibitions are committed to opening this great treasury of twentieth-century British art.

1 See S. Llewellyn and P. Lyss, eds: exh. cat. *Wow: Women Only, Works on Paper*, Newcastle upon Tyne (Laing Art Gallery) 2021. Selected by Sacha Llewellyn the works in the exhibition also include significant Laing Art Gallery additions by Beatrice How, Edna Clarke Hall, Annie French, Gwen Raverat, Thérèse Lessore, Lucy Kemp-Welch and Frances Hodgkins.

2 Catalogue: *Portrait of an Artist*. Edited by Sacha Llewellyn and Paul Liss. 398 pp. incl. 385 col. + b. & w. ills. (Liss Llewellyn, London, 2021), £15. ISBN 978-1-9993145-4-5.

3 A. Powers, P. Liss and S. Llewellyn: *British Murals and Decorative Painting 1920–1960, Rediscoveries and New Interpretations*, Bristol 2013; which accompanied an exhibition, *British Murals and Decorative Painting 1910–1970*, at the Fine Art Society, London, in 2013. These build upon Clare Willson's *Mural Painting in Britain, 1840–1940: Image and Meaning*, Oxford 2000; and the more recent attention paid to Orpen's so-called 'Irish Trilogy' in K. McConkey: "'Politics and that girl!': a study of 'Sowing New Seed'" by Sir William Orpen, in N. Garnham and K. Jeffrey, eds: *Culture, Place and Identity (26th Biennial Irish Conference of Historians, University of Ulster, May 2003)*, Dublin 2005, pp.53–77; L. Tickner: *Modern Life and Modern Subjects: British Art in the Early Twentieth Century*, New Haven and London 2000, pp.70–77; and Augustus John's *Lyric fantasy* (1912; Tate).

4 Reviewed by Susanna Avery-Quash in this Magazine, 158 (2016), pp.755–57.

5 H. Speed: 'Charles Sims RA, 1873–1928', *Old Watercolour Society's Club* 6 (1928–1929), pp.45–64, p.64.

Suzanne Valadon: Model, Painter, Rebel

Barnes Foundation, Philadelphia
26th September 2021–
9th January 2022

by PAULA J. BIRNBAUM

This is the first exhibition dedicated to the work of Suzanne Valadon (1865–1938) in North America. It offers a long-overdue career survey of an artist who has been marginalised in the history of art because of her gender, sexuality and working-class background. Curated by Nancy Ireson, it features over fifty drawings, prints and paintings – **which constitute** around ten percent of the artist's oeuvre – from museums and private collections in six countries, representing all stages of Valadon's career. The catalogue features high-quality reproductions and instructive essays, **including contributions by Martha Lucy and the artist Lisa Brice.**¹

The exhibition is divided into six thematic sections, which are roughly chronological. The first, 'Maria the Model', **presents** Valadon (born Marie-Clémentine Valadon) as an artist's model **who was** known for her flexibility, endurance and commanding presence. **The gallery walls are painted** a light blue, the colour and **texture [meaning the paint is stippled somehow, or there is a texture to the wall?]** of sea foam, which connects to the watery theme of Gustav Wertheimer's large painting *Kiss of the siren* (1882; Indianapolis Museum of Art at Newfields; cat. no.1), for which Valadon modelled as the siren. This is accompanied by three original paintings, by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Jean Eugène Clary and Santiago Rusiñol, and reproductions of eleven others, by Toulouse-Lautrec, Pierre Puvis de Chavannes and Pierre-Auguste Renoir among others, for which Valadon also modelled.

The next section, 'Suzanne Valadon the Artist', offers a room of Valadon's earliest surviving drawings and prints, documenting her transition from model to self-taught artist. The rich selection reveals her talent for capturing her own likeness, as well as those of **household ['family?']**

