

JOHN, GWENDOLEN MARY (1876 - 1939), artist

Name: Gwendolen Mary John
Date of birth: 1876
Date of death: 1939
Partner: Auguste Rodin
Parent: Augusta John (née Smith)
Parent: Edwin William John
Gender: Female
Occupation: artist
Area of activity: Art and Architecture
Author: A. David Fraser Jenkins

Born in Haverfordwest, Pembrokeshire, 22 June 1876, the second child of Edwin William John and Augusta (née Smith) and the elder sister of [Augustus John](#). She was educated at Tenby, where the family moved after her mother died in 1884. She continued to draw from childhood, and her first surviving oil paintings are a portrait of her younger sister Winifred (Tenby Museum) and a view of Tenby harbour. Following the example of [Augustus](#) she was sent to the Slade School of Art in London University (1895-98). This school was the most important source both of her friendships and her attitude to art, although this was learnt more from her fellow pupils than her teachers. She shared lodgings at first with [Augustus](#), but was then on her own in the Fitzroy and Bayswater areas of London, and the apartments she later occupied in Paris and Meudon were of the same kind. Her appearance is recorded in self-portraits and in drawings by [Augustus](#): medium height, slim and auburn-haired and dressed with an extreme neatness and a liking for jewellery and lace. Edna Waugh and [Augustus](#) recalled that she spoke with a soft, Pembrokeshire accent. The teaching at the Slade School was at odds with what in retrospect can be seen as her style as the Slade's method was based on a separation of drawing and painting with the emphasis on the former. Despite a few drawings in the style of Tonks, her tutor, the best of her early drawings are all portraits of her female contemporaries, particularly of Winifred John. In 1898 she stayed for six months in Paris to be taught at Whistler's school. Whistler's fastidious control of colour and his preferred subject of the single figure in an interior were both an example to Gwen John.

She returned to live in England, for the last time, until 1903. The New English Art Club exhibited her paintings, and although these seem to have been few she developed a skilful realist technique and a sense for the balance of tones similar to Whistler's. The occasion of her leaving Britain was a painting and walking expedition to France with [Augustus](#)'s mistress Dorelia McNeill, unusual in that they travelled alone, and originally intended to get to Rome. In February 1904 they arrived instead at Paris, where they earned money as artists' models in Montparnasse. Gwen John's life in Paris from 1904 is recorded in letters to Britain, particularly a series to the painter Ursula Tyrwhitt (at the National Library of Wales) and by her copious letters to the sculptor Rodin, who became her lover from that year, after she had worked for him as a model. Her long affair with Rodin was not known to her contemporaries, and was only published in Michael Holroyd's biography of [Augustus](#) (1974), but is now known from the letters at the Musée Rodin published by Susan Chitty (1981). Until his death in 1924 she was supported by the New York collector John Quinn, who bought as much as the reluctant artist would part with, and who gave her an annual allowance. Subsequently some of her paintings were acquired by American museums.

Early in 1913 she was received into the Roman Catholic Church. She painted portraits of two nuns from a convent in Meudon, the town where Rodin lived, and where she had moved in 1911, and a series of copy portraits of the founder of their order. Her tiny gouaches of people in church and of children were painted in 'sets' of almost identical copies.

During 1918-24 she began to paint more frequently, exhibited at the salons, and made her outstanding and unique series of portraits painted with dry touches of thick colour in a harmony of close tones. Frequently her subject was a seated model, a young girl, in her apartment. Many of her notes (at National Library of Wales) are concerned with the perfection of her range of colours and their association with flowers.

Her reputation has risen steadily since her memorial exhibition at Matthiesen Ltd. in 1946. The Arts Council's retrospective exhibition of 1968 shown at London, Sheffield and Cardiff included in the catalogue the first detailed account of her work. At the same time as the feminist movement in criticism has revaluated women artists she has become recognised as one of the best twentieth-century British painters, and is also so regarded in America.

She died 18 September 1939 in Dieppe, where she had presumably gone with the intention of returning to Britain before the War. Her paintings were inherited by her nephew Edwin, who was also a water-colour painter. In 1976 the National Museum of Wales acquired from him the remainder of the collection, including more than one thousand of her drawings.

Author

A. David Fraser Jenkins

Sources

Susan Chitty, *Gwen John, 1876-1939* (London 1981)

Cecily Langdale and David Fraser Jenkins, *Gwen John an Interior Life* (Oxford 1985)

Mary Taubman, *Gwen John* (Aldershot 1985)

Cecily Langdale, *Gwen John, with a Catalogue Raisonné of the Paintings and a Selection of the Drawings* (London 1987)

Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, *Gwen John papers at the National Library of Wales* (Aberystwyth 1988)

Further Reading

Beryl H. Griffiths, *Mamwlad* (Gwasg Carreg Gwalch Llanrwst 2016), pp.111-132

Bethany McIntyre, *Gwen John: detholiad* (Caerdydd 2010)

Wikipedia Article: [Gwen John](#)

Works

ArtUK: [Gwen John](#)

Additional Links

NLW Archives: [Gwen John manuscripts](#)

VIAF: [57417858](#)

Wikidata: [Q274339](#)

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