

**VOYAGING
OUT**



Carolyn Trant

VOYAGING OUT

BRITISH WOMEN
ARTISTS FROM
SUFFRAGE TO THE
SIXTIES

Dedicated to the memory of my great-grandmother Clara Legge (1881–1980), who named one of her daughters after Sylvia Pankhurst, and to Cynthia Heymanson Buckwell (1944–2013).

Page 2: Eileen Agar, *Butterfly Bride*, 1938. Collage on paper.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION	6
1 DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN the life class	8
2 BLESSED COMPANY being in the right group	28
3 NOT MERELY A WINDOW a new kind of representation	48
4 A ROOM OF ONE'S OWN from cupboard to studio	56
5 ALTERNATIVE ARRANGEMENTS life, art and sexuality	72
6 WOMEN ON TOP influence in the art world	87
7 ON GROWTH AND FORM modernism and abstraction	101
8 THE SUBVERSIVE EYE surrealism and democracy	114
9 ART FOR LOVE neo-romanticism	130
10 EDUCATION THROUGH ART women artists as teachers	147
11 PROLETARIANS AND PAINTERS political women	163
12 THESE THINGS THAT WAR HAS MADE art of the world wars	174
13 THINKING IN COMMON topography and creative clusters	190
14 SIGNIFICANT OTHERS artists' partnerships	213
15 THREE SALUTARY TALES careers and conflicts	236
16 IN THE SERVICE OF ART visions of the muse	247
17 THE KITCHEN SINK domesticity and the making of art	256
18 THIS IS TOMORROW signs of change	275
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS	289
PICTURE CREDITS	290
NOTES	291
INDEX	297

Chapter 1

DAUGHTERS OF THE SUN

the life class

Virginia Woolf saw December 1910 as the moment when the decline of Liberal, patriarchal, Imperialist England began and ‘human character changed’; but it may have been presaged two years earlier when Lytton Strachey queried a stain on her sister Vanessa’s dress. “‘Semen?’” he said. Can one really say it? I thought and we both burst out laughing. With that one word all barriers of reticence and reserve went down.² 1910 was also the year of Roger Fry’s exhibition ‘Manet and the Post-Impressionists’ at the Grafton Galleries in London, during a year marked by intensified, militant suffrage campaigns and the emergence of the New Woman.

Changes in the opportunities available for women in both work and leisure were accelerated by the outbreak of war. Married women had benefited from increasing social and financial independence following the Married Women’s Properties Acts passed between 1870 and 1893. Being single was no escape from family responsibilities: all women were expected to care for elderly parents. Even the more enlightened girls’ schools encouraged an ethos of female self-sacrifice that inhibited the sense of total immersion in work that is vital to creativity.

Women painters during this period were routinely dismissed as ‘amateurs’ or hobbyists, and professional artistic training for women was limited, if not prohibited. While many women considered themselves professional artists, the allocation of scholarships and exhibition opportunities always favoured the men. Women with private income who could afford to fund their vocation were still damned, because ‘being professional’ was understood to mean ‘supporting yourself from the sale of your work’. At the heart of the matter lay attitudes to the body. Until the 1960s, the teaching of painting in art school was based on the study of the nude, and for women this presented a problem. Men and women were segregated in art classes and women were usually only allowed to

work from plaster casts or a ‘semi-draped’ human figure, exposure to flesh being considered a threat to their emotional and ‘innately hysterical natures’. Women therefore received an inferior education in cramped, crowded studios, while male students received preferential treatment; segregated classes continued in many major art schools until after the Second World War. Meanwhile, Irish artists of both sexes had to travel to London or Europe to take part in life-drawing classes – they were unheard of in Ireland.

A previously little-discussed aspect of the way professional artists made studies for paintings during the period was the use of life-size jointed mannequins. A male model would pose with the female mannequin and a female model with the male, so that the two living subjects would never be in dangerous proximity. These antiquated practices were an embarrassment to Pre-Raphaelite artists, who prided themselves on their realism and truth to nature. It is little wonder nineteenth-century paintings of figure groups can seem so stilted. Once the government began to fund art schools such as the Royal College of Art (RCA), moral outrage around the issue of nude female models increased; there was even debate in Parliament about whether it was more titillating for models to be nude or partially clothed. Male artists hated having women in their life classes because their presence meant male models were obliged to wear a posing pouch. Around 1922, Peggy Angus began a campaign at the RCA – ‘down with the Codpiece’ – but got nowhere beyond receiving a private lecture on the unpredictability of male anatomy.

The end of the First World War in 1918 was supposed to have ushered in a new openness about bodies, modern warfare having done much to render old etiquettes redundant; however, the popular notion of the artist and ‘his’ model (even though many models were men) still contributed a morally suspect air to the profession. In 1879, Annie Swynnerton, a Manchester-born painter, and her lifelong friend the painter and suffragist Susan Isabel Dacre founded the Manchester Society of Women Painters. Its aims were to allow women to study the figure from life in women-only classes; to create more opportunities for them to exhibit their work; and to train women teachers who would question the whole direction of art and the way it was taught.

The work of three women, born between 1877 and 1890 – one a social and political reformer, one a bohemian and one a professional

artist – illustrates how attitudes to the depiction of people were changing and introduces ideas about social class, topography and friendship that will run like a thread through this book. These women artists were Sylvia Pankhurst, Nina Hamnett and Laura Knight.

Given her fame as a political activist and a campaigner for women's rights, most people do not immediately think of Sylvia Pankhurst as an artist, but a display at Tate Britain in 2013³ did much to reintroduce her work to the art world. Both as an artist and as an individual her social and political ideals diverged increasingly from those of her mother, the suffragist Emmeline Pankhurst, and her sister Christabel, particularly over their neglect of the needs of working-class women. Sylvia Pankhurst was influenced early on by her father's friends, the artists and socialists Walter Crane and William Morris, and by the Pre-Raphaelites, an artistic movement originally full of social idealism. She won a free place at Manchester School of Art in 1899, a scholarship to the RCA in London and a travelling scholarship to Italy, where she was the only woman in the life class at the Accademia in Venice. Her feeling for social realism encouraged her out onto the street, where she made studies and paintings of people in everyday life.

Sylvia's studies in Venice were cut short when her mother became ill. She returned to London, using her rented room to hold a self-help life-drawing class for women and starting a campaign about the injustice of the proportion of scholarships to art school available to them. She persuaded Keir Hardie, then leader of the Labour Party, with whom she had secretly begun a serious intellectual and intimate relationship, to bring the issue up in the House of Commons, but with little success. (Two portrait sketches she did of Hardie were later donated to the National Portrait Gallery, although she was not happy with either of them.)

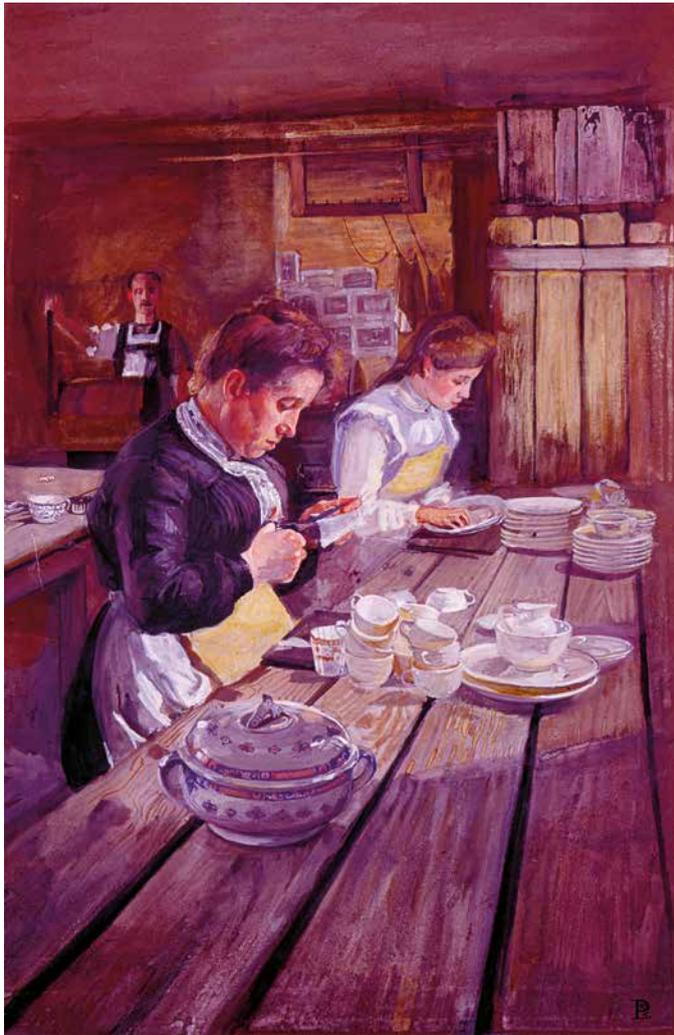
She chose to become the official artist and designer of the Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU) as new campaigns began in earnest in London, using the WSPU's symbolic colours of purple, white and green, representing dignity, purity and hope. Creating an immediately recognizable visual identity in this way was a relatively new concept, but her murals still had a foot in the nineteenth century: 6-metre (20-foot)-high canvases of women sowing grain and harvesting corn, featuring angels and doves, they had none of the formal dynamics characteristic of the revolutionary art being produced in Russia at the same time. Instead,

they related more closely to contemporaneous artistic trends in Germany, where Käthe Kollwitz was using similar symbolic imagery as a rallying cry against the working conditions faced by weavers. The content of her work was a riposte to the anti-suffrage portrayal of women as strident viragos who neglected their children, at a time when the WSPU was trying to gain more middle-class support. Her use of religious and agricultural imagery countered the argument that feminism was against the laws of nature and religion. Sylvia nonetheless struggled to find a balance in her work between the demands of aesthetics and politics, attempting to negotiate the unclear and contested line between art and propaganda.

Travelling across the country in 1907 for a project called Working Women in Britain, Sylvia made realistic paintings and pastels, horrified to see the conditions experienced by workers of both sexes in industry. Her art became her way of bearing witness, showing the monotony of the repetitive work done by women, from packing fish to stooking corn; enduring the heat of the mills or cold in the fields. By 1910, increasingly radical in her politics and associated with the Independent Labour Party (ILP), she became torn between her art and her political commitment, between social realism and allegory. Moreover, as an anti-capitalist she hated selling her work to rich patrons.

Imprisoned in 1913 as a result of her campaigning and subjected to being force-fed, Sylvia made sketches that were disseminated to the press on her release, exposing the harsh practices she had seen in jail. Much of the work in her studio was destroyed while she was in prison, suggesting it was regarded by the authorities as inflammatory; a century on, two of her paintings are included in the Parliamentary Art Collection.

Art and sexual politics were becoming increasingly intertwined during this period. In 1914 Mary Richardson, a Canadian artist living in Bloomsbury, slashed the Velázquez painting known as *The Rokeby Venus* (1647) with an axe she had smuggled into the National Gallery under the guise of doing some sketching. 'I have tried to destroy the picture of the most beautiful woman in mythological history as a protest against the Government for destroying Mrs Pankhurst'⁴ she subsequently wrote to the press, shouting at the police as she was led away: 'you can get another picture but you cannot get another life'. Richardson's act was a symbolic gesture of defiance against patriarchy, the seventeenth-century



Sylvia Pankhurst, *Old Fashioned Pottery: Transferring the Pattern onto the Biscuit*, 1907. Bodycolour. Hand-painting pottery was skilled work, but poorly paid.

picture of idealized female beauty serving as a symbol of male fantasy embodied in both the artist and contemporary male viewers. Unsurprisingly, copycat actions failed to get much public support, even from men who agreed with the suffrage campaign. *Blast*, the avant-garde journal edited by artist Wyndham Lewis, ran a patronizing open letter that urged protestors to ‘stick to what you understand...leave works of art alone’.⁵

Sylvia, a committed pacifist, was against attacks on either art or property. Once the war began she largely gave up her artistic career to pursue a ‘better world for humanity’.⁶ Much loved by the East End poor, she campaigned vigorously for the rights of working people, using her creative skills to set up a toy factory for unemployed women. Setting up a new nursery school she declared ‘if there were no legal marriage there would be no illegitimate children’.⁷ Towards the end of the war she began a thirty-year relationship with the Italian printer and typographer Silvio Corio, an anarchist who had been expelled from Europe and was as politically committed as she was. Charged with sedition in 1921, she quoted the artists William Morris and William Blake in her defence. She gave birth to her first child, Richard, at the age of forty-five, still without marrying, and became heavily involved in supporting Ethiopia (then Abyssinia) in its struggle against the encroachment of fascist Italy. She remained passionately engaged with the Ethiopian cause, eventually moving to live in Addis Ababa, taking her paints with her; she died there in 1960. In the 1950s Winsor & Newton planned to include her in their list of ‘Britain’s Most Distinguished Amateur Artists’ but she declined the honour. ‘The designation hardly applies to me’, she wrote, ‘who gave up her profession in the hope of becoming more useful and the idea does not appeal to me much...I would like to be remembered as a Citizen of the World.’⁸ Her example provokes a very topical discussion about where the responsibilities of artists lie.

Married Love, a study of female sexuality and desire written by British academic Marie Stopes, argued for equality in marriage. First published in London in 1918, it sold out its first printing within a fortnight but remained banned as obscene in the USA until 1931. As a young newlywed Stopes had been so ignorant about sex that she didn’t realize her marriage had never been consummated and she was determined to educate other young women. The writings of British physician and sexologist Havelock Ellis on homosexuality had been widely disseminated, but the vogue during this period for women dressing ‘mannishly’ was often as much about labelling oneself a new independent woman as it was about lesbianism, which in any case was not illegal. Rebecca West, the writer and suffragist, wrote a story for *Blast* about the hypocrisy of marriage, and journals such as *The Free Woman* criticized it as a form of legalized prostitution, some radical quarters denouncing it further as ‘legalized

breeding' dependent on an 'old morality'. West's son Anthony was born in 1914 out of wedlock after her affair with the novelist H. G. Wells.

A bohemian forerunner of the women artists included in this book was the painter Gwen John. Studying at the Slade in the 1890s and then in Paris with American painter Whistler, she had an intense affair with the sculptor Rodin, subsequently living her own independent life as a single woman in France. The unrelenting fecundity of her brother Augustus's entourage was one of the reasons she gave for her decision not to return to England. In her own words, Gwen had a 'passionate selfishness', which stood her in good stead, both in her life and in the pursuit of her artistic career.

A very different personality to emerge during this period was Nina Hamnett, one of the bohemian set who were as famous for being muses and models as artists and whose experimentation with personal freedoms often overshadowed their work. For a woman, being wild at this time often meant just being outside without a hat, smoking and wearing make-up, as the Café Royal set of women artists loved to do to shock the passers-by. For more sensationalist accounts of art history, Hamnett falls into a category usually occupied by male artists: promiscuous, often drunk, her career was ended by her tragic death in 1956 when she fell, by accident or design, from a window onto railings below.

That she was actually a very good painter is a detail in her biography that is often overlooked. Her portrait of Dolores Courtney reveals her as a serious artist, one who had seen and studied the post-impressionist exhibitions (1910 and 1912/13) of Roger Fry. Courtney was working as an artist at the Omega Workshops, London, between 1915 and 1917, where Hamnett was engaged in making and decorating fabrics, rugs, clothes, murals and furniture. Hamnett's sometime-husband, the Norwegian Roald Kristian, better known by his adoptive name of Edgar, was also at the studios, creating woodcuts that reveal a familiarity with the work of contemporary German artists like Franz Marc. From a Spanish family, Courtney was born in Russia but had studied in Paris; to the London of 1914 she brought knowledge of both French and Russian contemporary art before returning to Paris in 1920. The Omega Workshops were a melting pot of new ideas.

Unlike Sylvia Pankhurst, Hamnett, born in Wales, had a chequered family life, attending local art schools at a very early age, supporting



Dolores Courtney, *Le Samedi*, 1917. Oil on canvas. Fry liked his students to copy the Old Masters but Courtney chose to copy a Derain, whose work was very well thought of into the 1920s.

herself by modelling or giving tuition privately to individual pupils. Later she took over the classes previously taught by Walter Sickert at the Westminster School of Art. At twenty-one, new access to a small stipend allowed her a limited independence and she lived hand to mouth, cultivating an extraordinary circle of wealthy and aristocratic patrons who would bail her out on occasion, both with accommodation and with cast-off dresses that she wore with panache. She met Aleister Crowley in Paris and 'presented her virginity' to a young acolyte of his – 'previously ignorant' she 'didn't think much of it', except in terms of 'a sense of spiritual freedom and that something important had been accomplished'.⁹ Paris became her second home from before the outbreak of the First World War until 1926 and she was the best-known British woman painter in the city, although her paintings were too realist for French taste.

Her devil-may-care attitude endeared her to people of all social classes and her work revealed her genuine interest in her fellow human beings. The *joie de vivre* of her two memoirs *Laughing Torso* (1932) and

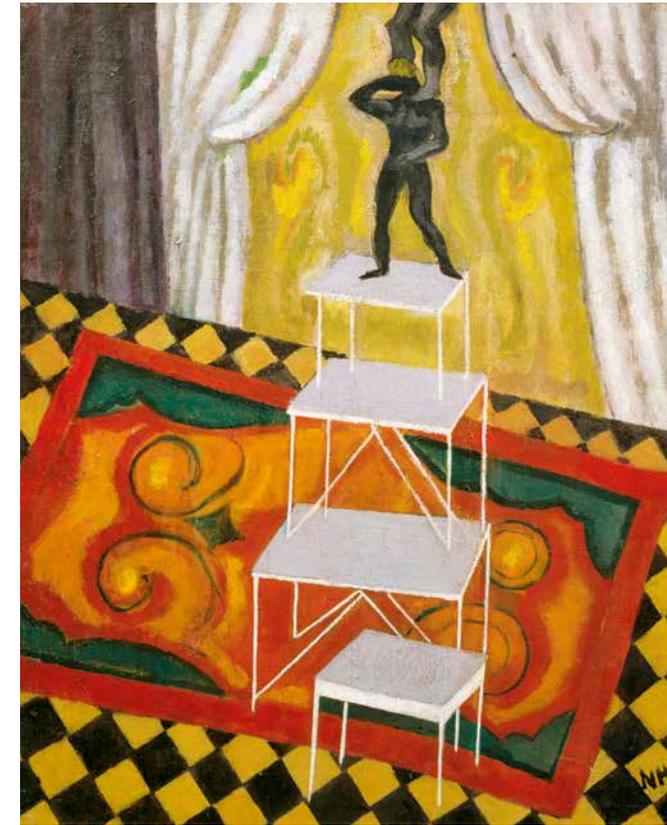
Is She a Lady? (1955) only makes her subsequent decline into poverty, squalor and alcoholism more tragic. Her ‘psychological portraits’ were an attempt to ‘represent accurately the spirit of the age’. Fred Etchells called her an ‘avid spider’ who ‘pounces on every vital trait of her sitters’.¹⁰ Roger Fry, her one-time lover, painted her and it is now suggested that, as a sort of unofficial ambassador between London and Paris in the 1910s and 1920s, she had some influence on his work. They both drew each other nude, but Hamnett would not have been easily able to exhibit her drawings of him at the time.

The title of Hamnett’s memoir *Laughing Torso* is borrowed from a small sculpture by French artist Henri Gaudier-Brzeska, made of her in Paris from a stolen fragment of marble from a mason’s yard. Before he tragically died in the First World War, Gaudier-Brzeska gave her some sound advice. ‘Don’t mind what people say to you,’ he told her, opposed as always to what he called the *sale bourgeois*, ‘find out what you have in yourself and do your best, that is the only hope in life.’ After she had posed for him in the nude for the sculpture he had immediately stripped off his own clothes and posed for her in return. She had escaped England and its small-mindedness.

In 1915, following her brief marriage to Edgar (entered into to help him stay in England), she became pregnant, but was so malnourished that her baby son, born two months premature, died soon after birth. She makes no mention of the baby in her memoirs. Monogamy, she declared, didn’t suit her. Sex, from which she apparently gained little satisfaction, was primarily a matter of companionship; bi-sexual, she was actually rather indifferent to grand passions. James Joyce called her ‘one of the few vital women he had ever met’, but for her the border between life and art became increasingly blurred.

One work in particular – *Acrobats*, dating from 1910 – could be seen as prophetic in its imagery of display and instability, but it is also glorious in its colour, its bravado and the dynamics of its composition. Hamnett shared a hotel room for a time with an acrobatic dancer from Anna Pavlova’s troupe, as well as two monkeys and a snake, recalling: ‘I found the circus people most charming and unpretentious...and very cosmopolitan.’¹¹

Close friendships with Fry, Sickert and fellow Welshman Augustus John should have ensured a continuing reputation for her early work.



Nina Hamnett, *Acrobats*, 1910. Oil on canvas.

Sickert reviewed her first solo exhibition, saying ‘she draws like a born sculptor...and paints like a born painter. Either gift is rare.’ Her extensive collection of press cuttings about her work was always important to her. On one early cutting she later pencilled: ‘It was a pity I had no one to back me in those days otherwise I might have been Dame Laura Hamnett.’

Laura Knight pursued her artistic career in a more dedicated and professional way than Nina Hamnett, but she incorporated her own life into her work as Hamnett did. Although not as overtly political as Sylvia Pankhurst, she fought her own battles with artistic institutions and societal prejudices. Another devotee of circus life, she quotes circus performer ‘Joe’ in her memoir *A Proper Circus Omie*: ‘Just look Laura at all those people who seem hardly able to put one foot in front of the

other as they trudge along,' he tells her. 'I am over fifty myself now, but I can't ever forget the time when I'd look at such a crowd and say to myself: You walk the ground – I walk the air.'¹² Of course, any high-wire performer runs the risk of coming crashing to the ground as Hamnett eventually did.

Knight is now chiefly remembered for her drawings of dancers, circus people and gypsies and for the painting *Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring*, an image of a young woman working in a munitions factory completed as a war artist in 1943. She remained firmly in the realist, figurative tradition; largely self-taught, she was born in 1877 and was therefore much older than many of the women included in this book, yet her early work is already much freer and fresher than most late-Victorian painting.

Her career was marked by many 'firsts'. She was the only female artist to be given war artist commissions in both world wars and in 1946, at the age of sixty-nine, the only British artist commissioned to cover the Nuremberg trials (see page 187). Exhibiting at the Royal Academy of Arts (RA) continuously from 1903 to 1970, she was the first woman to have a retrospective exhibition there in 1965 and she exhibited more pictures there than any other artist. When she became a Dame of the British Empire in 1929, at a time when such awards were seldom bestowed, it was recognition that through her success she had improved the status of women artists and was now a household name in her own right. Paradoxically, however, the fact she became the first woman Associate Member of the Royal Academy (ARA) in 1930, and a full Royal Academician in 1936, led to her later being seen as the epitome of a conservative academic painter, when she regarded herself, with some justification, as a modern realist. Her particular interest in what might be called ordinary working people, maintained throughout her life, was merely a different kind of modernism.

Her decision, as part of a hanging committee at the RA, to reject a painting by Wyndham Lewis – his controversial portrait of T. S. Eliot – led her to have a big falling out with the artist Augustus John, resulting in his resignation from the Academy while she stayed on. It was a disappointing episode from an artist who had always challenged authority herself, but is possibly an understandable instance of conformity in someone who had spent many years never knowing where her next

meal was coming from. She always stood up for her beliefs as a feminist, however. In a letter in response to the Master of Eton's comments about the lack of great women artists in the *Nottingham Evening Post* in 1930, she wrote that it was a 'lack of encouragement and opportunity, not ability' that denied women greatness.

Knight knew about Roger Fry and the Bloomsbury set, but she mistrusted the self-confidence of their class and background. Her interest in gypsies, shared by many artists of the period, reveals her to be an unselfconscious bohemian and egalitarian. Her personality allowed her to mix with anyone. Romany are the supreme anti-capitalists, their tradition dictating that all their worldly goods are burnt along with their caravans at their death. Rather than indulgence in a form of exoticism, Laura's many portraits of the Romany community were made with their full collaboration and approval. The relaxed poses of the circus performers she portrayed with respect showed that they too were comfortable in her company.

The idea of the wandering life has always been appealing and Knight's artwork was often about movement. From the start she liked to work from moving models, typically an informal group of figures on a windy beach. She was fascinated by dance, even taking dancing lessons herself with one of her favourite models, a Tiller Girl who set up a *barre* in her studio. Dancing was important across social classes in the early years of the twentieth century, from ordinary people enjoying themselves to new and avant-garde dance forms emerging in artistic circles. Isadora Duncan, famed for her free-flowing clothes and movements, was in London around 1900, while the Ballets Russes was touring Europe from 1909. Painting dancers and circus performers had to be done at great speed and from the beginning of her career Knight liked to paint directly onto canvas without preliminary drawing, a break with standard academic practice. Moving pictures in the cinema were also a new and dynamic influence; in 1884 the Lumière brothers had invented the cinematograph, their first 46-second film showing workers leaving factories at the end of the day. Over a thousand picture halls opened in London in the following decades, spreading to the provinces too, and cinema influenced artists of the vorticist and futurist movements.

Born in the Midlands into a modest working-class family, Laura had been a strong-willed, physically robust child, criticized at Nottingham

School of Art for being too vigorous and ‘un-feminine’; much later, the term used to describe her was ‘irrepressible’. Such women fulfilled the worst fears of anti-suffragists, who felt the natural order of things was being overturned. The art tuition she received was limited. At Nottingham School of Art she met star student Harold Knight and learnt much from his painstaking dedication. They decided to marry in 1903, after Laura sold her picture *Mother and Child* to the RA and Harold received a large and well-paid commission.

When she was only seventeen, Laura had been excited by an exhibition of the Newlyn, St Ives and Falmouth Artists in Nottingham in 1894. Artists’ colonies – like the Barbizon School in France and the Hague School in Holland – had been set up across Europe in the late nineteenth century, in which artists painted the lives of the rural poor in reaction to the academic vacuity of the art establishment of the time. The Knights visited Holland several times, where Laura also had the opportunity to see paintings by Vincent Van Gogh, but she didn’t understand the intensity of his vision. The couple moved to an artist colony in Staithes on the harsh North Yorkshire coast, where they could live cheaply; Laura took in private students to make ends meet and made studies of women and children in the fishing community. Laura Knight began exhibiting at the Leicester Galleries in London, before another move in 1907 to the livelier artistic community of Newlyn in Cornwall and then to nearby Lamorna Cove, where both the sparkling light on the sea and the bohemian freedoms on offer were more in tune with her personality.

Here Charles Mackie, a Scottish artist, urged her to stop being influenced by other people’s work and trust in her powers of observation and paint what she saw. Her palette lightened and working *en plein air* she documented picnics on the beach and by the sea on enormous canvases. Everyone admired her hard work and vitality, and increasing sales success gave her confidence. She soon overtook the academically trained Harold, who was constrained by his technical ability, capturing in her paintings the new spirit of the age. Without concerning herself with avant-garde experimentation she worked, as she put it, ‘straight from the subconscious’, and showed great aptitude for being in the moment in a very contemporary way. Her two core beliefs were confidence in the supremacy of the artist’s personal vision

and insistence on the interconnectedness of life and art. Her style was now set, changing little for the rest of her life and for the most part was uncontroversial. Two paintings, however, did cause heated debate in the early twentieth century.

Even in the free and easy Cornwall community the locals would not pose nude; artists’ models had to be brought down from London by those who could afford it, and even then there were sometimes complaints when the artists worked outside. *Daughters of the Sun*, exhibited at the RA in 1911, is seen as one of the first modern paintings to challenge assumptions about the female nude. ‘How holy is the human body when bare of other than sun,’¹³ wrote Laura. The painting is about fresh air on the skin and not supposed to be erotic in any way. The young women lounging about on the rocks are not even completely undressed but the attitude of the female figure in the foreground, looking back and inviting the viewer into the rest of the picture, was seen as a deliberate challenge to the ‘male gaze’. Most local critics liked and accepted it and the painting was displayed widely, but it caused controversy when it toured in exhibitions. Badly damaged during the First World War, Laura kept it face to the wall for years and it eventually rotted from mould.

1911, the year Laura exhibited *Daughters of the Sun*, was the same year Walter Sickert was exhibiting his Camden Town Murder Series in London, paintings that threw down their own gauntlet to challenge the whole academic concept of the nude; after the perverse Victorian idealizations of Academicians such as Lawrence Alma-Tadema and Lord Leighton, Sickert thought the whole concept of the nude had become an ‘obscene monster’ and degrading for everyone involved.¹⁴ He chose to show the stark reality of naked flesh in unconventional poses – not much ‘sun on bare skin’ on the bedsteads in his Camden interiors, but both he and Laura were breaking down the barriers between the naked and the nude. Laura drew nude men when she could find any happy to pose for her. There was a tramp she befriended who was perfectly uninhibited in posing for her on several occasions, but we don’t know what the other male artists at Lamorna would have felt about exposing themselves completely to her gaze, as Fry and Gaudier-Brzeska had done for Nina Hamnett.

Laura then made a much more problematic work, particularly in the eyes of the RA; although it was well received in Newlyn, London critics

thought it vulgar. Originally called *Self Portrait*, the painting depicted her standing at an easel on which is positioned a painting of her friend Ella Naper. Painted in the studio using mirrors, Laura is viewed from behind, as is the naked Ella, who is visible both in the flesh and in the portrait on the easel. This triple arrangement of artist, model and painted image has many classical antecedents as well as evoking Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* – soon to be attacked by Slasher Mary – but it was a step too far for the establishment. The suggestion that the artist *is the woman in the picture*, even when the painting's title was changed from *Self Portrait* to the bland and less specific *The Model*, meant it was rejected by the RA. Paula Modersohn-Becker had been painting nude self-portraits in Germany since the turn of the century but in London it was taboo. In *Ways of Seeing* John Berger famously claimed that 'men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at', but in this picture neither woman looks at the other, or at us, and the effect is unsettling. Painted and first exhibited in 1913, twenty-five years later *The Times* was still calling *The Model* 'regrettable'. It was eventually bought by the National Portrait Gallery in 1971.

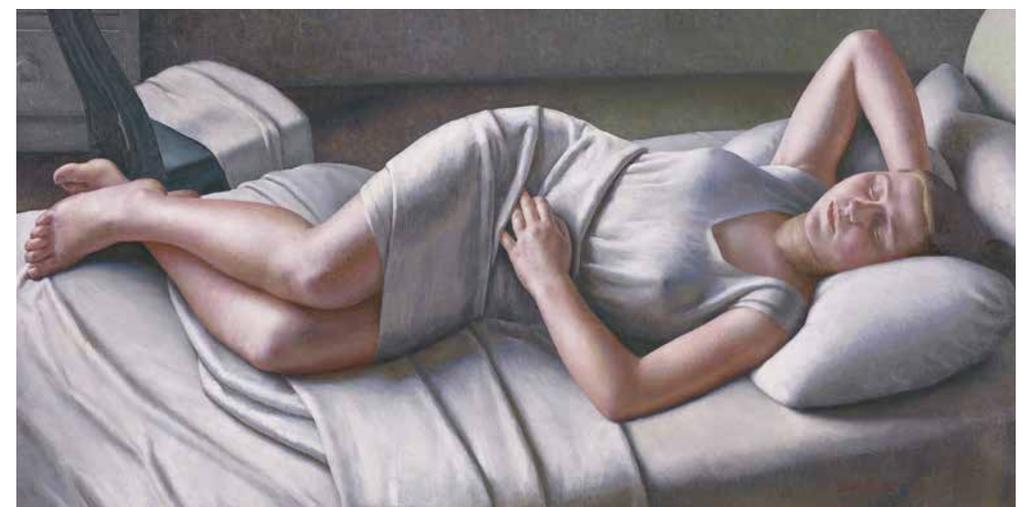
When in 1926, Laura's friend Dod Procter, who had like many female artists adopted a deliberately androgynous name, submitted a picture entitled *Morning* to the RA exhibition, it made *her* the most talked about artist in Britain. Not even a nude, it showed sixteen-year-old Cissie Barnes, a Cornish fisherman's daughter, lying on a bed in her nightdress with the sun shining across and delineating her form. Somehow the position of her hands and touchingly vulnerable feet and the way we are made to feel we are seeing into her dreams made viewers feel like unwitting voyeurs of an ordinary working-class girl. It caused an uproar.

Both the public and critics responded enthusiastically to its sensuous but sombre style and its evocation of the west coast light. Frank Rutter, art critic for *The Sunday Times*, wrote that *Morning* was 'a new vision of the human figure which amounts to the invention of a twentieth-century style in portraiture'. It was bought by a *Daily Mail* critic, who presented it to the nation in 1927 amid much publicity; voted Picture of the Year at the RA Summer Exhibition in 1927 it went on to be shown in New York at the beginning of a two-year tour before being hung in the Tate Gallery.

However, in 1929 another overtly sensuous painting by Procter – *Virginal* – once more resulted in salacious publicity, this time because it was *rejected* by the Academy. There was always a languorous sexuality in the way Procter posed her female models, whether clothed or unclothed. They are almost surreal, in the style of Paul Delvaux, although she actually claimed Picasso as an influence. 'You would have never suspected THAT influence would you? I digested him well,' she is reported as saying.¹⁵ Cissie Barnes, three years older now, also modelled for *Virginal*, posing standing naked holding a dove. Procter considered the painting one of her best works. It shows the influence of Renoir as well as Northern Renaissance painter Lucas Cranach the Elder, the sensually detailed softness of the dove contrasting with the cool, post-cubist monumentality of the female body, akin to the work of contemporaries like Meredith Frampton. The skin tones are remarkably painted but Procter's frank depiction of pubic hair and genitalia may have been too shocking for the Academy.

Virginal made Procter famous, even though it was rejected, and she did eventually become an Academician, but despite her moments of celebrity she did not maintain a reputation in the manner of Laura Knight. Like Laura, Dod was easy-going and adventurous; she enrolled at Stanhope Forbes School of Painting in Newlyn when she was fifteen,

Dod Procter, *Morning*, 1926. Oil on canvas. Painted in Newlyn, this picture took a local Cornish fisherman's daughter for its model.





Laura Knight working on *The Toilet Girl* in 1927. This unattributed photograph appeared in *The Sketch*, 16 November 1927.

later marrying a young *plein air* painter, Ernest Procter, who was four years her senior. They both went to Paris to further their studies. Ernest was a pacifist and a Quaker so worked during the war for the ambulance service in France, while Dod was left behind ill and depressed, with a small child and continual financial problems. After the war they both worked at the Omega Workshops, eventually being given a commission from a wealthy Chinese client to decorate a palace in Rangoon, before returning to Cornwall. Ernest died in 1935. Although she was sometimes a much better painter than Laura, her later work was less successful and she fell out of favour relatively quickly. Meanwhile, Laura became the grand old lady of the art world, exhibiting until her death aged ninety-two, even though her painting never transcended 'narrative' for those critics with an eye on the trajectory of modernism.

It is worth noting the way that women making sensual depictions of other women caused such a stir during this period. A newspaper image and article of 1930 shows Laura Knight working on a painting of the model Eileen Mayo, unerotically titled *The Toilet Girl*. Laura, with her plaited hair, photographed in a workmanlike overall, looks the professional she always was. The article celebrated 'Mrs Knight' becoming the second woman to become an ARA since 1769 when the RA was founded, the first being Annie Swynnerton in 1922, the two of them helping to break down some of the prejudices against women painters.

The press were never slow to spot an opportunity to whip up a 'scandal'. Marita Ross, another popular artist's model of the 1930s and 40s who had previously been a dancer, wrote gossipy and sometimes titillating items for the *Daily Express* among other publications, in which she exposed the less glamorous side of the profession. She wrote a poem about how artists' models were expected to be trim and fashionable and starve themselves like fashion models; the issue of unrealistic objectification is not in any way a new phenomenon. Models were often painters themselves. Eileen Mayo trained at the Slade and the Central School of Arts and Crafts in London; she always made it clear that she was an artist herself and that modelling was simply a way to pay the rent, pointing out in frequent press articles about her work that she had learnt a lot about painting from the artists she sat for. She modelled for both Procter and Knight, who were always supportive of her work and solicitous about her welfare: Mayo worked very long hours as a model, often going home too tired to start painting herself. Modern artists were beginning to shift the emphasis of life modelling away from being an academic exercise to one that explored the relationship between themselves and their models, either in abstract terms of the space between them or from a more psychological point of view. Letters in the Tate Archive between Procter, Knight and Mayo discuss how together they might explore the 'boundaries of erotic desire'.

The life class remained a fundamental basis of art education until the 1960s. Stylized figures by early avant-garde artists often showed few sexual characteristics but the subject remained dogged by controversy. Critics of Roger Fry's post-impressionist exhibitions declared Van Gogh a lunatic, claiming that his distortions of the body proved the New Art was insane. This was particularly distressing for Fry, whose talented



artist wife Helen Coombe developed paranoid schizophrenia and was hospitalized for life in 1910. Models were not always female, but there seemed less controversy about the men – although in Scotland, a Joan Eardley⁶ exhibition that included a nude painting of her friend Angus Neil completed in 1954 attracted ‘shock horror’ headlines, the newspaper helpfully printing her address as well, so that she had men turning up on her doorstep demanding to ‘model’. Even as late as this the vengeful reviewer felt uncomfortable with a lesbian artist painting a picture of a man looking like, well, a naked man and not the Apollo Belvedere.

The artist Cecil Collins broke some of the rules and taboos around the life class while teaching at the Central School of Arts and Crafts early in the 1960s, influenced by Laban and his theories of movement developed at Dartington Hall in Devon. Traditionally, the model in a life class maintained a static pose; watching someone move while naked was considered far too erotic. Even after 1960, models found Collins’ request that they mingle with the students, often in time to music, made them feel vulnerable; however, many women enjoyed his classes. Collins was a maverick in his approach; the realist artists William Coldstream and Euan Uglow, with their precise ‘dot-to-dot’ measuring system, maintained a more traditional approach in their teaching at the Slade. During the 1960s, new artistic preoccupations meant some London art schools lost faith in mandatory life-drawing classes altogether, believing they stifled creativity. With nudity no longer an issue, tutors went through the motions by setting up a conventional pose for their students, then disappearing to do something more interesting. Within a few years it was easy to forget the pioneering work done by so many women artists in the previous period in changing the ways the human body was portrayed.

Eileen Mayo, *The Turkish Bath*, c. 1927. Linocut. The work looks flagrantly seductive.