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2D Art: Portraits

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### **Gwen John a Methodical Portraitist**

Gwen John was born June 22<sup>nd</sup> 1876, in Tenby England. She is most recognized for her repetition of subjects, and her use of portraiture as a vehicle in which to experiment with color, tone, structure and form within a composition. Gwen John's art is an almost methodical study of an image she found compelling, and said to have served as a meditative practice for her, the way that prayer serves others. Her art went through different phases as she developed her own style and focus. She, like many other artists of this period (the era of Impressionists) did not work from paid models, but rather from friends and people who populated her environment, Gwen John's attitude toward most her sitters reflects a note made in Langdale's book *Gwen John*, "a model was of interest to Gwen John not as an individual but as 'an affair of volumes' a set of pictorial problem requiring a solution" (Langdale 88). Except for a series of paintings done for the nuns in a Meudon chapter of the *Soeurs de Charité Dominicaines de la Présentation de la Sainte Vierge de Tours*, Gwen John's art was done for herself. Over the course of her career, Gwen John is said to have produced about one hundred and fifty-eight known oil paintings, as well as many pencil sketches and watercolors.

Gwen John attended the Slade School of Fine Art in London from 1895-1898 where she studied figure drawing and the old masters. While there she won a certificate for her figure drawing. During the summer of 1898 Gwen John traveled to France to attend classes at James McNeill Whistler's *Académie Carmen*, "it was the last of her formal instruction, and her teacher was Whistler himself. 'I do not teach Art... I teach the scientific application of paints and brushes'" (Langdale 17). Whistler's instructions on painting and his ideas of order and discipline in regards to understanding tonal values and colors

influenced Gwen John throughout her entire career. Her painting, *Self-Portrait with a Red Blouse*<sup>1</sup>, show use of old master's techniques, and "have a new compositional simplicity possibly attributed to Whistler's teachings...it was at the Académie Carmen, Augustus [John] believed, that Gwen John 'acquired the methodicity which she was to develop to a point of elaboration undreamt of by her Master'" (21).



1. *Self-Portrait in a Red Blouse*

In *Self-Portrait in a Red Blouse*, Gwen John uses a dark and close tonal range, with subdued color to create an image that reference both Whistler and old masters' techniques, her own approach to portraiture is seen in her composition. Gwen John places herself in center of the painting, her face looking directly at the viewer; there is depth and detail to her face while in her clothing there is less detail but no less skill the figure as a whole dominates the painting and frame. Gwen John will continue to have her figure portrayed this way in nearly all her paintings-dominating the frame with acute attention paid to the face, it is her use of color, tonal values and application of the paint to the piece that varies throughout her career.

After returning to London in 1899, Gwen John embarks on a walking tour with her typist friend, Dorelia McNeill, toward Rome. They began their trip in the autumn of 1903, but "stopped in Toulouse so that Gwen John might paint... Although Gwen John referred to her Toulouse 'picture,' Ida John [Gwen John's sister-in-law] said there were five. The known paintings are all portraits of Dorelia...all are executed in rich dark tones with dramatic contrasts of light and shadow" (25) <sup>2</sup>.



2. *Dorelia in a Black Dress* (one of the portraits Gwen John did of Dorelia at the Toulouse)

It is important to note that “Gwen John’s portraits of this period are done in her own version of an ‘old master’ technique. On a canvas part-tinted with umber over a white priming, the picture is built up in states each of which is allowed to dry before the next application of paint. The paint is kept thin and fluid; and the vivacious drawing of detail with a fine sable is done in an idiom reminiscent of some of her drawings in pencil” (Taubman 25). This technique is similar to the one taught to as a ‘glazing technique, but instead of acrylics Gwen John used oils. The ‘Dorelia portraits’ also seem to follow Whistler’s teaching in the subdued use of color and a close tonal range.

After residing in Toulouse for a year, the women gave up their ideas of reaching Rome and returned to Paris, where Gwen John continued to live after Dorelia leaves her company, and supported herself by selling paintings and posing as a model for other artists, such as Rodin with whom she had an affair. It is not clear if Rodin had any artistic influence on Gwen John, but he did encourage her work, as did an American art collector named John Quinn, who contacted Gwen John in 1910. John Quinn was Gwen John’s most enthusiastic supporter, buying many of her paintings and showing them in various shows in the United States even providing Gwen John with an annual stipend. It is important to note here during the mid to late 1910’s Gwen John met many of the more recognized artists of her time, including Pablo Picasso, Georges Barque and Henri Matisse, she also exhibited almost annually at the New English Art Club (NEAC) starting in 1900 with her debut. Despite her being keenly aware of the art scene surrounding her in Paris, “Gwen John never attached herself to any school or movement but her written

notes and letters bear witness to a generous and open-minded delight in the work of other artists” (Taubman 30). That same year (1910), Gwen John employed Fenella Lovell (one of Rodin’s models) to do two portraits, called *Girl with Bare Shoulders* and *Nude Girl*<sup>3</sup>, these portraits “have a new simplicity and a grandeur of design that is a step towards the monumental images of later pictures, though lacking their detachment.” (Taubman 19).



3. *(Nude Girl)*

Gwen John’s relationship with Fenella Lovell, brings to attention her relationship with all her sitters, “It is possible that she herself was unaware of the extent to which emotional involvement with her subject was, at this stage in her career, a prerequisite of artistic inspiration” (Taubman 18). With Fenella Lovell, Gwen John’s response to her as a person was significantly more intense than with any other sitter she ever had before, she found “It is a great strain doing Fenella. It is a pretty face but she is *dreadful*” (Taubman 19). When Gwen John moved to Meudon around 1913 and is later that year received into the Catholic Church, she begins to paint with a more ‘detached’ approach, as her models are either nuns of the Dominican Sisters of Charity, or acquaintances within Meudon, “A new range of subject-matter of a kind which invited a different and more impersonal approach was to be opened up to her...she became friendly with some of the Dominican Sisters of Charity at Meudon...and sometime during 1913-14 she began to paint, at their request, a portrait of their founder Marie Poussepin” (Taubman 19). The portraits of Marie Poussepin, Taubman continues, were based off a number of small reproductions which were in turn based off a portrait. Doing these portraits without a live model, and transfer a small image on a the largest scale Gwen John had ever done before, “presented her with a subject whose pictorial possibilities she felt impelled to explore-and to exploit- with all her habitual seriousness...the reproduction ...of a

tiny monochromatic image called for broader handling of pigment which coincided with and reinforced the stylistic development already detectable...” (Taubman 19). In the series of portrait Gwen John did, not only of Marie Poussepin, but also of other nuns<sup>4</sup> within the convent show the beginnings of the style she was implement for the rest of her career. Gwen John uses the same almost muted color palette and close tones that Whistler taught, yet she is also starting to find her own style within the three-quarter length pose and patchy application of paint and color that reference’s Cezanne’s work.



4. *Soeur Marie Celine*

Within the mid 1910’s some Gwen John’s work shows her exploring the iconography used in portraiture to convey religious occurrences, more specifically, the Annunciation. In two<sup>5</sup> of her works on the subject Gwen John uses the most recognized iconographic symbols associated with the Annunciation in a way, if the viewer knows what to look for is easy to find; the long loose hair, a full length figure reading near a window, within a domestic setting.



5A. *A Lady Reading*



5B. *Girl Reading at the Window*

With her induction into the Catholic Church, Gwen John's art became a meditative practice, in the way that prayer is meditative. It is also important to note that while Gwen John was developing her individual approach to portraiture, she did show signs of being influenced by another artist, Cezanne. Gwen John's "Girl with Cat", and the many variations, show signs of drawing from the Impressionist style of painting and being influenced in particular by Cezanne, in the handling of paint and leaving parts of the canvas 'unfinished'.



6A. *Madame Cezanne, Paul Cezanne*



6B. *Girl Holding a Rose*

These works show her using brush strokes and patches of color to comprise her images in what could be called an Impressionist style- yet she cannot be considered an Impressionist. One of *Country Life's* articles which reviewed Gwen John's Chenil exhibition is quoted as saying "Gwen John cannot be called an Impressionist: there is far too much deliberation about her work, far too much monumental design- one has to use the word, though it hardly fits the scale of her pictures" as accounted in Langdale's book Gwen John. The 'monumental design' references Gwen John's greatest influence, James Mc Neill Whistler who taught that a painting should be almost completely designed before the brush touches the support, and was a methodical approach to painting and portraiture that Gwen John most diligently applied to her work. "In these powerful pictures, the monumental figure nearly fills the composition. The pose is simple and static, devoid of dramatic gesture or exaggerated expression. The model faces directly ahead, with level head and impassive gaze, arms resting close to the body, massive hands lying heavy in the lap. The body is a study in geometry. The disproportionally small oval head, sloping shoulders, tubular arms, waistless torso and spreading skirt make a slightly flattened pyramid...the background is as

strictly edited as the figure. Detail is suppressed, and the ...room is reduced to a geometric abstraction”(Langdale 92-93). Gwen John would continue to work until the mid 1920’s when failing eyesight and health prevented her from painting, she continued to think about art, and, “During the 1930’s she became increasingly interested in Cubism and found herself in particular sympathies with the theories of Andre Lhote. At the age of sixty-three (three years before her death), still pursuing the means to resolve what she called ‘problems of technique’, set herself a course of study and, though frequently unwell, attended Lhote’s famous classes” (Taubman 30).

Cecily Langdale says of Gwen John, “It would be a mistake to claim too much for her. She was not a major historical force, affecting those who followed; she neither set new problems nor discovered new solutions. Her art for the most part turns its face from the greater world. Choosing instead to explore shy corners of feeling. But in the riches of that ‘interior life’, in the beauty, integrity and fierce resolve of her work... lies that strange mixture of gift and will that can only be termed genius” (Langdale 123).

Gwen John’s portraiture is important because of how she used the genre of portraiture, within the three-quarter figure-dominated frames of Gwen John’s pictures lies her exploration into structure and form, her attention to tonal values and like dark colors, her lack of lines and high contrasts. Within her later work Gwen John made her viewers work for the image by making the subject and the background so alike in color palette that it takes active looking at the piece in order to find the subject. Gwen John is important as a portraitist because of how she worked within the conventions of portraiture to fulfill her own inquiries into painting.