

## Six Women Artists

**Laura Knight** (1877 – 1970) was among the most successful and popular painters in Britain. Her success in the male-dominated British art establishment paved the way for greater status and recognition for women artists. Born Laura Johnson she married fellow artist Harold Knight.

In 1929 she was created a Dame, and in 1936 became the first woman elected to full membership of the Royal Academy. Her large retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1965 was the first for a woman.



Laura Knight was particularly known for subverting the male perspective and adapting a radical modern approach to depicting women. She was also consistently inspired by painting marginalised individuals, often painting Gypsy communities and circus performers.

She was a painter who dismantled institutional gender barriers. She received unprecedented acceptance and success as a woman artist, though she was not exempt from criticism. In 1929, she became the first female artist to be appointed Dame of the British Empire. In the 1940s she was appointed war artist and in 1946, was invited by the War Artists Advisory Committee to paint the Nuremberg Trials, cementing her reputation as an important chronicler of history.

Her lifelong concern and interest in the plight of working individuals was probably due to her origins as a daughter of a single mother and amateur painter from Nottingham who taught part-time at the Nottingham School of Art and managed to enrol her daughter as a student in 1889 without paying fees. Knight's upbringing was characterised by strife and financial problems, setting her apart from many of the established artists she encountered.

This gave her an affinity for the bohemian and marginalised people whose lives she documented: ballet dancers, circus performers and communities of travellers.

**The Fishing Fleet**, (c. 1900) was created only a few years before her marriage to Harold Knight in 1903, who greatly influenced her work. The couple had moved to the artists' colony and fishing village, Staithes in North Yorkshire before eventually settling in Cornwall in 1908 among the influential Newlyn School of artists.

The overlapping of the figures, and the method of painting them in dark tones, barely distinguishable from the muddy shoreline they walk upon serves to unite them in their common purpose and fuse them to the ground from which they seem to made of.

In Staithes, Knight had depicted the inhabitants of the coastal community, capturing the poverty she encountered. These formative experiences would go on to shape Knight's career. She continuously returned to humble subject matters, despite earning lucrative commissions from members of the cosmopolitan elite and even the Royal Family.

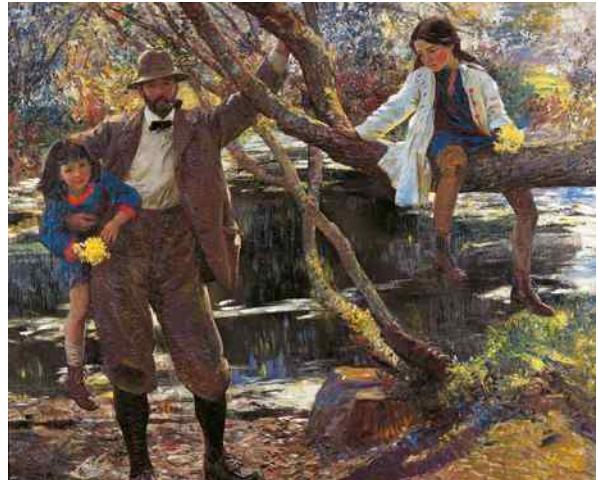
In her 1936 autobiography *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, she wrote: "Staithes was too big a subject for an immature student, but working there I developed a visual memory which has stood me in good stead ever since."





**The Cornish Coast** (1917)

In late 1907 the Knights moved to Cornwall, staying first in Newlyn, before moving to the nearby village of Lamorna. There, alongside Lamorna Birch and Alfred Munnings, they became central figures in the artists colony known as the Newlyn School.



Samuel John "Lamorna" Birch, (1869 – 1955) painted in oils and watercolours. At the suggestion of fellow artist Stanhope Forbes, Birch adopted the *soubriquet* "Lamorna" to distinguish himself from Lionel Birch, an artist who was also working in the area at that time. He was attracted to Cornwall by the Newlyn Group of artists but he ended up starting a second group based around his adopted home of Lamorna, known as the Lamorna colony. His two daughters Elizabeth Lamorna, 'Mornie' (1904–1990), and Joan Houghton (1909–1993). Both became painters.

Knight started the vast painting **Lamorna Birch and his Daughters** (215 x 261 cms) in 1913, painting in a wood in the Lamorna Valley but then kept the painting unfinished in her studio until finally completing it in 1934, the same year Birch was elected a full member of the Royal Academy.



As an art student Knight had not been permitted to directly paint nude models but, like all female art students in England at the time, was restricted to working from casts and copying existing drawings. Knight deeply resented this, and **Self Portrait with a Nude** (1913) is a clear challenge, and reaction, to those rules.

It was a first for a woman artist, showing herself painting her friend the artist Ella Naper. The painting is a complex, formal composition in a studio setting. Using mirrors, Knight painted herself and Naper as seen by someone entering the studio behind them both.

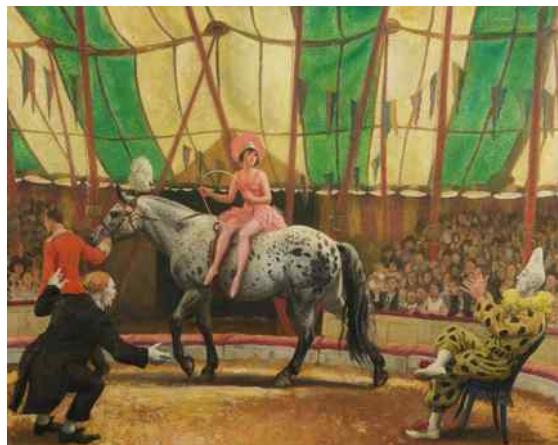
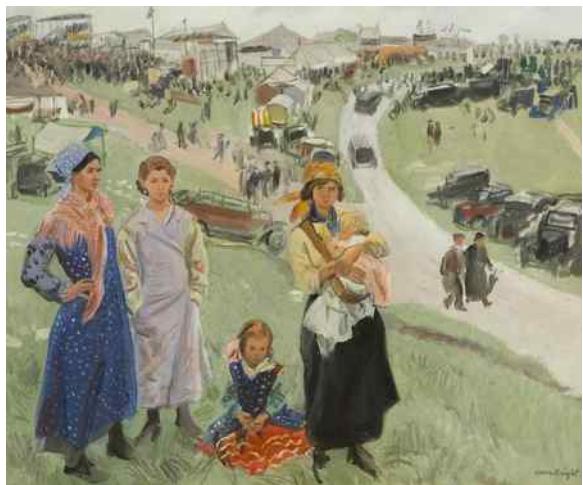
The painting was first shown in 1913 in Newlyn, and was well received by both the local press and other artists. Although the Royal Academy rejected the painting for exhibition, it was shown at the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers in London, as *The Model*. Critics objected to the impropriety of a female artist depicting herself alongside a female nude. Writing in

*The Telegraph*, art critic Claude Phillips called the painting "harmless" and "dull", "obviously an exercise" which "might quite appropriately have stayed in the artist's studio", but also said that it was "vulgar" and "repels". An article in *The Times* in 1914 called it "extremely clever", but another in 1939 criticised its "mistaken attempts at solidity" and called it "regrettable".

After Knight's death it was purchased by the National Portrait Gallery, which describes it as "a bravura statement about the ability of women to paint hitherto taboo subjects on a scale and with an intensity, that heralds changes". It is now considered both a key work in the story of female self-portraiture and as symbolic of wider female emancipation. In 2015 Simon Schama described the painting as a "masterpiece" and "incomparably, her greatest work, all at once conceptually complex, heroically independent, formally ingenious and lovingly sensual."

### **The Trick Act** 1930

Throughout 1929 and 1930 Laura Knight went on a tour of British towns with the combined Bertram Mills and Great Carmo's Circus. Painting within a working circus forced her to paint at great speed, as the performers rarely had much time to pose. Knight responded by painting directly onto the canvas without any preliminary drawing.



### **Epsom Downs** c1938

In the mid-1930s Laura Knight befriended and painted groups of Gypsies at the Epsom and Ascot racecourses. Rather than observing her subjects from an impersonal distance she immersed herself in their way of life. She frequently returned to the racecourses and painted from the back of an antique Rolls-Royce car, which was large enough to accommodate her easel. Often pairs of Gypsy women would pose at the open door of the Rolls-Royce, with the race-day crowds in the background.

From Epsom, she was invited to the Gypsy settlement at Iver in Buckinghamshire, which was normally closed to outsiders, visiting every day for several months.

These visits resulted in a series of portraits of great intensity. Two women, in particular, sat a number of times for Knight: Lilo Smith, the subject of *Old Gypsy Woman* (1938) and her daughter-in-law, Beulah.



These two young women, titled *Ascot Finery* (c. 1938), are dressed in their best clothes and would have made a striking contrast with that of the usual race-going public.

From her familiarity with the gypsy culture Knight has observed their informal poses and the uncertain wariness of their expressions, and depicted them with consummate skill.



In the later decades of her life and during the post-war era, Knight returned to her favourite subjects: the circus acrobats and the travelling, Romani communities – groups of people usually neglected and disenfranchised by the mainstream.

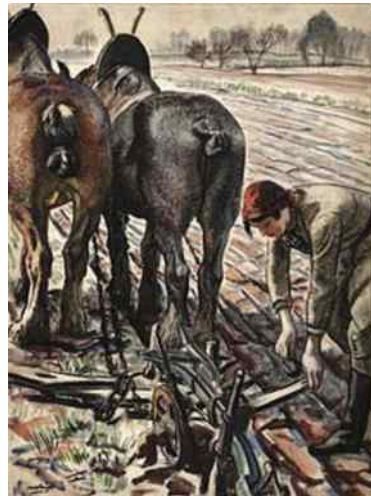
By the 1940s, the War Artists' Advisory Committee contracted Knight as an official war artist. In 1939, she had been commissioned to produce a recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army. From there, she would go on to complete around 17 paintings reflecting women's contributions to the war effort.

As preparation to produce a recruitment poster for the Women's Land Army Knight hired two Suffolk Punch horses and a plough from a farmer

and painted them outdoors in a cherry orchard on Averills' farm in Worcestershire. Her original design for the WLA poster was rejected for placing too much emphasis on the horses rather than the women working. A new design, with a single woman, was accepted.



She also designed posters for the Women's Auxiliary Air Force (WAAF), and the Electric Train Company to promote leisure travel on the London Under-ground.



The painting, ***Corporal J. D. M. Pearson, GC, WAAF*** (1940), shows Daphne Pearson, a recipient of the George Cross for saving the life of the pilot of a crashed bomber by dragging him from

the cockpit, then flinging herself across him when a bomb exploded. She then returned to the blazing aircraft to look for the radio operator, the only crew member left in the plane. He unfortunately hadn't survived.

The portrait, commissioned by the government, shows Daphne Pearson as a corporal, although she had been promoted to a commissioned officer shortly after the incident. Although Pearson, at Knight's insistence, sat for the portrait holding a rifle, the finished painting shows her holding a respirator. As WAAF personal were not allowed to carry arms on duty, Knight had to paint over the rifle.



***A Balloon Site, Coventry*** (1943) shows a team of women hoisting a barrage balloon into position with the partial ruins and the chimneys of industrial Coventry in the background surrounding the spire of Coventry Cathedral. In the foreground two groups work on launching the balloon. The group in the foreground—composed of three women and man—are under the leadership of Jean Brydon, a female sergeant. A second group are shown on the far side of the balloon. The War Artists Advisory Committee commissioned the work as a propaganda tool to recruit women for Balloon Command, and Knight's composition succeeds in making the work appear both heroic and glamorous.



In the autumn of 1942 the WAAC commissioned Knight to paint a portrait to bolster female recruitment to the ordnance factories, as the Ministry of Supply were concerned at the level of disaffection and absenteeism among women working in the factories.

***Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring*** (1943), one of the largest oil paintings in the entire WAAC collection, shows a woman doing what was traditionally a man's job, and helped to popularise a "new, active image of femininity". It was first shown on 30 April 1943 at the Royal Academy and the next day was reproduced in eight British newspapers. It also featured, along with Knight and Loftus, in a British Paramount News short film



shown in cinemas, and was reproduced in a poster version. The success of the painting led to further industrial commissions for Knight throughout the 1940s.

Loftus was a 21-year-old woman who had no prior experience of heavy machinery or the industrial workplace, but she became highly skilled in seven months, rather than the several years it normally took, in making the breech ring of a Bofors anti-aircraft gun. This was the most complex task at ROF Newport and any lack of precision in forming the breech ring could result in the gun being destroyed when fired; the task was normally assigned to a worker with up to nine years' experience. Women dominate the picture, and only one man is visible, in the background.



In the aftermath of the war Knight proposed to the War Artists' Advisory Committee the Nuremberg war crimes trial as a subject. The Committee agreed, and Knight went to Germany in January 1946 and spent three months observing the main trial from inside the courtroom. The result was the large oil painting, *The Nuremberg Trial*. This painting departs from the realism of her wartime paintings, in that, whilst apparently realistically depicting the Nazi war criminals sitting in the dock, the rear and side walls of the courtroom are missing, to reveal a ruined city, partially in flames.

Knight explained this choice of composition in a letter to the War Artists' Advisory Committee:

*In that ruined city death and destruction are ever present. They had to come into the picture; without them, it would not be the Nuremberg as it now is during the trial, when the death of millions and utter devastation are the sole topics of conversation wherever one goes— whatever one is doing*

The painting was coolly received at the subsequent Royal Academy Summer Exhibition, but was greatly praised by those who had witnessed the trials.

Hugely popular in Britain throughout her career, Laura Knight, working in a male-dominated art industry, paved the way for the women artists who followed in her footsteps. She championed voices for women and marginalised individuals. Her legacy in figurative and realist styles, as well as British Impressionism continues to inspire working artists today.

**Gertrude Harvey** (1879– 1966) (nee-Gertrude Bodinnar) was born in Cornwall and became an active member of the Newlyn School of artists and a regular exhibitor at the royal Academy. She was largely self taught, becoming interested in painting by modelling for students at the Forbes School of Painting in Newlyn, where she became fascinated by art and by the working methods of the artists. She modelled for Harold Harvey (whom she married), Harold and Laura Knight and others of the Newlyn School.



**Harold Harvey,**  
**Gertrude Harvey With a Parrot in the Artists House** (1916)

She became an accomplished artist in her own right, painting landscapes, still-lifes of flowers and made textile designs.

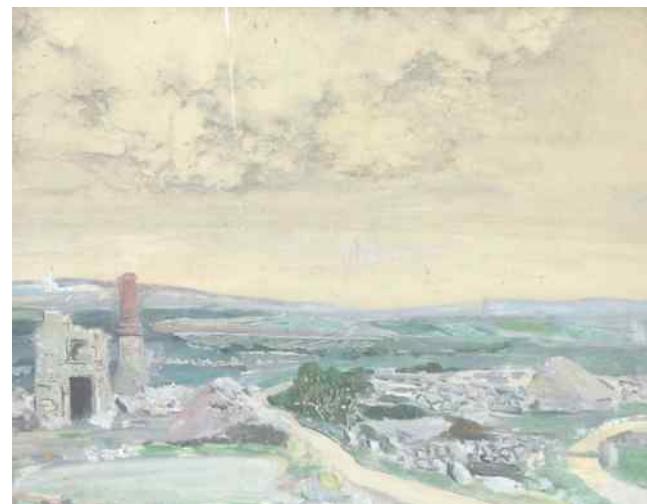
**Cornish Landscape with Cottages** is painted in subdued colours, depicting a moody, remote moorland under a grey sky with the threat of rain.

She paints in broad impressionist strokes with freely applied, assured brushwork, which this detail shows.



**Cornish Tin Mine** is painted in pale pastel colours. The landscape is confined to the bottom third of the picture, leaving a large area of expressive sky; imparting a sense of expansive space.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s she exhibited in various London galleries. One of her London exhibitions, with a catalogue introduction by George Bernard Shaw, was a sell-out. As well as taking part in joint exhibitions with her husband, notably at the Leicester Galleries in 1918 and 1920, She had twenty works selected for exhibition at the Royal Academy between 1930 and 1949, and from 1945 to 1949 was regular exhibitor with the St Ives Society of Artists.



**Farmhouse on a Mound** again takes a low viewpoint with a large expanse of sky. Heightened colours, opposing bright greens with the red of the soil create a sense of a warm sunny day.



In this **Landscape** a busy, animated sky, sweeping brushstrokes and smudges of contrasting colour create a vibrant scene with a sensation of spontaneity and immediacy; as if we are there feeling the sudden chill as the drifting clouds casts a passing shadow over the land. Patches of sunlight illuminate the distant hills.



Painted in broad and flowing brushstrokes on the reverse of the previous picture this **Landscape** presents another murky sky with purple blue hills, emphasising the wildness of the landscape and isolation of the lonely farmhouse.



This vigorously painted **River Landscape** presents a startling composition, contrasting horizontal bands of pale blues and creamy whites at the bottom of the picture with the stark verticals of the trees. Although having a spontaneous appearance it is a carefully considered composition. The main area of interest is contained within a narrow band at the bottom, while the left tree, which makes a band crossing from bottom to the top, cuts the picture area into two: a square and a long thin strip approximately the same width as the tree. The second tree occupies the central part of the square, leaning to the left and introducing a sense of movement and instability into an otherwise static image.



**Dusk** also takes a low viewpoint, typical of Harvey's landscapes. The simplicity of the arrangement, concentrating a few geometric shapes on the skyline formed by the looping forms of fields, footpaths and distant river, set against a soft, misty grey brown sky, creates an almost abstract design.



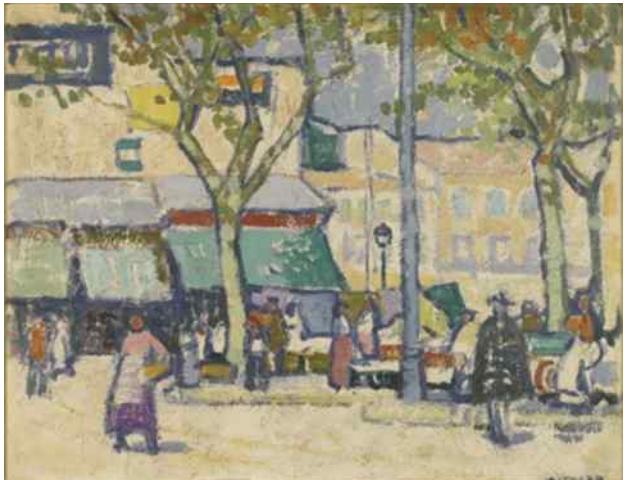
The detail of the buildings show how quickly, almost crudely, the paint is applied; but with complete confidence, conviction and mastery over materials.



**Jessica Dismorr** (1885 – 1939) was a painter and illustrator. She participated in almost all of the avant-garde groups active in London between 1912 and 1937 and was one of the few English painters of the 1930s to work in a completely abstract manner.

She studied art in London and Paris (under the cubist artist Jean Metzinger), and was in the circle around the Scottish Colourists, in 1912 exhibiting with John Duncan Fergusson and S.J. Peploe.

Portrait of Jessica Dismorr:  
detail from *The Vorticists  
at the Restaurant de la  
Tour Eiffel: Spring* (1915)  
by William Roberts

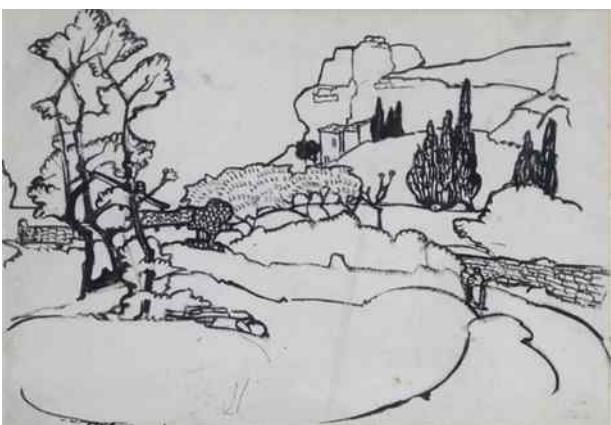


These early French studies of street scenes and markets, such as *Avignon* (c.1910–11), are heavily influenced by Fauvism, and her association with Fergusson and the Scottish Colourists, but are painted in her own, distinctive style.

During 1911, Dismorr contributed several illustrations to the avant-garde *Rhythm* magazine.

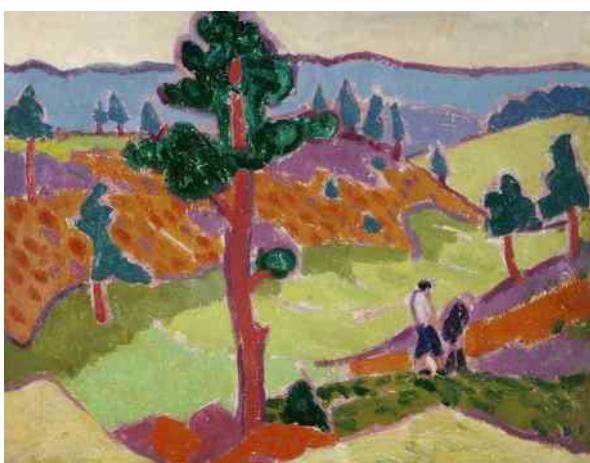


The emphasis on the structure of the painting and the cubistic style of the houses in *Les Baux, The Priest Enters His Church* (1911) derive from the influence of Cézanne on French painting of the early twentieth century.



The heavy outlining and emphasis on flat shapes and pattern of *Martigues Market 2* (1911) is comparable to the Cloisonnism of Emile Bernard and Gauguin.

From 1912 to 1914 Dismorr exhibited Fauvist influenced work at the Salon d'Automne in Paris, and with the Allied Artist's Association, to favourable reviews The Fauvist influence is said to have resulted from her studies at the Académie de la Palette.



Prior to joining the Vorticists in 1914 Dismorr made repeated trips to France where she created representational works with 'rich colour and flat decorative shapes'

The red trees, extreme simplification of the landscape, and raw energy of the *Landscape with Figures* (c.1911-12) is reminiscent of Maurice de Vlaminck's Fauvist works.

The strong and clearly defined shapes of *Italian Landscape* (c.1912), are interpreted as abstract symbols of trees, field and clouds rather than representational descriptions. The emphases on the conscious design and placement of the forms heralds the pure abstractions of her later paintings.



In *Landscape with Trees* (1911-12) the trees, fields, mountains and clouds are treated in the same overall manner, creating a flat, unified jig-saw composition.

Dismorr met Wyndham Lewis in 1913 and by 1914 had become a member of the Rebel Art Centre. She was a signatory to the Vorticist manifesto published in the first issue of their literary magazine, *Blast* in 1914, and also contributed illustrations and a written piece, *Monologue*, to the second issue in 1915. She was one of only two women members of the Vorticist movement. She shared the group's depiction of the dynamics of the machine and their desire to challenge the public's conservative views on art but little of her work from this period survives.

**Abstract Composition**, (c.1915) shows Dismorr's interest in arranging and rearranging forms suggestive of architectural fragments to create the effect of movement is. This parallels the concerns of the Vorticist movement, which sought to imagine the condition of the modern city as augmented by machines and new metropolitan infrastructures. Dismorr's prose poem '*London Notes*', evokes wartime architecture: 'towers of scaffolding draw their criss-cross pattern of bars upon the sky, a monstrous tartan'.



Around the time that she created *Abstract Composition* Dismorr contributed six pieces of writing titled 'Poems and Notes' and two illustrations, *Design* (1915) and *The Engine*, to the second and final issue of *Blast*.



Historian Miranda Hickman has argued that Vorticism appealed to Dismorr as it offered her "the free navigation of such city spaces, at this time marked masculine ... through the gestures, perspectives and qualities associated with its masculinity", and which "countered effects of 'Prettiness' that suggested feminine weakness and inferior artistry."

During World War 1 Dismorr served as a nurse in France and then as a bilingual field officer with the American Friends Service Committee. After the war Dismorr was at the centre of the London avant-garde world, acquainted with both T.S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, with her poems and illustrations being published in various publications. During 1919 several poems by Dismorr were published in the *Little Review*, but following a highly critical article she did not submit any more for publication until the 1930s. Early in 1920 Dismorr had a handful of paintings shown, in group shows.

Dismorr spent a period in the 1920s as a member of the prestigious Seven and Five Society during which time she produced representational works, including portraits, which one critic described as combining 'satisfying design with inventive liveliness' She also began a series of water colour paintings of music hall performers, a popular subject at the time.

## MATINEE

Jessie Dismorr

The Croisette trembles in the violent matutinal light; shapes quicken and pass; the day moves. My nerves spring to the task of quisitiveness.

The secret of my success is a knowledge of the limitedness of time. Economy is scientific: I understand the best outlay of intention. Within this crazy shell, an efficient machinery mints satisfactions. Your pity is a systematic mistake. I may yet grow arrogant on the wastage of other lives. The holes of my sack spill treasure. Who but I should be susceptible to the naked pressure of things? Between me and apprehension no passions draw their provoking dissimulative folds.

I have not clouded heaven with the incense of personal demand. Myself and the universe are two entities. Those unique terms admit the possibility of clean intercourse.

All liaisons smell of an inferior social grade; but alliance can dispense with fusion and touch.

I treat with respect the sparkling and gesticulating dust that confronts me: of it are compounded fruits and diamonds, superb adolescents, fine manners.

This pigment, disposed by the ultimate vibrations of force, paints the universe in a contemporary mode.

I am glad it is up-to-date and ephemeral; that I am to be diverted by a succession of fantasies.

The static cannot claim my approval. I live in the act of departure. Eternity is for those who can dispose of an amplitude of time.

Pattern is enough. I pray you, do not mention the soul.

Give me detail and the ardent ceremonial of commonplaces that means nothing.

Oh, the ennui of inconceivable space! My travelling spirit will taste too soon of emptiness.

I thrill to the microscopic. I plunder the close-packed cells and burrows of life.

The local has always the richness of brocade: it is worth while to explore the design.

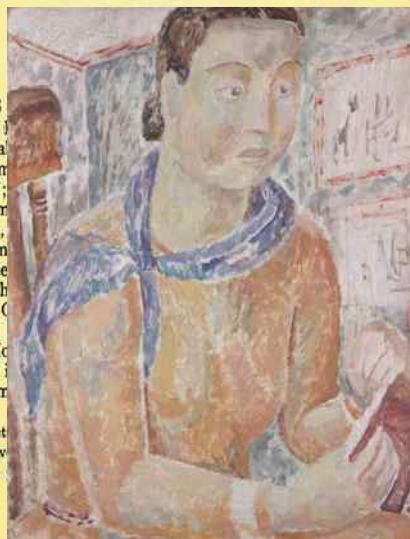
I spell happiness out of dots and dashes; a ray, a tone, the insignificance of a dangling leaf. Provided it has a factual existence the least atom will suffice my need.

But I cannot stomach shadows. It is certain that the physical round world would fit my mouth like a lolly-pop.

You ask: To what end this petty and ephemeral busines, this last push of human sensation?

Is one then a neophyte in philosophy, demanding reasons and results? I proclaim life to the end a piece of artistry, essentially idle and exquisite.

The trinkets stored within my coffin shall outlast my dust.



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**Self Portrait** (c.1929) is painted in soft, close toned colours in a *faux naïf* style, typical of the portraits she painted at this time. She has a haunted, melancholy expression. With the low viewpoint and closeup angle she seems crushed into the room, heightening the impression of an oppressed and quietly distraught personality; reflective of her mental problems at this time.

From 1920 until 1924 she appears to have had no settled home and travelled throughout Europe, spending time in Paris, the Alpes-Maritimes and in both London and Folkestone. She had a nervous breakdown in 1920 and received medical advice not to paint. Lewis suspected that it was her modern style that was causing the doctors concern, and wrote to her that "the best possible distraction for you would be to paint".



Both her mother and sister Blanche died in 1926 and Dismorr herself was ill during 1927. She recovered and between 1927 and 1934 exhibited some twenty-six figurative pieces with the London Group. In the early 1930s these included a series of portraits of poets.

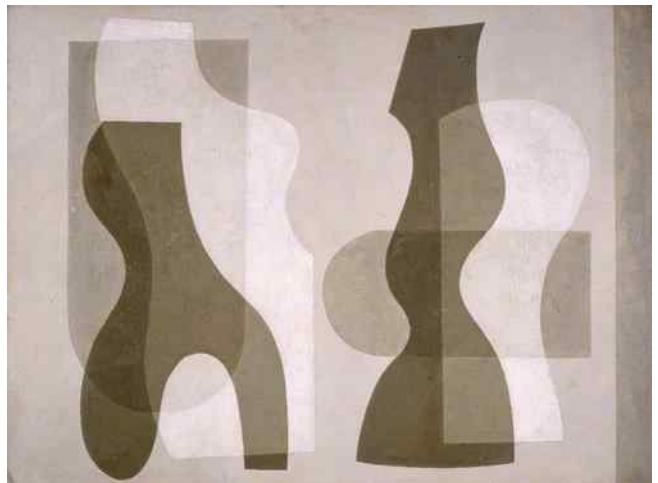
**Mother and Child** (c1932) is painted in subdued flesh tones contrasted with blue-green and orange.



The landscape of 1928 is painted in the muted tones and stylised forms typical of her work at this time.



Throughout her final years, Dismorr continued painting and exhibiting her work, which reintroduced her explorations of abstraction during the late 1930s. She exhibited with the Association Abstraction-Creation. **Related Forms** was contributed to *Axis* magazine in 1937. She joined the London Group and exhibited along with Charles Ginner and Barbara Hepworth.



She also exhibited with the Allied Artists Association, the Seven and five Society, along with Ivon Hitchens and Ben Nicholson and was the only female contributor to Group X. She showed abstract works at the 1937 anti-fascist Artists International Association exhibition. Poems and illustrations by Dismorr appeared in several avant-garde publications.

The finely balanced shapes of her late work *Related Forms* and *Superimposed Forms* (1937), reminiscent of paper dress patterns, have associations with the human form. Although painted in flat even tones of brown Superimposed Forms suggests the forms are floating in an undefined spacial depth by introducing an effect of transparency.

So far as is known, Jessica Dismorr's work was exclusively abstract from 1936 until her death. Her still-lifes of 1935 are transitional to abstraction. These and the earliest abstract works bear a strong relation to the shapes of vases, curtains and scrolls of music. Dismorr's late painting tended increasingly to the overlapping of forms. She variously prefixed the word 'Forms' in the titles of her works from 1936 by 'Related', 'Assembled,' 'Disassociated,' 'Stationary', 'Separated' and 'Superposed'.



Wyndham Lewis,  
*Portrait of Helen Saunders*

**Helen Saunders's** (1885 – 1963) work shifted from post-impressionism to draw on cubist influences between 1913 and 1914. She exhibited in the Twentieth Century Art exhibition at the Whitechapel Gallery in 1914, and was one of the first British artists to work in a nonfigurative style.

Reflecting later on her role in shaping the visual identity of Vorticism, she described its aims as "emphasising the fact that shapes and their relationships have a meaning of their own apart from any literary or representational overtones."



**Female Figures Imprisoned** (c.1913) from her pre-Vorticists days, shows Saunders's early interest in moving away from post-impressionism and a determination to seek a challenging and indisputably modern style. It appears to occupy a position uniting expressionism to abstraction.

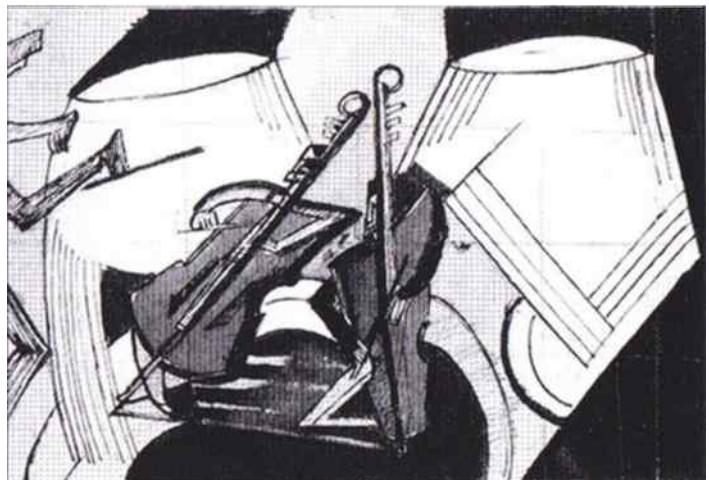


Angular shapes of *Portrait of a Woman* (c.1913–1914) drawn in pencil are used to outline the head and shoulders of a female figure. Watercolour washes have been applied to create shading on the left side of the face and neck, describing the head as a faceted geometric form in which abstract shapes created by shadow seem both to float free of the composition and to model the form. The sitter is the artist's friend Blanche Caudwell whom she had known since 1908; later in life they shared a flat from 1933 until Caudwell's death at the end of 1950, and Caudwell became Saunders' most frequent sitter. Saunders' faceted approach to the figure shows her exploring cubist ideas in a period when she was moving towards abstraction and away from post-impressionism and the circle of artists around Roger Fry

In April 1914 Saunders had joined the Rebel Art Centre, which Lewis founded after his break with Roger Fry (1866–1934) and his post-impressionist circle, and two of her works were selected for the important survey exhibition

**Cabaret** depicts a monstrous transformation of two musical instruments playing themselves, which may be inspired by Bosch's fantastic creatures.

In 1913, just before the Vorticist group was formed, Wyndham Lewis had stated: "All revolutionary painting today has in common the rigid reflections of steel and stone in the spirit of the artist; that desire for stability as though a machine were being built to fly or kill with ... [a] realization of the value of colour and form as such independently of what recognisable form it covers and encloses."



In 1962 Saunders described Vorticism as: "A group of very disparate artists each working out his [sic] own ideas under the aegis of the Group and its very able leader and publicist Wyndham Lewis."



Saunders's use of geometric elements to create a dynamic force in this drawing *Monochrome Abstract Composition* (c.1915) is characteristic of Vorticist aims to express the dynamism of the modern world through hard-edged imagery derived from the machine and the urban environment.

In *Vorticist Design* (c.1915) a series of angular upward pointing and enclosed forms in tones of red, yellow, white and blue are outlined in black on a bi-coloured back-ground of ochre and beige. The forms push upwards diagonally towards the upper right corner of the composition, where they are pierced by a single upright black and white triangular form with a yellow rhomboid form at its base. The overall diagonal trajectory of the composition is balanced by a sense of uncoiling

movement as the forms angle back on themselves.





*Vorticist Design* has a similar composition to *Study for 'Vorticist Composition in Black and White'* (c.1915), a monochrome drawing in which angular geometric black forms push upwards to the top right of the composition counterpointed by a smaller form at the bottom pushing upwards to the left. Parallel short vertical lines and dashes are used to shade areas of white between the thick black lines.

Saunders's use of geometric elements to create a dynamic force is characteristic of Vorticist aims to express the dynamism of the modern world through hard-edged imagery derived from the machine and the urban environment. In 1914 Lewis described how the art of the figure would be abstracted to "a simple black human bullet" capturing the geometry and explosive energy that characterised his own and Saunders's work.

Between 1915 and 1916 she produced a series of powerful Vorticist compositions which employed a distinctive interpretation of the dynamic geometric language of the movement in the combination of jagged diagonal forms with curved shapes and figurative elements, as seen in *Abstract Multi-coloured Design* in which a figure is mounted on a form that resembles a diagonally thrusting rocket.



The art historian Richard Cork described Saunders's Vorticist work as "a series of remarkable designs which show how much Vorticism enjoyed juxtaposing the most scalding colour oppositions to heighten the controlled structural dynamism of their forms", epitomised by *Vorticist Design (Man and Dog/Figures in Conflict)*



*Abstract Composition in Blue and Yellow* (c.1915), a drawing in ink and coloured pencil, suggests a crouching figure climbing up a steep bank.



#### *Untitled watercolour*

Painted in a post Vorticist style, and possibly a late work, this watercolour and coloured ink abstract work is suggestive of a landscape, in which the main, rounded forms seem to float in a clear limpid atmosphere.

**View of Port Isaac** 1(1930s) is a view of the harbour painted from the hillside above the village of Port Isaac on the north coast of Cornwall, where she had often spent holidays as a child. In this work she simplified the roofs of the houses to a series of geometric shapes which cluster at the base of the composition, while the coastline beyond and a road winding up to the top left are tilted upwards to create a vertical arrangement of forms. The art historian Brigid Peppin has described how, in Saunders' watercolours of this period, she used "a tilted and flattened perspective to produce a topographically ambiguous landscape where uncertain spatial relationships enhance the formal design without compromising a sense of place". She also notes how the narrow unpainted strips which Saunders often used in this period to outline the areas of wash reverse "graphic expectations of dark boundaries [and] served to dislocate illusion". Peppin argues that these 'modernist' affirmations of the picture surface show Saunders's continuing emphasis on contemporary developments in her later figurative work.

Saunders died of accidental coal gas poisoning at her home in Holborn, London, on 1 January 1963.



**Self Portrait (?)**

**Norman Garstin,  
Portrait of the Artist's Daughter**

Her paintings have a deceptive simplicity and painterly charm that belies the careful construction and colour harmonies.

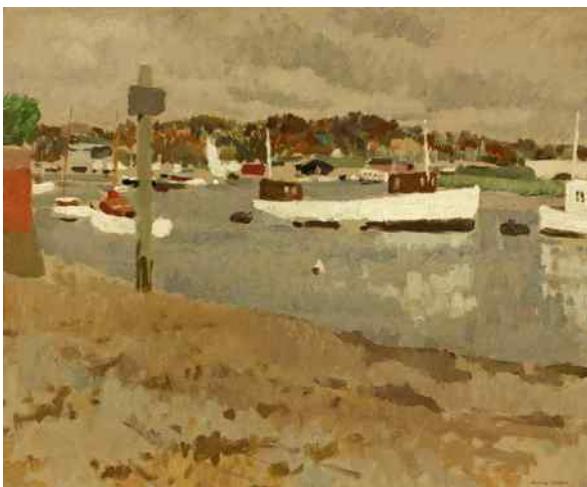
In the **Little Farm Place** we have a rural scene of buildings and fields under a cloudy grey sky with a dull wintery light and no sunshine to cast shadows. It is painted with some brighter notes of green and orange, but the predominant mood is of close toned greys, blues and ochres. A line running right across the painting through the hedgerow on the far side of the field and the eaves of the house, connecting the far distance to the middle-ground of the picture, acts as a structural scaffolding. The grey stone farmhouse wall (which is extended to its left by a lean-to) is placed off centre and square on to the picture plane, with its white framed windows forming upright counterpoints, 'hangs' from this line. The slate coloured rhomboid of the roof is echoed by a corrugated roof of a barn, cutting across the horizontal oblong of the house. From there the eye moves down onto a softened rhomboidal form of the haystack, its orange brown colour contrasting with the mossy green wall leading back into the picture and holding the pinky orange colours in the foreground in place. To the left a passageway in the painting is formed by

**Alethea Garstin** (1894–1978) was once dubbed "England's leading impressionist painter."

Garstin was born in Penzance, the daughter of painter Norman Garstin. She was trained as a painter by her father, and joined him on bicycling trips around France. She first exhibited a painting, "*The Chairmakers*", at the Royal Academy in 1912 (aged eighteen) and the president of the Royal Academy was so impressed that he asked to meet her. She displayed a much larger painting of a Market Place in Brittany, the following year.



the outbuilding on the edge of the picture and the lean-to opening up a space and inviting us to pass through to the field with two black and white Frisian cows, one disappearing behind the wall helps to thrust that part of the scene into the background and creating a sense of pictorial space.



A similar technique of painting in close, harmonising tones is employed in this **Harbour Scene**. Greys, ochres and browns are contrasted with the stark abstract whites of the boats. Most of the activity is concentrated in a narrow band in the top half of the picture, held in place by the larger areas of sand sea and sky. The diagonal of the line between sea and shore runs up to the left and into the picture. A red, ambiguous shape forms a buffer, holding the edge of the picture in. A vertical grey post cuts right across the central band, holding the busy shapes and detail down to the middle distance. Two brown rectangles, the cabins on the central boat, are evenly spaced with the post and the red shape on the left. A horizontal dash of deep maroon in the background is an echo of the grey signboard and the cabins.

So that what initially appears to be a simple, informal study, dashed off as an impression of what happened to be presented to the artist's eye, turns out to be a carefully considered design.

**The Rockery** presents an arch of rounded, cushion-like shapes, where rocks, shrubs and tree crowns reflect and echo each other in a dancing movement across the picture.



In **Cashelnagor, County Donegal** a high viewpoint affords a view over a rugged landscape fashioned from a broadly brushed ensemble shapes. The curve of the ochre coloured hill on the left is inverted alongside to create a deep decline, revealing a patch of blue water, echoed by a swath of green fields.

There is little or no aerial perspective in this painting, **Small Trader**; that is the distant houses are painted in the same tonal range and colours as those nearer to the viewer, nevertheless a sense of deep space is suggested by the lines of the curbs sweeping into the picture, and the contrast in size between the foreground subject, dramatically pushed to the left side, and the distant figures and background townscape. This creates a sense of spaciousness and airiness.





Garstin captures a street scene, titled **Road-up**, from a high viewpoint. As we saw in the Camden town paintings views from windows was a popular theme; and at the bottom right we see the gate posts of the house from which she painted the scene. As we look down on the hand cart and the foreshortened figures the slender, twisting line of the tree trunk weaving across the picture further distances the viewer from the events in the road below. The figure of the stark blue-black policeman cuts the line of the curb, creates distance, pinning down that area of the picture. He looks to his right, drawing attention to the horses and cart arrive in the corner of the picture.

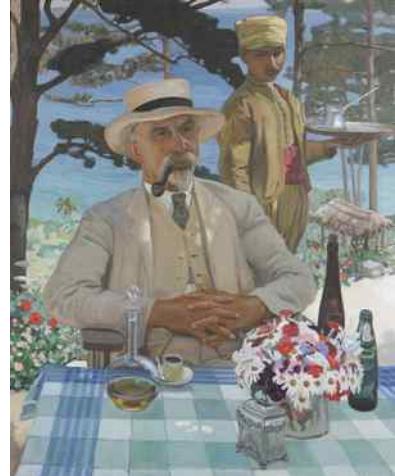
**The Fair at Penzance** is thickly painted in strokes which express detail and creates an atmosphere of fun and gaiety on a summer afternoon. A few dabs of expertly placed colour are enough to capture a pose and conjure up a convincing image of a figure with a personality full of life.



Titled **Harbour With Boats** a simple arrangement of a few shapes is sufficient to suggest this semi abstract scene of sailing boats at harbour. The slightly faded colour and scrubbed white brushyness creates an impression of almost blinding sunlight.

**The Reverend Charles Francis Bentall on Holiday in Morocco** (c. 1926) sets an informal portrait in a shady spot with the North African light casting patterns on his waistcoat. It demonstrates Garstin's proficiency in painting a more conventional subject. Flesh, the clothing, flowers, reflections in the silverware and wine in a glass carafe are all rendered with technical mastery. White is the most difficult colour to paint: the white of his jacket is distinct from the white of his hat, his beard and his shirt collar, but we read them all as white. Her composition is, also, far from conventional. The subject is seated behind a table with a distant view of a landscape and bay. Behind him the young waiter turns to glance at the Reverend Charles, bringing the viewer's attention back to the foreground and the figure,

thereby setting him midway between the two gazes: that of the waiter and ours.



**The Moroccan Bride** shows that her training had given her the techniques to paint in a more conventional manner when required.

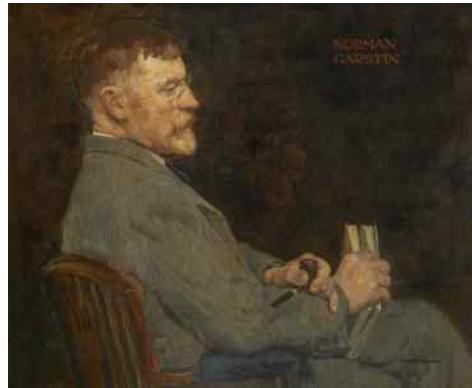
'The Moroccan Bride' was painted during her trip to the country in the 1920s. The North African light plays on the hems of her silken kaftan. She is adorned in heavy jewellery, with painted elaborate henna on her hands and with darkened downcast eyes as she ponders her future with a husband she had probably never met.



The impressionistic background, if we contrast its brightness against the subtlety of her flesh and the pale satin of her bridal gown, speaks of an understated modernity.

**Portrait of Norman Garstin** (c. 1925) is a sensitive portrait of her father, swiftly painted but with deep psychological insight.

Alethea Garstin's paintings, almost always on a small, intimate scale, are characterized by a lightness of touch and a freedom of execution. Her paintings have been aptly likened to the *intimiste* paintings of Edouard Vuillard by the artist Patrick Heron, who championed her work. Writing just before her death, Heron noted, "I say Vuillard in view of the basic means employed by Alethea throughout sixty years of painting small, delectable, ever-different pictures...and that basic means is the small, blunt-ended hog-hair brush which stippled, stroked, dragged and drew good old-fashioned oil paint, depositing it with an infinite variety of tonal colours upon tiny panels of wood...I have taken Vuillard as a peg – and if there are for some time to come those who think the comparison with such a master is simply a gratuitous gift to Alethea Garstin... - I shall have no reply, save only to invite contemplation of her output as prolonged and intent as that devoted to her by her smallish band of intense admirers."



**Self Portrait**

**Winifred Knights** (1899–1947) was much influenced in her style by the Italian Quattrocento and she was one of several British artists who participated in a revival of religious imagery in the 1920s, while retaining some elements of a modernist style

She began her formal training at the Slade School of Fine Art in 1915. Under the rigorous tuition of Frederick Brown and Henry Tonks, two of the most influential and forward looking teachers in the early twentieth century. She soon became an exacting draughtswoman, earning great admiration from her teachers and fellow students; in 1917 she won a first class certificate for a life-drawing.

Knights's work is deeply autobiographical. Incorporating themes of women's suffrage, workplace politics, war, marriage, motherhood and death, it straddles the gap between emancipation and subjugation experienced by many women during and after World War I. Combining influences from the Italian 15th century with a sharp-edged, surrealist modernism, Knights's paintings often depict a bold ideal of women's solidarity, in which the harmonious social and economic emancipation of women drives wider societal and industrial progress.

By the time war broke out, Knights was already an accomplished young artist with a bright career ahead of her. In spring 1916 she was working hard and reported optimistically to her family, "I am getting on nicely if you want to know and am improving rapidly (you may think I am suffering from swelled head but that is not so. I speak the truth when I say that there is a decided improvement in my drawing)." Knights was keenly aware of the conflict's effects – both in terms of the sheer loss of life and its associated anxieties, and of changing debates in the art world regarding approaches to war-related subjects – although she was not caught up in it in the same way that the war artists were. That said, in September 1916 some thirty-two bombs fell on Streatham, where she lived, and in 1918 Knights wrote, "I have got to this state that I can't let an aeroplane pass over my head without feeling terribly ill and shaky".

However, this auspicious start was interrupted by ill-health; she had been deeply traumatised after witnessing the explosion of a munitions factory in Silvertown in 1917, and took a year off from her studies to recuperate with cousins in rural Worcestershire. It was here that she consolidated her already deep attachment to the countryside and, influenced by the utopian writings of the socialist philosopher Edward Carpenter, began to produce ambitious figure compositions recording rural labour, and the social status of men and women.

**The Potato Harvest** (1918) shows a frieze of male and female workers in social and economic harmony on the land. The distant fields have been flattened into a patchwork quilt of contrasting colours, out of which rise strong verticals of haycocks and ladders. The workers – modelled by Knights and her cousins – are all wearing robust rural dress of the kind advocated by Aunt Millicent's friend, Edward Carpenter, as a way of resisting the endless consumerist churn of factory-produced fashion. Knights adopted this part-peasant, part-bohemian rig for the rest of her life, self-aware enough to know that it suited her lithe body and Modigliani facial features to perfection.



It was after the war, in 1919, that Knights truly came into her own at the Slade. In that year, having already established a reputation for quality and meticulousness in her work, she produced a relatively small, nearly square watercolour, **Leaving the Munitions Works**. This is a constructed cultural memory of a relatively typical scene of female labour in wartime: as Sacha Llewellyn has pointed out, by 1917 approximately eighty per cent of the weapons used by the British Army were produced by women. Knights's image positions the viewer gazing down onto a road between two low brick walls bordered by gas lamps. The cropped figures of a well-dressed working class couple front the scene beyond, which shows women munitions workers – each with a highly individual personality of her own and each in a standard-issue uniform – linking arms and conversing with one another. However still and serene the tone of the image may be in its execution and, on the surface at least, its mood, it is also an imagining of the kind of place at which the explosion took place that killed and injured so many at Silvertown in 1917. There is also the suggestion that leave-taking here is not only for this particular day, but one conducted en masse when women returned to the home and to their former means of earning a living, if any, after the war. In *Leaving the Munitions Works* the rhythm of houses and their gently gabled roofs, and the rolling hill in the distance that fills up the horizon almost entirely and enfolds the viewer within the immediate space of the skyless town, anticipate some of the compositional techniques that Knights would use months later when finalising her Rome Prize-winning painting *The Deluge*.

In 1919, with the country gripped by strikes, Winifred won the prestigious Summer Composition Prize at the Slade with **Mill Hands on Strike**, the title later being changed to **A Scene in a Village Street with Mill-hands Conversing** in order to make it more acceptable. It shows a female trade unionist in a red jacket addressing female workers at Roydon Mill, Essex. The trade unionist is an image of Millicent Murby, now an organiser of the Women's Trade Union and campaigner for equal pay for women, while Winifred appears in the painting listening intently to the arguments.



Paintings such as this, and *The Potato Harvest*, painted while she was in rural Worcestershire portray Knights's firm political convictions. Women and men work the land together, as equals, and figures such as her aunt Millicent Murby, treasurer of the Fabian Women's group and a campaigner for 'equal pay for equal work', feature repeatedly.



Although depicting an English landscape under a subdued English light, the formal arrangement and 'solidity' of the forms of *Landscape at Roydon, Essex* (1920) betrays Knight's studies of Fifteenth century Italian art, in particular Piero della Francesca.

Her paintings are characterised by an uncanny, almost surreal stillness – even when portraying scenes of movement. It is as if time has stopped still and she has carefully recorded the frozen moment.

**The Deluge** (1920-23), with its wide-angle view and raking diagonals, conflates the well-known biblical story with Knights's horror at the devastation of war. The canvas is crowded with 24 anguished figures who scrabble up a soon-to-be-flooded hill-side. With the painting Knights became the first woman in England to win the prestigious Scholarship in Decorative Painting awarded by the British School in Rome, fuelling her interest in Italian painting – particularly that of Piero della Francesca and Fra Angelico – as well as her interest in socialist politics. In its depiction of fleeing figures and barren landscape, it may have drawn upon Knights' first-hand experience of zeppelin raids.



The subject of the competition for the Rome Scholarship was set by the judges and had to measure 6 X 5 feet and completed in a period of eight weeks. Knights' depiction of the deluge went through several versions; however, as time ran out Knights was forced to simplify her composition with people fleeing the rising waters and escaping to higher ground, Noah's Ark can be seen in the distance to the right, simplified into three strips of grey. Knight's mother modelled for the central figure carrying a baby and her then partner Arnold Mason modelled the male figure beside her and the man scrambling up the hill. Knights portrayed herself as the figure to the centre right of the foreground. *The Deluge* was shown in the British Pavilion at the Paris Exhibition of 1925.



**Study of a Woman Standing** (1920): These two life studies demonstrate the meticulous clarity and dexterous observation to her draftsmanship, which, combined with the skilled technique of her painting grants them a very particular stillness.

Although many of her works have biblical themes they often have a deeply autobiographical element, informed by personal experience and the traumas that she felt in the war.

She used herself, friends and relatives as models, as in *Life Study, Eileen Knights* (1920) where her sister posed for the seated figure.



Through the influence of her aunt, Millicent Murby (Treasurer of the Fabian Women's Group), Knights sought themes and subjects through which she explored women's autonomy. Presenting herself as the central protagonist, and selecting models from her inner circle, she consistently rewrote and reinterpreted fairy tale and legend, biblical narrative and pagan mythology to create visual documents of her own lived experience.

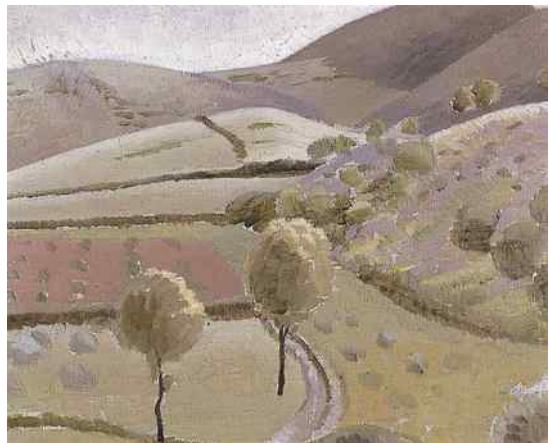


**Italian Landscape near Lago di Piediluco, Umbria, Italy** (c.1920-23) is painted in soft pastel shades

In their flattened perspective, contemplative moods and harmonious colour schemes, Knights' pictures convey her increasing admiration for the Early Renaissance painters, in particular Piero della Francesca, whose fresco cycles would provide inspiration and influence throughout her life.

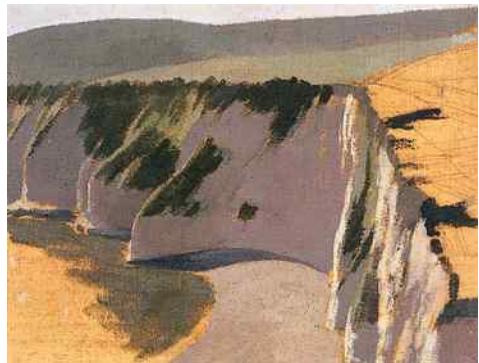
During the five years Knights spent in Italy, she found inspiration in the Roman Campagna and in the towns and villages of Tuscany and Umbria, as in *Italian Landscape* (1921). Her interest lay in the beauty of the living landscape and its inhabitants whom she depicted with intuitive understanding.

Her landscapes often have an uncanny, hallucinatory quality, as if some mythological or legendary event has just escaped our attention.



In this unfinished painting, **Cliffs at Beer, Devon** (1922), the landscape seems bathed in a sublime evening light, throwing the cliffs into purple shadow.

**A view to the east from the British School at Rome** (1921) is classically organised in bands across the picture. The severity of the formal garden and lake in the foreground is softened by gently curved lines as we move back into the picture. The horizontality of the landscape is counterbalanced by the vertical format of the picture and the vertical lines of the house and trees.



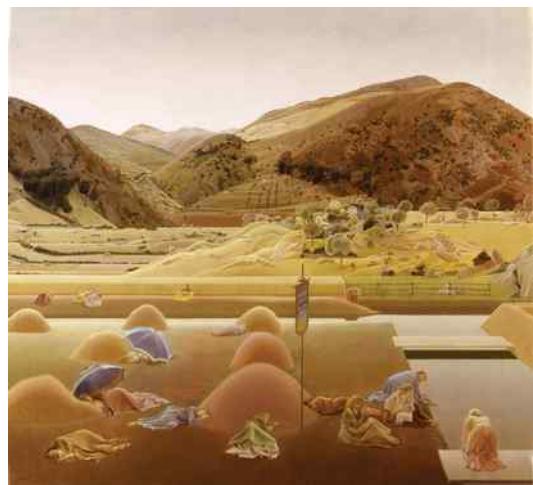
The conflict between female self-empowerment and subjugation was a recurrent theme of Knights' paintings, explored through women's relationship to the natural world, working communities, marriage, motherhood and bereavement. Working with a sincerity of purpose and a unique vision, she created an image of an ideal world.

**The Marriage at Cana** (1923) is Knights's personal retelling of the New Testament miracle in which Christ turns water into wine. Again, she places herself in the scene, this time at two guest tables, as well as concealed in the rear antechamber, as the bride to be. Elsewhere, her fiancé Arnold Mason sits with his arms defensively crossed, while beside him is Thomas Monnington, the Rome scholar whom Knights would soon marry. Each guest at the celebration appears muted and impassive, lost in thought. The work is animated by 11 gleaming slices of pink

watermelon, which sit nibbled on each guest's plate, infusing the occasion with a heavy air of temptation that perhaps suggests Knights's concerns around divided sexual loyalties and women's autonomy

"Tomorrow morning I am going right up into the mountains with a mule and a very beautiful cover & some Anticoli peasants to see a miracle which happens every year, at Valle Pietra, in the Abruzzi." (Letter from Knights to her Aunt, 1923). In 1924 she started work on *The Santissima Trinita* which she completed in 1930.

The subject of the painting relates to a pilgrimage that Winifred Knights made to the Sanctuary of the Santissima Trinità in Vallepietra. Inspired by Thomas Ashby, the Director of the British School at Rome, Knights became fascinated by the people and the landscape of the Lazio region, and especially by the village festivals. The painting records female peasants from Anticoli Corrado resting in the lower Aniene valley during the procession to the sanctuary. When the painting was shown, unfinished, at the *Art of the Empire* exhibition in 1927, the critic P. G. Konody considered it to be "the greatest attraction of the whole exhibition".



Knights' underlying mental health problems made her doubly vulnerable. The birth of a stillborn boy in 1928 reanimated the memory of losing a baby brother when she was fifteen. Even the birth of a healthy son, John, in 1934 was not enough to soothe her, and her mental anguish was renewed by the Second World War and put strain on the marriage. While she produced almost nothing, Monnington designed camouflage and then worked as an official war artist. The marriage broke down in 1946, hastened by Knights's emotional struggles, and in February the following year she collapsed with a brain tumour and died two days later aged only 48. Not a single obituary appeared in the newspapers. Had she lived she would have undoubtedly contributed much more to British art and be better known today.

The Tate Gallery website has a number of articles related to Winifred Knights's *The Deluge*:

<https://www.tate.org.uk/research/publications/in-focus/the-deluge>