

THE MUSE AS ARTIST/ THE ARTIST AS MUSE



Ben Elwes Fine Art
Leonora Carrington (1917-2011)
Stella Snead and Her Cat
This work was recently sold by Ben Elwes
Fine Art and is now on view at the Rhode
Island School of Design (RISD) Museum
(with kind permission of the RISD
Museum).

During Women's History Month we celebrate women often admired in portraits whose own roles as accomplished artists have generally been overlooked.

Seen purely as models to male artists, even those that inspired a whole body of work, many of these talented women soon became forgotten. They were not only painters themselves, but also writers, photographers, poets, sculptors, musicians and designers.

Even as recently as the 1980s, women artists weren't playing a big part in art history. This is at last changing and they are getting the attention they deserve. One of the defining moments was the essay "Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?" by American art historian Linda Nochlin, published in 1971. The exciting re-emergence into public consciousness of historic female painters is helping us engage more fully in judging and appreciating art for what it is, rather than by the gender or race of the artist.

Here, we offer just a tiny glimpse of women who were both muse and artist; there are still many waiting to come in to the light.

Pablo Picasso (1881-1973) was famous for his muses: Francoise Gilot (born 1921) established her own career as a painter after she met Picasso, while Dora Maar (1907-1997) was already part of the Surrealist movement when she and Picasso met in 1935. Maar worked as a photographer, painter and poet. A recent exhibition at the Tate Modern showed both her photography and paintings with Picasso's famous portrait of her. Sylvette David (born 1934) is famous as 'the girl with the ponytail'; Picasso created about 60 portraits of her. She later became a painter and ceramicist, working under her married name of Lydia Corbett.

Man Ray (1890-1976) also had several muses who were later recognised for their own work. Among them is Lee Miller (1907-1977) who sat for portraits; learning from Man Ray, she became a prolific photographer. The most famous photograph, of herself, staged with a colleague whilst working as a war photographer, was when she took a bath in Hitler's flat the day he committed suicide. After the war she suffered from PTSD and rarely worked in photography again. Miller's career was all but forgotten until her family discovered her archive after her death. The Imperial War Museum held an exhibition of her work in 2015.

Two women who became as famous, if not more so, than the men they modelled for: Georgia O'Keeffe (1887-1986) the modernist painter was discovered by, and was muse to, master photographer Alfred Stieglitz (1864-1946). He supported her financially to start with and she enjoyed a long and successful career. Some of her works now fetch the highest prices for a female artist. Frida Kahlo (1907-1954) and Diego Rivera (1886-1957) influenced each other's work and Kahlo featured in many of his paintings. While Rivera may have been the more celebrated artist in their lifetime, Kahlo has certainly surpassed him since her death.

Painter Camille Claudel (1864-1943) started her career as a student of Auguste Rodin (1840-1917). She became his lover as well as his muse, and continued to work as a sculptor after their break-up. While she produced some outstanding work, she destroyed much of it and was forgotten for several decades until finally she gained recognition for the originality and quality of her work.

Before she married his brother, Berthe Morisot (1841-1895) was painted by Édouard Manet (1832-1883) more often than any other of his models. She and Mary Cassatt were the only two female artists of the French Impressionists. Although respected by her peers, critics were less kind and she sold little in her lifetime. Only a century later was her talent recognised. Some of her work was shown recently as part of the Royal Academy exhibition 'Gauguin and the Impressionists'.

Victorine Meurent (1844-1927) was another Manet muse whom he spotted on the streets and she inspired him to change his style. She modelled for two of Manet's most controversial and influential paintings: *Le Déjeuner sur l'Herbe* and *Olympia*, which were quite scandalous at the time. Victorine also modelled for Degas and Alfred Stevens and in 1870 she started pursuing her own career as an artist, exhibiting regularly at the prestigious Paris Salon.

By the age of nine, Suzanne Valadon (1865-1938) had taught herself how to draw. At 15 she was a model for the likes of Renoir (who coincidentally didn't believe women should become painters),

Morisset and Toulouse-Lautrec. She began painting in earnest during her early 20s after giving birth to Maurice Utrillo; Degas became her mentor. In 1894 she was the first woman painter to exhibit at the Society of Beaux Arts in Paris.

Emilie Louise Flöge (1874-1952) was life companion to Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) until his death. A fashion designer widely misunderstood because she was far ahead of her time, Flöge often appears in his art, as do her ground-breaking designs: these are the iconic dresses we know so well from Klimt's paintings.

More often, very little of the muse's art works are known. Jean Hébuterne (1898-1920) was well-known as one of Modigliani's best-loved muses, who committed suicide less than 48 hours after he died, 8 months pregnant with their second child. Only 25 paintings by her are known to exist, but those show such promising talent which could have resulted in a brilliant career.

Marian Collier (1859-1887) is another sad example of how women were not taken seriously as artists, although she trained at the Slade and received critical acclaim at exhibitions. She was married to the painter John Collier (1850-1934) who depicted her on occasions, but an obituary only said "We are very sorry to hear of the death of Mrs John Collier, the wife of the able portrait painter, and herself an amateur artist of promise."

Our London Art Week dealers show here some fascinating portraits of women artists as well as works by artists who were also well-known muses...



Carlo Virgillio and C.
Gaspare Landi (1756-1830)
Bianca Milesi c. 1811-1814
This work has been sold to the Uffizi
Galleries

Bianca Milesi (1790-1849) was born into a well-to-do entrepreneurial family from Bergamo, spending much time in Milan. She was a painter, writer and patriot. Educated in a convent as was traditional for upper-class young ladies, she desired greater learning, taking a particular interest in the figures of Enlightenment and Italian poets before embracing painting as well. Part of a group of writers and artists in Milan, in 1820 she moved to Rome to dedicate herself as a professional artist and set up an atelier. Milesi knew Antonio Canova and the German painter Sophie Reinhard, and through them, Giuseppe Tambroni, who was then setting up the Accademia d'Italia. After 1815, Milesi gradually abandoned painting in favour of writing, publishing biographies of Sappho and Gaetana Agnesi. She also focused on her political passions cultivated in her literary salon and in the secret revolutionary society "giardinieri della carboneria". Later, via Switzerland, France and England, she settled in Genoa, frequented liberal circles and married the doctor Charles Mojon. Moving to Paris, Milesi nurtured an interest for children's educational literature and conducted

epistolary relationships with eminent intellectuals. The portrait here conveys the qualities that made Milesi famous: her beauty; the social amiability of her character, as well as the vitality of her many intellectual talents that caused her to become a symbol of self-determination and female emancipation.

Fanny Tedeschi (1879 - 1927) was a published poetess, and the lover and muse of the avant-garde Trieste painter, Gino Parin (1876 - 1944). Fanny was the daughter of a Hungarian-born official of the Adriatic Meeting of Sicurtà. She grew up surrounded by art; her family were prominent supporters of the city's artistic community. During the city's Carnival, she staged a fictitious "Musei Trieste" at the headquarters of the Circolo Artistico at the Portici di Chiozza, and attended the Trieste Artistic Circle. Parin made a huge body of work with Tedeschi as the subject, attesting to the intensity of their relationship tragically cut short due to her death in 1927. This painting, dated around 1926, was made at the height of their relationship and a year before she died. It is without doubt a tour de force and one of Parin's defining masterpieces, representing one of his finest and perhaps his last great portrait of his preeminent muse.



Lullo Pampoulides
Federico Guglielmo Jehuda Pollack, known as Gino
Parin (Trieste, 1876 - Bergen-Belsen, 1944)
The poetess Fanny Tedeschi in purple and black c. 1926

Gwen John (1876-1939) was the elder sister of Augustus Edwin John. She studied at the Slade School of Fine Art from 1895 to 1898 under Henry Tonks, a staunch advocate of the importance of a thorough grounding in the art of drawing. In 1898 she travelled to Paris and studied at the Académie Carmen under James Abbott McNeill Whistler (whose teaching concentrated on painting techniques). She returned to England in 1899 but finally settled in France once again, in 1904. Initially based in Montparnasse, she supported herself by working as an artist's model for English and American women painters, and for Auguste Rodin, who became her lover. In 1914 she moved to the Paris suburb of Meudon, where Rodin had

established a studio and 'held court' at the Villa des Brillants. In 1913 she followed Rodin's long-time lover Camille Claudel and converted to Catholicism. She remained in Meudon, and the nuns of the town's Dominican convent were among her sitters. On the eve of war in September 1939, at the age of 63, Gwen travelled to the French channel port of Dieppe, carrying only an official copy of her will and instructions for her burial. She collapsed and died in the town's public hospital on 18 September.



Piano Nobile
Gwen John (1876-1939)
Sleeping Nun, c. 1916-18

Stamped lower right 'Gwen John' (estate stamp)

In recent decades, increasing critical and popular appreciation of her work has gone some way towards realising Augustus John's prediction that he would ultimately be remembered as 'Gwen John's brother'.



Philip Mould
Augustus John
Iris Tree c.1920

Iris Tree (1897-1968) rivalled Augustus John in her disregard for social convention. A poet, a playwright and eccentric bohemian, Iris Tree, with her non-judgemental approach and sexual fluidity, raised eyebrows and forced others to lower their guard. Her life, in many senses, prefigured that of the modern-day liberated woman.

She was the youngest of three daughters of the actor-impresario Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree (1852-1917) and grew up surrounded by actors and artists. By the age of eleven she had sat for a portrait by William Nicholson (1872-1949); this was to be the first of many likenesses of Tree that were produced over the course of her lifetime by artists ranging from Vanessa Bell (1879-1961) to Man Ray (1890-1976).

Like Augustus John, they were drawn to Tree for her vivacious personality and striking appearance. She even had a cameo role in *La Dolce Vita*, Federico Fellini's (1945-1992) cult film of 1960.

In 1913 Tree attended the Slade School of Art where she developed a multi-disciplinary practice in fine art,

playwriting and poetry - her greatest accomplishment was as a poet. In the same year that this portrait was painted, Aldous Huxley (1894-1963) wrote of her 'genuine lyrical power ... already rich in achievement and richer in its future promise'. Her poetic voice revelled in her free-spirited lifestyle.

Stella Snead (1910-2006) was a British painter and photographer, and a lifelong friend of Leonora Carrington. The two women met in London in the autumn of 1936 as young students at the Fine Art Academy of the French painter Amédée Ozenfant who founded the Purist movement. While Carrington left after a year to live with Max Ernst (1891-1976) in France, Snead continued to study with Ozenfant, following him to New York in 1939. Here she reunited with Carrington through a chance meeting on the subway in July, 1941. Through Snead, Carrington re-connected with André Breton (1896-1966) and the Surrealists, most of whom were also exiled from wartime Europe. It is during this time that Carrington painted the portrait of Stella with her cat. As the inscription on the stretcher of this work implies 'Leonora's of me', there was probably an exchange of portraits between the two friends.

Snead spent the rest of the 1940s dividing her time between California, New Mexico and London, painting and exhibiting often until 1950 when a terrible break-up initiated a long period of depression. This upheaval caused Snead to shift her artistic interests and many of her paintings were lost at this time. In 1952, she travelled to India where she took up photography. Her dream-like Surrealist images and collages were used as illustrations for many books, and served as her main creative output. In 1987, she began painting again and decided to recreate some of her lost works from old black and white photographs. Throughout all this, Snead and Carrington remained friends, visiting each other in Mexico and other places. Snead began exhibiting again in 1999, and died in New York in 2006 at the age of 96.



Laocoon Gallery
Elica Balla Self-portrait, 1940

Elica Balla (1914 - 1993) was born in Rome in 1904. She led a sheltered life, beside her father, the famous futurist artist Giacomo Balla (Turin 1871 - Rome 1958). Instead of going to school, she was taught at home by private tutors and from a very young age was made, along with her sister Luce, to translate their father's works into tapestries while also sitting for several of his paintings. During the war, she devoted herself to painting outside in nature, as well as creating intimate portraits of herself and her family. She participated in some futurist exhibitions in Venice, Milan and Trieste, but aside from this her life was devoted to perpetuating her father's fame. She died in Rome in 1994.

Artemisia Gentileschi is the perfect example of a woman artist who was a successful professional painter in 17th-century Europe, at a time when women artists were not easily accepted. She was considered to be exceptional and Artemisia was very aware of the fact that she had to be 'better' than her male competitors. To a

Sicilian patron she is known to have said: "I will show Your Illustrious Lordship what a woman can do". She was a feminist before the term had been invented, but like many of her male contemporaries she was forgotten for centuries. It is only in this century that she has been given the attention she deserves, as the recent exhibition at the National Gallery proved. (Watch a recording of the [London Art Week talk in October 2020 about Artemisia Gentileschi](#) and Angelika Kauffman).

The re-discovery and re-attribution of works by women artists currently underway certainly promises some excitement in the future of art history. There are many female artists missing in this article, but we are aiming to bring you more features on this subject in future. You may be interested in some of the articles we have already written on women artists as well as the talks held on this subject which you can also access on our news & events page.

If you would like to find more women artists we can recommend the following Instagrams accounts:@

rediscovering_women_artists

@thegreatwomenartists

@womenartists_uk

@theearthstory

@artherstorynotes

@womeninthearts

The latest book on women artist has just been published and you can read the Literary Review's write-up on it here:

<https://literaryreview.co.uk/the-female-gaze>