

LET HER PAINT
Ten Women Painters
in Southampton City Art Gallery



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Written by Gill Hedley



Published by the
Directorate of Leisure, Tourism and Amenities, 1988

Note

This version has been scanned in July 2013. The general layout has changed and the page numbers with it. There may be errors where the scanning has not picked up the text correctly. The front cover is in colour but all the other images were printed in black and white. As published, the booklet had an attractive squarish shape and each artist had a double-page spread with the image on the right.

Foreword

In determining the subject matter for this booklet, Gill Hedley reflected Southampton's, and her own, approach to the displays of the collection in the Gallery. Visitors are offered the opportunity to make comparisons and contrasts between objects rather than to receive a potted art history, school by school. By presenting the unexpected, one hopes to encourage some contemplation of the artists' ideas and intentions. It is part of a general attempt to make the collections accessible, which includes the provision of quizzes, information, talks, tours and participators activities.

Elizabeth Goodall
Assistant Curator

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The title "Let her paint" is deliberately challenging. It is taken from one of Hamlet's speeches and refers not to oil paint but to makeup. It is used here partly to catch the eye and interest but also to emphasise the way in which, over the last four hundred years, women artists have been "allowed" to paint. For some women, this might have been in the shadow, studio or workshop of a husband, father or brother. Other women artists were encouraged only to acquire artistic skills in an entirely amateur fashion and only as a social accomplishment. In this way, it is not far removed from the ability to apply makeup skilfully.

The ten women artists, chosen from many represented in the collection of Southampton City Art Gallery, illustrate different kinds of success and failure in the male art world. They have been selected partly because of the quality of their work and partly because they are able to stand as examples of certain types of "woman artist".

The artists are discussed chronologically and it is interesting to note that the most successful of them, in career terms, is the earliest in date: Sofonisba Anguiscola. However, with the exception of Eileen Agar and Ithell Colquhoun (who first came to prominence in the 1930's) contemporary artists have not been included although Kim Lim, Gillian Ayres, Maggi Hambling, Kate Blacker and Lisa Milroy all have works in the gallery's collection. Although the fact of being women is inevitably important in their work, their biographical details are not vital to an understanding of it. The purpose of this catalogue is to summarise the lives of women painters and to compare their careers with those of their male contemporaries.

We can only speculate, fruitlessly, whether any of the work in question would have been of another quality or content had social constraints been different. That is in part the answer to the tedious question "Why are there no great women artists?" The second part of the answer is: wait and see. This applies to artists of either sex. "Greatness" is a judgement passed on artists by time, with a little help from the art market. Today, there are many women artists with international reputations and the future will see the success of the best, regardless of gender.

Fashion also plays its part and women artists are now, per se. in vogue. This is due to many factors as well as simple merit. Women are consumers of art and, in increasing numbers, they are art historians, curators, exhibition organisers and critics. Many are feminists and concerned to redress the imbalance in the history of art. The art market, too, is anxious to resurrect forgotten artists to encourage the burgeoning crowd of collectors. This is particularly true of Victorian women painters and their re-discovery must be welcomed. However, this strange conjunction of interests - dealers and feminists - should warn the wary.

The new, feminist art history emphasises the vital role played in any era by social pressures and market forces. Thus, the wealth of source material available concerning nineteenth century manners, morals, marriage and the law allows the art historian to place the artist firmly in her Victorian context. Many previously disregarded artists are now, sometimes in virtue of their relationship with a male artist, being considered as significant regardless of merit. A gallery visitor or interested reader might be prompted to wonder if all women painters were good artists, whose talent was hidden through male conspiracy, and that merit is somehow conferred automatically by gender.

The feminist art history considers questions of quality and hierarchy to be the irrelevant heritage of a competitive and exclusive male system. The gallery visitor with a casual interest in art does not always care for the minutiae of art history and although the new ideas are dynamic and crucial their passage from the text books to the public gallery will be slow.

The question of quality is a vexed one and troubles many gallery visitors. The paintings that are usually on display in a public art gallery such as Southampton's are perceived as being "good" art and setting some sort of standard. The displays are chosen by people who are influenced by their own training, by fashion and, of course, by what they like. They hope to communicate this balance between expertise and enthusiasm. Many of the paintings have been purchased after due research, consultation and deliberation but others may have been given, or bequeathed many years previously. Many paintings remain in store because they are no longer considered as important or because subsequent acquisitions have overtaken them.

This has been the fate of many paintings by women artists all over the world and it is right that reputations have been rehabilitated and that curators have been obliged to search their stores. It must be remembered, though, that the male sex does not have the monopoly on mediocrity, either. In this catalogue there are artists whose work is on permanent or regular display in Southampton City Art Gallery. Others have been brought from the store and included to tell

part of the story of women's contribution to the story of art. Helen Allingham is a case in point: a Victorian water-colourist who specialised in variations of a theme made popular by a more successful male colleague. As Southampton has only a minor collection of Victorian watercolours it is much more important to see her work in the context of other women painters.

Many women painters find that one of the stigmas they have to avoid today is the "special pleading" publication of which this is yet another example. Women artists enjoy international reputations today and the future will judge their work on merit alone. It is valuable to look back at the past to see the struggle that has created today's freedom. It is equally important to look at the paintings themselves and not just as illustrations to a text. The paintings, too, have merit beyond the confines of their authors' biographies but the entries that follow are designed to provide some insight into the lives and personalities of the artists. The paintings illustrated will not always be on display and those that are will be displayed with other paintings of the same date or subject. This guide may help to illumine these paintings whose significance might otherwise be overlooked and let them be seen in a new light.

SOFONISBA ANGUISCIOLA
1527?-1625

Portrait of the Artist's Sister in the Garb of a Nun

Oil on canvas

685 x 533mms

Purchased through the Chipperfield Bequest Fund. 1936



Sofonisba Anguisciola was the daughter of a nobleman in Cremona, Northern Italy. Amilcare Anguisciola sent Sofonisba and her sister Elena to study painting and live with the family of Bernadino Campi in 1546. A contemporary source wrote that Amilcare was hoping "through the nobility and worth of his daughters to render noble and highly esteemed in this city, the profession of painting". This seems a curious and charitable reason and it has been suggested that another motive might have been the fact that there were in all six daughters in the family for whom to find dowries. All the daughters, however, were encouraged to learn skills, unlike their younger brother. Sofonisba, the eldest, taught three of her other sisters to paint and this tender, gently smiling portrait is believed to be of Elena, who became a nun.

She was a contemporary of Michelangelo and is mentioned in Vasari's *Lives* which describes a vivacious painting of her sisters playing chess. Campi taught her the skills of official portraiture and the present painting seems to owe more to her instincts than his teaching.

In 1559, Sofonisba was appointed painter to the court of Philip of Spain where she was paid in handsome gifts rather than in money. This was customary, as was her task of producing numerous versions of her portraits of royalty and courtiers rather than more imaginative compositions.

When she was about fifty-two, the King offered to find her a husband and she asked to marry an Italian. The King found her a Sicilian who died after four years of marriage. The King recalled Sofonisba to Spain but she asked to be allowed to visit her birthplace. However, she married the captain of the ship taking her from Palermo to Genoa and spent the rest of her life in those two cities. She died at a remarkably advanced age.

Her curious life history, the sympathetic paintings of her family and perhaps her lyrical name have caught the attention of at least two contemporary artists in different fields. Peter Porter has written a poem "For Sofonisba Anguisciola" which refers to her "honoured calling to represent the human race" and Cas Holmes, a textile artist, has also named a work after this extraordinary, successful Late Renaissance artist.

HELEN ALLINGHAM
1848-1926

Witley Post Office

Watercolour

220x 183mms

Signed

Presented in memory of the late Canon Bliss by his nieces, 1943



Helen Allingham always exhibited under her married name, Mrs. Helen Allingham. She was born Helen Paterson, the daughter of a physician, near Burton-on-Trent. She studied at the Birmingham School of Design and then moved to London as a student of the Royal Academy Schools. She was strongly influenced by the minutely detailed watercolours of her contemporaries Fred Walker and, especially, Myles Birket Foster. Birket Foster's landscapes remain the most loved, most expensive and most copied of Victorian landscapes in watercolour. Helen Allingham followed his manner closely.

In 1871 she married the Irish poet William Allingham whose best known work is *The Fairies* ("Up the airy mountain..."). She entered his literary circle which included Carlyle, Rossetti, Ruskin, Browning and Tennyson. She painted Carlyle's portrait and Ruskin asked why she had painted him like a lamb instead of the lion he was. Seven years later, in 1884, he seems to have answered his own question when he started his lecture "Fairy Land " (*The Art of England*) by coupling Mrs. Allingham's name with that of Kate Greenaway.

Helen Allingham's subject matter was the English country cottage, especially those around her home at Sandhills, near Witley, Surrey. She also travelled around Kent, Surrey, Wiltshire, Hampshire, the Isle of Wight, Dorset and Gloucestershire making studies and working them up into finished watercolours on her return home. Her views of cottages, gardens, country lanes and woodlands are cosy and idealised and were immensely popular with her urban audience. She used an extremely limited palette of only nine colours, five of which were yellows: cobalt, rose madder, aureolin, yellow ochre, raw sienna, sepia, permanent yellow, light red and orange cadmium.¹

Sh3' was a member of the Old Water-Colour Society and was elected as associate of the Royal Water-Colour Society in 1875. When women were finally admitted to full membership in 1890 she was at once raised to full rank.

W. Graham Robertson wrote in praise of her fine balance between her career and her marriage:

"What would have happened to William Allingham had he not married Helen Paterson it is impossible to imagine. She understood him thoroughly, cared for him deeply and made life smooth and happy for him: and to do this all for a poet would have provided most women with a fairly arduous career. But she also had her work as an artist and she painted day in and day out; in fact she hardly ever seemed otherwise occupied."²

¹ M.B.Huish. *British Water-Colour Art*, 1904

² W. Graham Robertson, *Time Was*, 1931, p. 292

MARY HAYLLAR
exhibited between 1880 and 1887

The Lawn Tennis Season

Oil on card

193 x 243mms

signed and dated 1881

Chipperfield Bequest, 1911



Mary Hayllar came from one of the large families of artists typical of the Victorian era. Her father James, who was born in Chichester, exhibited at the Royal Academy for over forty years but, although popular, never became famous. He was, however, sufficiently successful to enable him to buy a large country house on the Thames at Wallingford where he and his wife Ellen brought up nine children. He taught them drawing and painting and four of the daughters, Edith, Kate, Jessica and Mary, all exhibited work at the Royal Academy at the same time as their father.

Mary had the shortest career of all and Jessica and Edith are generally held to be the more talented. As Mary's output was so small this may be unjust. All the family painted together at their house, Castle Priory, using relations as models. Not surprisingly, their subjects are quiet, domestic scenes of middle class, late Victorian life: scenes of children, the interior of the large, comfortably furnished family home and their favourite pastimes of boating and tennis.

Mary married Henry Wells about 1887 and abandoned her career as an exhibiting artist. Kate also gave up painting to become a nurse and did not marry. Jessica was confined to a wheelchair after an accident in 1900 and, unmarried, moved to Bournemouth with her father in 1899. After her accident she painted only flower pieces. Edith married a vicar in 1900 and gave up painting. James, the patriarch of this family whose story sounds as if it was written by a romantic novelist, also abandoned painting on the death of his wife.

Mary and Henry Wells had several children in a short space of time and, in keeping with the contemporary perception of her new role and duties, she confined her talents to painting miniatures of children.

STANISLAWA DE KARLOWSKA
1876-1952

Polish Interior

Oil on canvas

628x 808mms

Signed

Presented by R.A.Bevan and Mrs. E H Baty (children of the artist), 1968



Stanislawa de Karlowka was born near Lowicz in the Russian territory of Poland and an area famous for its richly patterned textiles. Her family had owned substantial estates for generations and farmed their own land. They had no social contact with their Russian neighbours and, in common with other Polish landowners with a history of active patriotism, they were always subject to sudden police raids.

She studied art in Paris and, in the summer of 1897, was bridesmaid at the wedding of a fellow student and Pole, Janina Flamm. One of the guests at the wedding in Jersey was Robert Bevan, an English painter. In 1894 Bevan had visited Brittany with the bridegroom, Eric Forbes Robertson, and stayed in the artists' colony at Pont Aven, dominated by Gauguin.

Stanislawa returned to Poland that summer but, from the end of July to the end of September, Bevan wrote constantly to her in French, their only shared language. He then travelled to her home in the depths of the Polish countryside and they married in Warsaw in December of the year they met.

In a memoir of Robert Bevan by their son, Stanislawa's own work is not mentioned. She is described as beautiful, vivacious and a balance to her husband's diffidence and lack of confidence: "Your mother, of course, thinks that I am a great artist. I don't know about that..."¹

At the beginning of their marriage, the young couple lived with his parents and then had their own small house in Brighton. They made regular visits to Poland where the landscape and culture had a profound effect on the work of both painters. Later, they moved with their two children to a house in Hampstead with a large studio that had been built for an artist. It was not possible for Bevan to support the family from sales of his work alone and both he and Stanislawa relied on family money. Her inheritance of £100 a year from Poland stopped at the outbreak of war in 1914. The present painting is thought to have been painted at about this date.

Their home was a meeting place for Poles during the war and they actively supported the cause of Polish relief. Stanislawa continued to paint Polish subjects, as well as views of London, the south coast and portraits. In common with other women artists, she was not allowed to become a member of the Camden Town Group (see Sylvia Gosse entry) but she became a founder member of the London Group in 1913. This might have been recognition of her loyalty to factions within the art world of North London as well as to the quality of her work. She also exhibited in the 1913-14 Brighton "English Post-Impressionists, Cubists and Others" exhibition.

¹ J. K. Bevan, Robert Bevan, 1965

GWENJOHN
1876-1939

Girl in a Mulberry Dress

Oil on canvas

540x 375mms

Purchased through the Chipperfield Bequest Fund, 1962



Gwen John is no longer remembered as the younger sister of Augustus John but as one of the finest British painters of this century. Her brother, with uncharacteristic modesty and great perception, recognised her talent and claimed that it would eventually be seen to overshadow his own. Their work could not be more different. His is all bravura and verve, powerful drawing, vivid colour and brushwork. Hers is small in scale, restrained in colour and subject matter and always conveys a strong sense of deep personal involvement, while maintaining an air of privacy.

She was born in Haverfordwest in Pembrokeshire, the second of four children of whom Augustus was the third. Their mother died when Gwen was eight years old and the family then moved to the elegant seaside town of Tenby.

In 1895, Gwen moved to London to study at the Slade School of Fine Art and later trained under Whistler in Paris. She worked and exhibited in London until 1904 when she moved to Paris and began a career as an artists' model. She worked for Rodin and became his lover although the relationship was far from tranquil.

From 1909 an American collector John Quinn bought all the work that she gave him, but her output was fitful. After Quinn's death in 1924, Augustus persuaded Gwen to buy a cottage near his home at Fordingbridge in Hampshire but she only stayed there for short periods, returning to Paris with failing eyesight and increasing ill health. She died in Dieppe, a fortnight after the outbreak of the Second World War. She had not painted or drawn since the early 1930s but hundreds of flower studies were found in her studio after her death.

The present painting is one in a series of nine of the same subject, six of which are finished. There is a feeling of immediacy which is rare in her work and the sitter seems slightly tense, her hands ill at ease. The brushwork is unusually spontaneous and free but the muted tones and mysterious air of a special relationship between painter and sitter that excludes the viewer is characteristic.

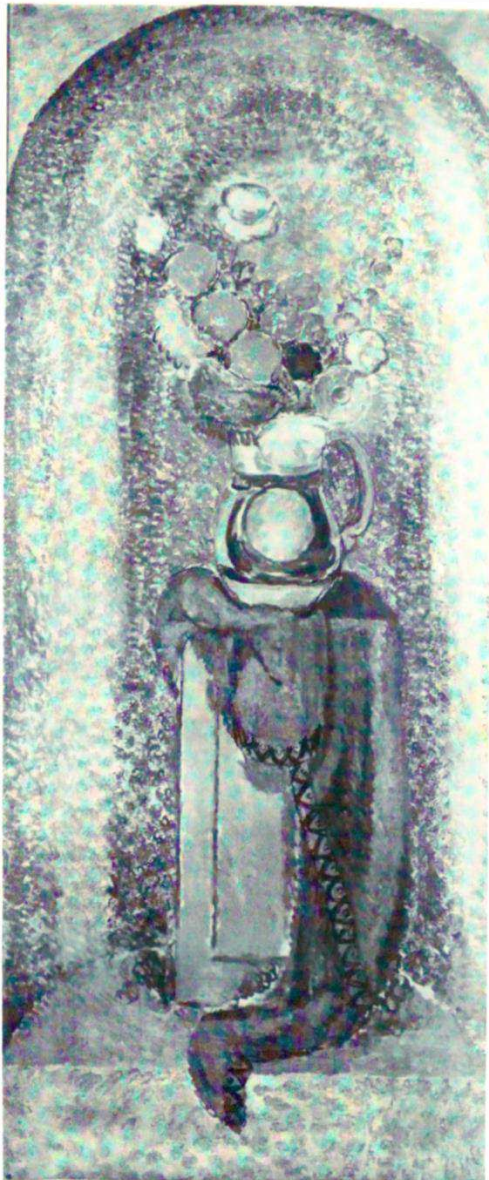
VANESSA BELL
1879-1961

Vase and Flowers

Oil on canvas

2134 x 916mm

Purchased through the Chipperfield Bequest Fund, 1972



Vanessa Bell is one of the most important figures in the history of culture, destined to be referred to in the context of her relationships with other people: Virginia Woolf's sister, Clive Bell's wife, Duncan Grant and Roger Fry's lover.

In her own right. Vanessa Bell was a painter and designer and, above all, creator of the house at Charleston in East Sussex which was home to so many of the painters and writers associated with Bloomsbury Group.

As her biographer, Frances Spalding, has pointed out Vanessa Bell may, at first glance, seem a disappointment to feminists. She did not join the suffragette movement, despised female exhibiting societies and seems to have been happiest in, and dependent on, the company and conversation of men. She did far less to further the cause of women than her sister Virginia Woolf, but unlike her sister, she defied convention to the extent of living most of her life with Duncan Grant to whom she was not married and by whom she had an illegitimate daughter.

In 1901, Vanessa became a student at the Royal Academy Schools. On her father's death she moved to Bloomsbury and in 1905 she founded the Friday Club in emulation of the cultural milieu of Paris cafes. Thanks to Vanessa's ability to organise, the Club began to hold art exhibitions.

Clive Bell, the art critic, proposed to her repeatedly. He was her brother Thoby's closest friend and, when the latter died of typhoid in 1906, Vanessa agreed to marry. In 1908, she gave birth to a son, Julian, and to Quentin in 1910.

In 1910, she met Roger Fry, an erudite art critic and curator. He and Clive Bell shared an interest in modern French painting and Fry introduced the work of Cezanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin to London. She and Fry became lovers.

In 1916, Vanessa and her family moved to a farmhouse near Lewes in East Sussex, called Charleston. During the main years she lived there Vanessa decorated the walls and woodwork of the house with elegant and decorative geometric and flower designs. In 1913, Vanessa, Fry and Grant founded the Omega Workshops to provide young artists with the opportunity to earn money while enabling the new ideas of Post-Impressionism to overthrow Edwardian taste in decoration. Charleston is still filled with the textiles, ceramics and furniture that resulted from their collaboration.

Vanessa and Duncan Grant had a complicated and long-lasting love affair which produced a daughter Angelica. They worked together on a decorative scheme for the house of Lady Dorothy Wellesley in Sussex and the present painting is one of five from the series in Southampton City Art Gallery. It is painted by Vanessa Bell alone.

LAURA SYLVIA GOSSE
1881-1968

Street Scene, Dieppe

Oil on canvas

556 x 460mms

Signed

Purchased through the Smith Bequest Fund with 50% Government Grant-in-Aid, 1973



Sylvia Gosse was the daughter of Sir Edmund Gosse, man of letters and author of "Father and Son". Her mother and aunts all painted: one was a pupil of John Brett; Sylvia's mother was taught by Ford Madox Brown and the third sister, Laura, married Alma-Tadema, who taught her painting. All three women

continued to paint throughout their lives and Sylvia's mother became an art critic.

When Sylvia was thirteen she was sent to a school in France chosen for its art teaching. When she left, she began to study at the Royal Academy Schools and, after three years study, her father showed examples of her work to his friend Walter Sickert. He was impressed by her work and by her personality and their ensuing friendship lasted until his death in 1942.

He decided that she should learn etching and that he should teach her. He then made her Co-Principal of his School of Painting and Etching in Rowlandson House, Hampstead. In 1910, the names of Sickert and Gosse appeared over the entrance to the school.

From 1912, Sylvia exhibited regularly at the Royal Academy and her work has been purchased by many British public collections. She loved the landscape of France and spent much time there. Sickert had lived for a time in Dieppe and both he and Sylvia bought property there and at Envermeu, in the Arques forest region of Normandy.

Her work was heavily influenced by Sickert who taught her much in the way of technique but she maintained an air of quiet objectivity in her work which was her own. Harold Gilman's portrait of her in Southampton City Art Gallery reveals her painful shyness but seems to show Gilman's own attitudes quite clearly, too.

Sickert and Gilman, with other artist friends working in the Fitzroy Street area of London, created the Camden Town Group from a circle of artists who they considered to be the best and most promising. Sickert and Gilman agreed that there should be no women members and Charles Ginner noted that the aim was to avoid undue pressure from members whose wives or friends might want to join but might lack talent. Sickert-put it more bluntly: "The Camden Town Group is a male club, and women are not eligible. There are lots of 2 sex clubs, and several one sex clubs and this is one of them." It was also put about that the exclusion of women would prevent chatter and gossip but this sits ill with the aims of a group who wished to introduce avant-garde, European ideas and standards to the Edwardian art world.

Sickert had many female students and most adored him. He was happy to exploit this and have his studio chores undertaken for him. Two became his wives. Sylvia Gosse had a deep attachment to him and helped him through the depression between the death of his second wife and his third marriage.

NINA HAMNETT
1890-1956

Portrait of Horace Brodzky

Oil on canvas

892 x 689mms

Signed

Presented by Denys Stilton, 1957



Nina Hamnett's recent biography is subtitled "Queen of Bohemia" and she is a leading character in many memoirs of her contemporaries.

She was born in Tenby, the childhood home of Gwen and Augustus John, and came from a respectable army family. She had a very unhappy childhood and

was in conflict with her parents from an early age. She attended Portsmouth School of Art at the age of thirteen and then returned to a school in Bath where she passed the South Kensington Art Examinations, first class in freehand. She briefly attended the Dublin School of Art until her father's court-martial and dismissal from the army.

The family moved to London and, after a few other establishments. Nina settled happily into the London School of Art where Frank Brangwyn was professor. She was introduced to the Fitzroy Street Group (see Sylvia Gosse entry) and became one of Sickert's favourites. She also became part of the Cafe Royal set where Augustus John, Roger Fry and others held artistic sway and Bohemian society dominated.

She first exhibited her work at the Allied Artists Association exhibition in 1913 where she met Henri Gaudier-Brzeska and through him, Roger Fry. Through Fry, Nina began to work for the Omega Workshops (see Vanessa Bell entry) and exhibited with the Friday Club and the Grafton Group.

She visited Paris for the second time in 1911 and became a friend of Modigliani. She also fell in love with a Norwegian, Edgar, whom she married in London later that year but the marriage did not last. She and Roger Fry became lovers and she continued to exhibit, to get commissions and to teach. In 1915 she painted this portrait of Horace Brodzky, a friend and biographer of Gaudier-Brzeska, who had left Australia and New York to pursue his career as an artist in London.

In 1920, she returned to Paris and became "the best-known woman painter in Paris". She returned to London for a show of her own work in 1926 and stayed on, exhibiting, drinking and writing her autobiography, "Laughing Torso", in 1932.

By 1936 and the International Surrealist Exhibition (see Eileen Agar entry), Nina knew that her work was becoming hopelessly out of date. She continued to lead the life she had enjoyed in the 1920s, drinking heavily in Fitzrovia and Soho with a new generation of artists including Francis Bacon and Lucien Freud. She became a chronic alcoholic and died after falling forty feet from her window.

Her obituary in The Times, 17 December 1956, read: "Her friends will know... that whatever she might ultimately have done in painting if she had stuck to it more closely, Miss Hamnett was a complete success as a person; generous, good humoured, loyal and witty."

EILEEN AGAR
Born 1904

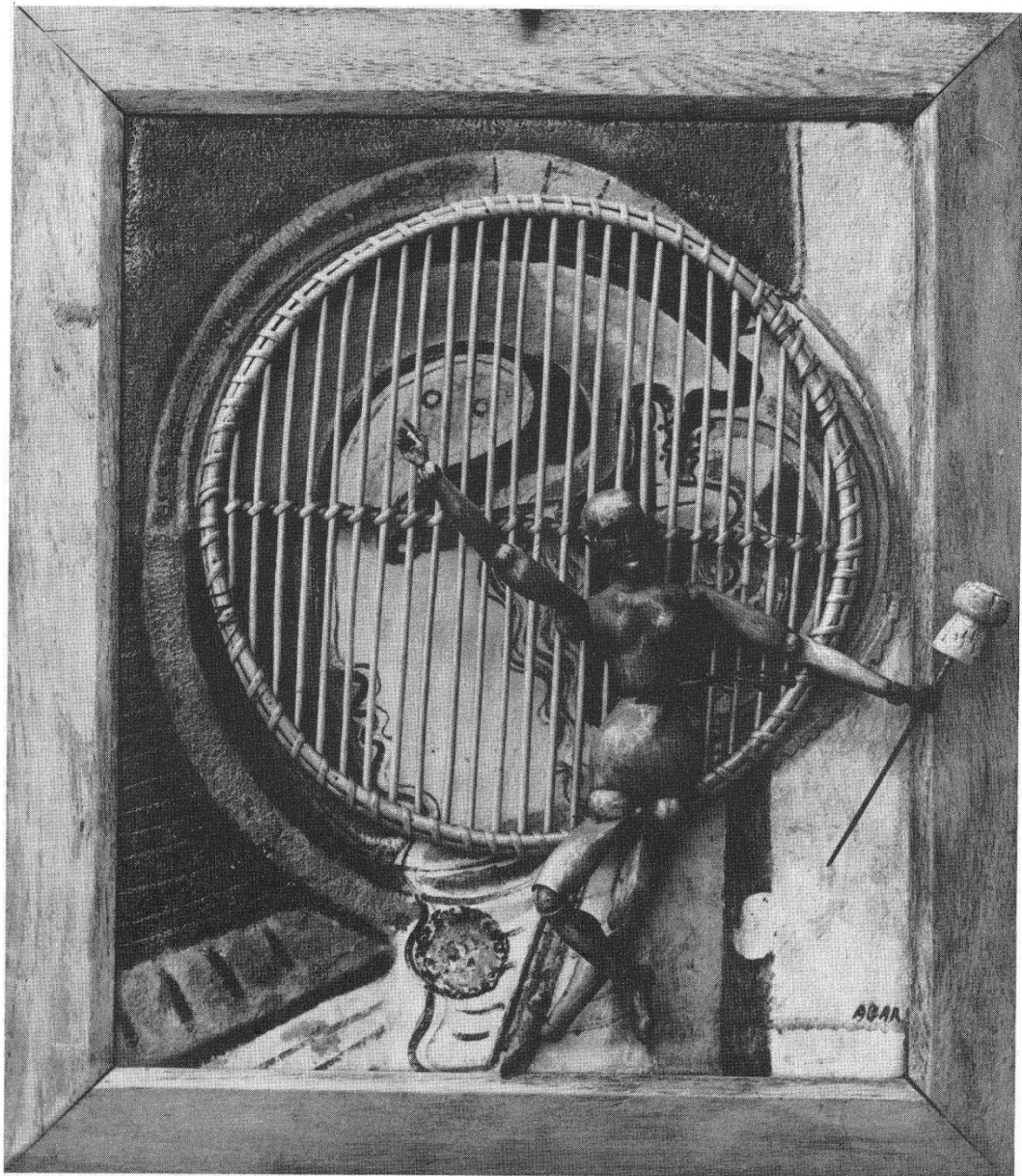
The Object Lesson

Collage and body colour on softboard

558 x 460mms

Signed

Purchased through the Chipperfield Bequest Fund with a 50% Government Grant-in-Aid. 1977



Eileen Agar and Ithell Colquhoun are both included in this selection as women artists active in the Surrealist movement. A recent book devoted to the subject states: "No artistic movement since Romanticism has elevated the image of woman to as significant role in the creative life of man as Surrealism did; no other movement had so large a number of active woman participants."¹

Eileen Agar, who was born in Buenos Aires but studied at the Slade School of Art. She met Paul Nash in 1935 when he was living on the Dorset coast, painting and working on the essay "Swanage or Seaside Surrealism". She spent that summer in Swanage and later recalled that many of her childhood memories were "sunk in Dorset". Nash was already familiar with her work from her one exhibition with the London Group which she had joined through the help of Henry Moore. From the late 1920's Eileen Agar had painted straightforward portraits but in 1928 she went to Paris, studied under the Czech Cubist painter Foltyn, and saw the work of Miro, Ernst and Picasso which changed the direction of her work. Her meeting with Nash confirmed the shift towards imagination and lyricism. She also read the poetry of Paul Eluard who was to become a close friend.

From 1930, she worked on her own and largely unnoticed in London until she was visited in the spring of 1936 by Roland Penrose and Herbert Read who were looking for artists to exhibit in the seminal International Surrealist Exhibition held in London that year. Penrose later wrote that they were both "enchanted by the rare quality of her work" and she was included in the exhibition, which attracted 1000 visitors a day.

Collage, with its curious juxtapositions of unrelated objects, is perhaps the pre-eminent technique of Surrealism. In her present work, made in 1940, Eileen Agar has included a lay figure, a cooling rack and, originally, a champagne cork given to her by Picasso (this was stolen and has been replaced). At an opening of an exhibition in 1938, at midnight, Eileen Agar wore cream gloves with scarlet cloth tips like nail varnish, in true Surrealist mode. Her work was shown in Japan, France, America and Holland until the Second World War.

She did not begin painting again until 1946 and was later inspired by a visit to the Canary Islands in 1953 to paint a six by five foot canvas. Since the mid 1960's she has painted in acrylic and in strong colours, with a persistent and provocative sense of humour.

¹ Whitney Chadwick, Women Artists and The Surrealist Movement

ITHELL COLQUHOUN
Born 1906

Rivières Tièdes

Oil on wood

911x 612mms

Purchased through the Smith Fund with 50% Government Grant-in-Aid, 1977



Ithell Colquhoun was born in Assam, India, but educated at Cheltenham Ladies' College and later at the Slade School of Art. She later wrote that the training there to draw in the style of Michelangelo but to paint in the style of the French Impressionist was not helpful.

She went to live in Paris in 1931 and read a booklet called "What is Surrealism?"; she also saw work by Salvador Dali. She was in London in 1936 for the International Surrealist Exhibition and she joined the English Surrealist Group in 1939. In 1940, she left the group after refusing to give up her work on occultism.

She continued to experiment with the many and varied techniques associated with Surrealism such as automatism, decalcomania, sfumage, frottage and collage, publishing the results of her research in "The Mantic Stain" (Enquiry , 1949).

The present work was painted in 1939 and exhibited with a group of works said by the artist all "to deal with erotic themes."¹ The title is taken from a line in Mallarme's poem "Tristesse d'état":

"Mais ta chevelure est line rivière tiède"
(But your hair is a warm river).

It has been suggested that the four streams in the painting represent the four humours of the human body believed in the Middle Ages to determine the human temperament.

There maybe an element of mockery in this work, parodying the male Surrealists' obsession with sex as subject matter. It appears that, in spite of their theorising and Freud's writings on female sexuality , male Surrealists were not interested in furthering their understanding of female sexuality. As Ithell Colquhoun wrote: "among them, women as human beings tended to be 'permitted not required'".¹

Ithell Colquhoun is also an established writer and is the author of a Surrealist occult novel "The Goose of Hermogenes" and several volumes of poetry.

¹ Letter from the artist to the Oxford Art Journal, Julv 1981

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Southampton City Art Gallery
Civic Centre Southampton SO9 4XK

Printed by Offset, Southampton