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# La force tranquille

A new Life of Gwen John and an exhibition of her work at the Pallant House Gallery

By **Lauren Elkin**



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"Landscape at Tenby with Figures" by Gwen John, c.1896-7 | © Tenby Museum and Art Gallery Collection

## IN THIS REVIEW

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### GWEN JOHN

Art and life in London and Paris  
272pp. Thames and Hudson. £30.

Alicia Foster

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### GWEN JOHN

Art and life in London and Paris  
Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, until October 8

**I**t has been a bumper couple of years for the painter Gwen John (1876-1939), with Celia Paul's luminous *Letters to Gwen John* appearing last year, and now a critical biography and accompanying exhibition at the Pallant House Gallery in Chichester. Essay after essay has scrutinized John's paintings and gouaches to try to figure out who this enigmatic figure really was, beyond the tropes that set in after her death: reclusive shut-in, obsessive Rodin fan girl, crazy cat lady obsessed with nuns, Augustus John's sister. Who, we are finally asking, was the person who lived and breathed and made this work?

Alicia Foster's volume is the first critical biography of John, joining Sue Roe's *Gwen John: A life* (2001) and Susan Chitty's *Gwen John: 1876-1939* (1981). Foster broadly outlines the artist's life - born and raised in Wales, she moved to London in 1895 for art school, where she was a prize-winning student at the Slade, then to Paris in 1904. She lived in France for the rest of her life, dying in Dieppe in 1939.

However, where Roe and Chitty emphasize the solitary aspect of John's life in London and Paris, Foster argues for another version of the young Gwen John, this one a social creature, hanging out with other students, roaming the

busy streets, attending political meetings. She may have prized a solitary lifestyle, the author tells us, and resisted the attachments of marriage and motherhood, but she was not cut off from the world. Foster devotes chapters to sketching out John's place in the Paris art world, her inclusion in the revolutionary Armory show in New York in 1913, her library and her conversion to Catholicism, as well as her relationships with her brother, her peers at the Slade, Rilke, Rodin, Vuillard, Bonnard, Véra Oumançoff, Mary Reynolds and Marie Laurencin.

The solitariness of her life and work challenges us to rethink our understanding of aloneness, interiors, modernity and art. Foster shakes up the usual view of John, virtuosically reading her paintings not as quiet meditations on solitude and domesticity, but as direct interventions in the world around her. This may seem like a tough sell, and the author is aware of it. But much of feminist criticism over the past fifty years has been at pains to demonstrate that the domestic is as political a sphere as the public, and Foster's biography roots itself in this heritage.

If John has been overshadowed previously by her brother, it is perhaps because of the way her paintings connote femininity and even spinsterhood. She “did not paint interiors because she was confined to them”, Foster writes, “but because she believed them to be extremely important, both personally - a space entirely her own was always essential to her - and in terms of what modern art could be”. These quiet interiors were actually the setting for art-making, for devotion to craft instead of family. They seem well behaved, but they are actually interiors of defiance.

Gwen John desired solitude not out of a wish to withdraw from the great issues of existence, but because it meant that she could engage with them without distraction; because it allowed her, as she put it, to make her life “consciously”.

John's paintings are largely of women in domestic spaces, conveyed in a Parisian palette: slate blue, deep blue, shades of biscuit, ochre and taupe, and the earthy reds and browns of a tomette floor, the distinctive hexagonal terracotta tiles found so often in chambres de bonne. Wicker furniture, a delicate parasol, a neat bouquet of flowers, lace curtains, quiet, calm. The artist described herself as recueillie, meaning gathered, reflective. "I think [my work] will count because I am patient and recueillie in some degree". She would have encountered the term, Foster tells us, in French art criticism of the time, "a term of high praise for those, past and present, who made figures in rooms the centre of their work".

Yet this great series of paintings was, in some ways, a direct engagement with what she saw happening around her in Paris and in the wider maelstrom of Europe between 1914 and 1918. Foster's justification for this reading is somewhat far-fetched – it involves Pierre Puvis de Chavanne's paintings of the 1870-1 siege of Paris, Rogier van der Weyden's "The Magdalen Reading" (c.1435) and the question of whether or not we can take the appearance of a pot of tea and a pink cup and saucer in the later paintings to indicate that "civilized life has returned, along with the sitter's well-being".

Similarly, John's painting of the nun Mère Poussepin "may well have seemed to visitors [to the Salon d'Automne in 1919, where John exhibited one painting] a reassuring incarnation of the continuation of French Catholic culture, no matter the scarred landscapes and decimated cities they were having to repair and rebuild, and the losses they were grieving." Foster reads this curious gesture for a modernist painter - emphasizing historical continuity as opposed to rupture - as part of the postwar *rappel à l'ordre*, in Cocteau's terms, a time when "figuration and the calm and classical were now in vogue". John's work had found its way into the "smart establishment art world of the Right Bank".

Unlike her brother, John “would never apply the term ‘bohemian’ to herself”, Foster writes; “in fact she positively rejected it. Hers was a different type of modernism, calm and classical in its leanings.” The exhibition at the Pallant House Gallery captures this calm classicism in all its gathered beauty. John’s work, and Foster’s guide to it, make a full argument that even peacefulness can be intense, that force can be soft, there need be no opposition between domesticity and modernity.

In addition to more than 120 works - paintings, drawings, and other odds and ends - that give a sense of John’s development as an artist, from an early painting of the beach at Tenby to the late repetitions, as she painted and repainted *Mère Poussepin*, or a convalescent young girl, the show features work by John’s friends, including Ursula Tyrwhitt’s “Head of Gwen John” (also a cast of Rodin’s), and Mary Constance Lloyd’s nude of John reading. Somehow Foster makes out that the book John holds in Lloyd’s painting is a yellow paperback and deduces that it is a French book, as French paperbacks were yellow, but it strikes me as potentially a reference to Aubrey Beardsley’s literary journal *The Yellow Book*; as Frances Winwar wrote in 1940, at the fin de siècle the colour yellow had “connotations ... of modernity, challenge, emancipation”.

John’s interiors are contrasted with paintings by Édouard Vuillard and Spencer Gore; the wall text mentions Vuillard’s “fellow intimiste” Pierre Bonnard. While they “painted bourgeois family homes cluttered with pattern and objects, John favoured a different kind of space, which she described as ‘simple’ in taste.” “Gwen John”, Foster writes, “always seemed more interested in her work as an artist than her domestic security, and seems never to have wanted a family, but something starker, grander.”

At Pallant House we can see on the walls the transition Foster can only point to in the book, from high Whistlerian gloss to chalky flatness, with a deliberately patchy, unfinished quality, and the growing ambiguity between finished and unfinished, which John learnt to let stand. We can actually see what she learnt from Rodin, for whom drawing became as central to his practice as sculpture around the time when John knew him. (He made “some 6,000 drawings in the last thirty years of his life”.) “Line was drawn rapidly and summarily, a figure sometimes made with just a few strokes. From around 1903 he had begun to use tracing paper to produce multiple versions, repeating and altering as he went, sometimes adding watercolor washes.”

John began to experiment with this technique, “drawing with a new rapidity and fluidity and attempting to make multiple versions of the same subject, an approach she was to carry into her painting over the next few years. This desire to repeat has often been seen as an idiosyncrasy of hers, perhaps even symptomatic of an obsessive nature, but it was actually a cornerstone of modernist art, and doubtless inspired by the artists she admired above all others: Rodin and Paul Cézanne”.

Knowing this transforms a nude self-portrait like that of 1909, in which she sketches herself sketching herself, standing naked in her room, her body small and lithe, only partially filled in with gouache, as well as her hair, the fireplace and a drippy white halo surrounding her torso and head. It is either unfinished or it is a deliberate hybrid of sketch and painting; either way, Foster writes, it was made for Rodin, “to ensure he thought of her ... their private nature is underlined by the fact that she did not exhibit them in her lifetime”. One could think of John’s many self-portraits as her autobiography, a *mise en scène* of the artist as her practice develops over her life. Here the self-positioning as artist takes on a more urgent tone, as if to challenge Rodin’s other lovers or his wife, none of whom were artists of John’s stature.



In her “Portrait of a Lady Reclining” of the following year, John drew her friend Grilda Boughton-Leigh, whose portrait she had painted a few years earlier, as well as that of her sister. But in this new phase of John’s work she is conjured up with a few quick lines. The simplicity is astonishing: how little effort is needed to make this woman emerge from the paper, as if she dwelled there and the artist made her visible with a few sure, inhabited lines.

I thought I knew John’s work inside and out, but the show has given me new angles on the painter. Standing in front of her early work “Landscape at Tenby with Figures” (c.1896-7), I can see just how good she was, and just how early. The emotional currents in the painting are stronger than I had realized from the black-and-white reproductions I’d encountered before. The woman in the foreground looks dejected, depressed, standing in shadow. The little girl looks at her beseechingly, as though her mother is unreachable, like someone in an Elizabeth Bowen novel. There is light just on the other side of the bay.

All of John’s genius is there in the little girl’s face. It is surprising that Foster does not make more of this early mother-daughter painting in a biography of a motherless daughter. It made me long for a more emotive biography, one that could tell me more about her mother’s death when John was eight, their life in Tenby, where they lived, whether they were comfortable, what daily life was like. But for that we have the painting itself.

Foster does give a strong sense of where John belongs in the context of the French art world. Her success after the First World War, including a “flurry of exhibits and sales at the Paris salons”, indicates that “her work was so clearly a valuable and distinctive part of the evolution of modernism in the French capital”. That she showed at the progressive but not radical Salon de la Société Nationale des Beaux-Arts as well as the Salon d’Automne “reveals her

sense of herself as an artist: modern rather than part of the academic establishment, but not avant-garde in the way that the Salon des Indépendants (founded in 1884) was”.

In spite of this success John mysteriously stopped showing her work - at the Salons or anywhere else in Paris - after 1925. Her dealer, John Quinn, had died in 1924, and there was the sting, Foster speculates, of having been nominated to become a salon associataire, then disqualified because she was not French. It was excruciatingly difficult, then as now, to make one’s way as an artist in France when one is not “homegrown”, in Foster’s words. Her “refusal to send work in to any Paris show from then on could have been a reaction to this rejection”.

During the First World War John made sketches of generals based on press photographs, bundling them into albums for Quinn to sell, including one of General Philippe Pétain (done in 1915, when he was not yet the Lion of Verdun, much less the leader of fascist Vichy France). Tyrwhitt told her not to bother with “such stuff”, but John insisted that they “taught [her] something”. Perhaps, Foster wonders, that thing was “the potential of working quickly and repetitively”, adding that there is “something fascinating ... in the disjunction between the formality of the images of these wartime leaders, obviously taken from a mass media source, and the individual touch of the artist, that suggests a tension, a distance, between the official façade and the human subject fallible and frail”.

I was reminded as well of a drawing exercise that John set her students when she herself was studying in London – to draw “the most hideous & wicked of the Roman Emperors in the British [Museum]”, thus revealing, Foster comments, the artist’s “dark humour”. Foster includes the Pétain drawing (not in the show), the general looking off into the middle distance, wide-eyed and slightly doxy under the kepi he is never depicted without. John was clearly

not all wan pale girls, but deeply interested in varieties of character and the inflections of the human to be found in faces and bodies.

The misconceptions about John can be traced back to a 1949 essay by her brother Augustus for *Horizon* magazine, later expanded into a book. Augustus did not have access to his sister's correspondence with friends such as Tyrwhitt, "in which she was frankest about her career and expressed all the concerns that a professional artist would have", or her letters with her agent, Quinn, "in which she was never shy about asserting the value of her work compared to the other artists she saw in the Paris galleries or in his collection". But perhaps, Foster speculates, it was a "shrewd" move on Augustus's part to promote a particular image of his sister, the better to market her work.

But in the end, why does it matter, she asks, whether or not we regard Gwen John as a solitary figure? Why are biographies like this important?

Put simply, there is more to lose for women artists in being understood as separate from the world in this way. It means that they are also often perceived as separate from the important developments in modern art, rather than a vital part of them; with nothing to say in their art beyond the story of their own strange lives, rather than having something to impart, beyond autobiography, to their world and time as well as our own. The effect is always a diminishment of who they were and the significance of what they made.

*Lauren Elkin's most recent book is Art Monsters, published this year*

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