

Genius and gender

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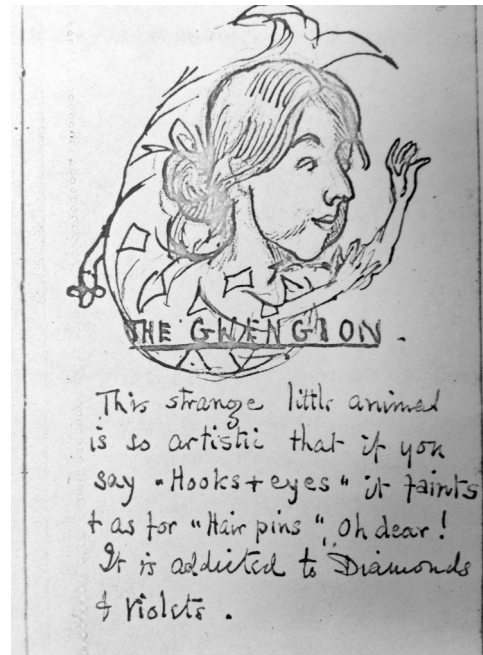
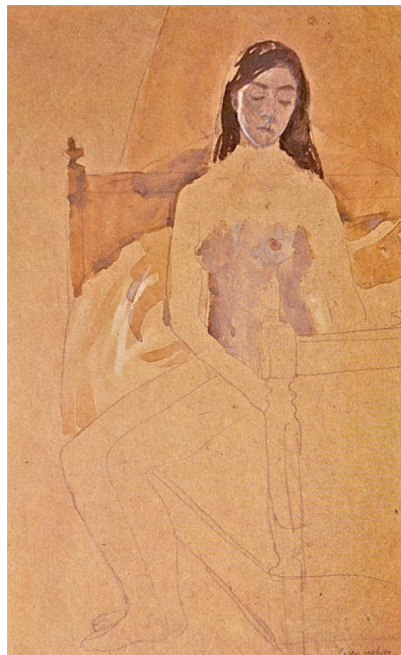
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Genius and gender

Women artists and the female nude 1870–1920

Jane Silcock



This article considers examples of female nudes produced by women artists between 1870–1920 in the light of their artistic training, with particular reference to the life-class. It also addresses significant educational influences that affected these artists as well as factors in their personal lives that drew them to depict the female nude.

In the 19th century, the female nude became the dominant vision of nudity, embodying abstract notions of ideal beauty. It has been said that mastering these portrayals was not only crucial for artistic success but also 'central to the construction of artistic identity'.¹ In any event, for centuries, perfection in the depiction of the nude form was perceived as one of the pinnacles, perhaps the pinnacle, of an academic art education, and the life-class was central to achieving this goal. As social and educational change was gaining momentum, more women began to participate in the art world and in 1871 the British census recorded 1,069 professional women artists, whereas in 1841 there had been only 278. By 1871, after a reluctant start, the Royal Academy had admitted a total of 117 women to its Schools,² and yet it continued to keep the doors of the life-class firmly shut to them. Ambitious women artists felt this exclusion keenly and began to demand access to the life-class – or at least to a draped nude. As Linda Nochlin, the first feminist writer to explore 'the Question of the Nude', pointed out: 'To be deprived of this ultimate stage of training, meant, in effect to be deprived of the possibility of creating major art works, unless one were a very ingenious lady indeed.'³

To cater for the growing numbers of women artists, large numbers of new art schools began to open and Tessa Mackenzie cites some 56 of them.⁴ Only a very few, however, such as the mixed school opened by Hubert von Herkomer in 1883 in Bushey, or the ladies-only school opened by Louise Jopling in 1887, placed much emphasis on teaching female students from the live model. The Slade School, described by Mackenzie as 'one of the most important art

schools in our Kingdom', was established in 1871. The life-class was central to its curriculum and it offered women access to the partially draped male model and to the nude female model from its inception.

But gaining access to the life-class was only half the battle: social mores were another problem, because there was considerable stigma associated with the nude. The aspiring female artist was torn between being 'a good woman' or 'a great artist' – the two being deemed mutually exclusive. Even those pioneering women who did gain access to the life-class felt the burden of moral responsibility placed upon them to maintain decorum: 'Looking neither to the right or to the left, they will never meet with annoyance, and will gradually form around them a pure, straightforward atmosphere.'⁵ The perception of women as the gentler sex was linked to that of their being physiologically incapable of artistic genius. Although John Ruskin in the mid-1860s may have advocated some artistic education for women, in order to add to their accomplishments, he believed '[a woman's] intellect is not for invention or creation, but for sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision'.⁶ At the turn of the century, even men who had some belief in female talent reflect a heavily gendered bias in their writing. In a ground-breaking tome, covering four centuries of female painters working in twelve countries, the British art critic Walter Shaw Sparrow posed the question: 'What is genius? Is it not both masculine and feminine? Are not some of its qualities instinct with manhood, while others delight us with the most winning graces of a perfect womanhood?'⁷ Similarly, Arthur Fish, Henrietta Rae's biographer, reflected upon the perception that female artists are 'handicapped by nature against the attainment of the highest distinction in the practice of art', meanwhile emphasising the extraordinary degree of perseverance needed for a female artist to succeed, given educational restrictions.⁸

Another key prejudice was the belief that women artists



1 *Self-portrait* by Gwen John (1876–1939), 1900. Oil on canvas, 61 x 37.8 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London

2 *Self-portrait naked, sitting on a bed* by Gwen John, 1908–1909. Pencil and gouache, 25.5 x 16 cm. Private collection

3 Caricature of Gwen John by Logic Whiteway from *The Slade Animal Land*, February 1898, unpublished set of 41 caricatures. Ref: UCLCA/SS/3 C (i b), UCL Special Collections, London

4 *Life-class in the 'Slade' room* by JR Brown, from *The Graphic*, 26 February 1881. Etching, UCL Art Collections, PID 33458

were dilettantes, incapable of becoming professional. Even men who held power in the new art establishments – such as Hubert von Herkomer and Henry Tonks – could be extremely patronising to their female students. Finally, the heavily gendered view of art meant that the existing vision of the female nude was a male vision. The female nude was seen from a male viewpoint, which did not correspond to female experience, and the advent of the avant-garde nude did little to change that.

First, let us consider the work of Gwen John (1876–1939), which demonstrates a remarkable transformation. There can hardly be a greater contrast between the self-confident clothed *Self-portrait* painted in 1900, reminiscent of Rembrandt, and the modest nude self-portrait from 1908 where she is perched sketching on the edge of her bed (Pl 1, Pl 2). What had happened in John's life and art education to lead her to depict herself nude in this way?

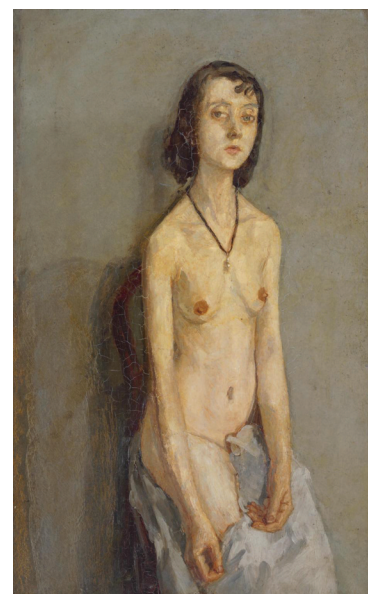
During 1895–1898 John studied at the Slade School of Art. The Slade represented remarkable progress in art education, accepting male and female students on a near equal basis, albeit charging women much higher fees than men. Its syllabus combined 17th-century academic training with 19th-century realism and was massively influenced by the French atelier system. Female students had access to the life-class – an absolutely central part of the curriculum – albeit to a draped male nude (Pl 4). One of the first three women students to enrol in 1873, Evelyn de Morgan, was also one of the early female pioneers of the allegorical nude. Right from the beginning women were winning the revered Slade scholarships of which only two per year were awarded, with seven of the 16 scholarships between 1882–1892 being awarded to women. As Augustus John, Gwen's brother, observed: 'In what I have called the Grand Epoch of the Slade, male students cut a poor figure, in fact they could hardly be said to have existed, beside their more talented sisters.'⁹ Gwen John belonged to a gifted group of artists taught by Frederick

Brown and Henry Tonks in the late 1890s.¹⁰ A charming set of caricatures produced by fellow student Logic Whiteway, depicting John (Pl 3), her friends and Professors Brown and Tonks as mythical beasts suggests the level of creativity John experienced at the Slade.¹¹ Tonks could be daunting and patronising to female students lacking in talent but inspirational to those who demonstrated real ability. John achieved a coveted drawing prize for composition in 1898 and there is no doubt she gained considerable technical competency in portraiture here.

What dramatically transformed John's artistic style, however, were her experiences in Paris. It is impossible to ignore the impact of Paris on 19th-century women's art education. Some of the most interesting examples of nude female self-portraiture come out of this city. The new style of Impressionism had made Paris a Mecca for middle-class female artists frustrated by the limitations of practising art in their own country. The atelier system played a massive role in female art emancipation as it provided them with access both to a famous master and to the life-class.

Between autumn 1898 and early 1899, John attended a study course with two close female friends at the newly opened Académie Carmen set up by Carmen Rossi and James McNeill Whistler (an influential figure for several female artists). Whistler placed a much greater emphasis on painting as opposed to the formal drawing skills John had learnt at the Slade and his style is clearly reflected in John's *Self-Portrait* of 1900.

John returned to Paris in 1903 and, following a 'rite-of-passage' trip through France with her friend Dorelia McNeill, during which she lived off the sale of her drawings, remained there for the rest of her life. Paris was able to provide aspiring female artists with access to exciting new styles in art and training to foster their artistic talent but at the same time it could also pose particular challenges. Female artists during this period grappled with combining artistic self-expression and social acceptability. Following a rift with her father, who had been shocked by elements of her Bohemian lifestyle, John was forced to support herself through nude modelling.¹² After modelling nude for Auguste Rodin's statue of *Whistler's Muse*, she embarked on a disastrous affair with the artist. It was an encounter that influenced her work in a number of ways. There is, for example, a discernible transition from John's self-confident portrayal of 1900 (Pl 1), through the more questioning style of her self-portraits of 1902 (Pl 5) and 1905 to the series of simple, informal nude drawings of 1908 where John appears semi-faceless (Pl 2). Like Renée Sintenis' nude self-portrait of 1917 (Pl 6), through showing

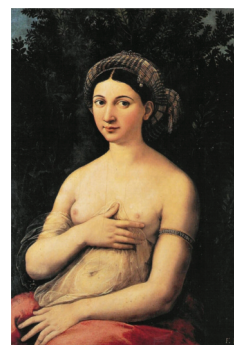
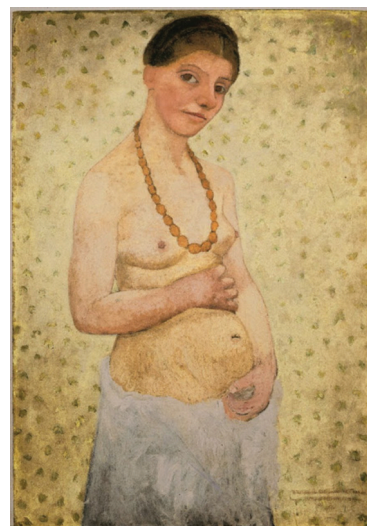


herself naked in the act of drawing John seems to visualise the dilemmas and ambivalences that female artists went through as they sought their own identity while deploying their new-found skills. The sense of isolation in John's nude sketch is echoed in the look of complete disillusionment on the face of Fenella Lovell in *Nude Girl* (1909) (Pl 7), a uniquely un-erotic depiction of an adolescent girl. This style of nude is a far cry from the nude of the academic life-class and represents a compelling attempt on the part of the artist to find a distinctive mode of expression, which was shaped by John's experiences in Paris.

Although their oeuvre is totally different in style, there are strong parallels between Gwen John's artistic development in Paris and that of her exact contemporary Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907). Indeed the two may well have met in Rodin's studio in 1905, introduced by their mutual friend, the poet Rilke. Modersohn-Becker was a prolific painter of the female nude, producing no fewer than 50 nude portraits. Between 1905-1907 alone, she produced 22 self-portraits, most of them nude and several of them life-size, but she only sold three paintings during her lifetime.

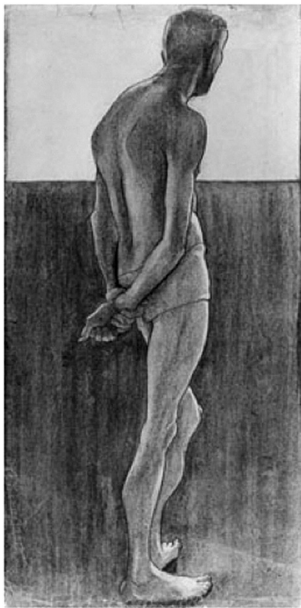
Modersohn-Becker's style has been described as 'purposeful primitivism',¹³ and she does indeed display a sense of purpose in her art, addressing herself both as an artist and as a woman. The creation of her self-portraits was important to her, representing not only artistic fulfilment but, a significant point, liberation from domestic ties. For example, in her 1906 *Self-portrait on her sixth marriage day* (Pl 8), the artist appears to be heavily pregnant, but in fact this is a fantasy pregnancy. It reflects on her artistic fruition following her decision to leave her husband for Paris, rather than on an actual pregnancy. The full title *I painted this at the age of thirty on my sixth wedding day. PB* is etched sharply into the portrait with a paintbrush handle – underscoring its meaning and emphasizing the fact that it is signed with the initials of her maiden name. On the one hand, as James Hall points out in *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, she depicts herself in a classical pose highly reminiscent of Raphael's *La Fornarina* (Pl 9) and in my view it is influenced by formal life-class studies.¹⁴ Yet at the same time the treatment is very modern. The influence of Gauguin, whose retrospective she had visited in 1905, is irrefutable but a hint of Klimt is also perceptible in the background. Modersohn-Becker soaked up artistic influences like a sponge – spending hours studying Old Masters in the Louvre and visiting exhibitions of the 'most, most modern' artists – such as Cézanne, Van Gogh and Gauguin.

The greatest lure of Paris for Modersohn-Becker, however,



was the availability of proper artistic training, including in particular the life-class. Between 1900-1906, she made four visits, all of them for the purpose of study. In 1900 she took life-classes at Académie Colarossi and attended anatomy lectures at the École des Beaux-Arts. She undertook more classes at the Colarossi in 1903 and at the Académie Julian in 1905 and, during her final trip to Paris in 1906, enrolled for a full programme at the École (which had opened fully to female students in 1901) to study anatomy and the life-class.

Like John, Modersohn-Becker had perfected her drawing skills in life-classes in her homeland – in her case from 1896-1898 at the Berlin Drawing and Painting School (established



5 *Self-portrait* by Gwen John (1836-1939), 1902. Oil on canvas, 44.8 x 34.9 cm. Tate Britain

6 *Drawing nude self-portrait* by Renée Sintenis (1888-1965), 1917. Pencil on paper, 27 cm x 20 cm. Kunsthalle, Mannheim

7 *Nude girl* by Gwen John, 1909. Oil on canvas, 44.5 x 27.9 cm. Tate Britain

8 *Self-portrait, age 30, sixth wedding day, 25th May, 1906* by Paula Modersohn-Becker (1876-1907), 1906. Oil on cardboard, 101.8 cm x 70.2 cm, Paula Modersohn-Becker Foundation, Bremen

9 *La Fornarina* by Raphael (1483-1520), 1518-1520. Oil on panel, 85 x 60 cm. Galleria d'Arte Antica Nazionale, Rome

10 *Standing male nude, backview* by Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1898. Charcoal over pencil, 68.5 x 35.5 cm, Paula-Modersohn Becker Foundation, Bremen

11 *Standing male nude* by Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1899. Charcoal, 189.5 x 84.5 cm, Paula Modersohn-Becker Foundation, Bremen

12 *Mother and child* by Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1903. 58 x 69 cm. Oil on canvas, Kunsthalle, Hamburg

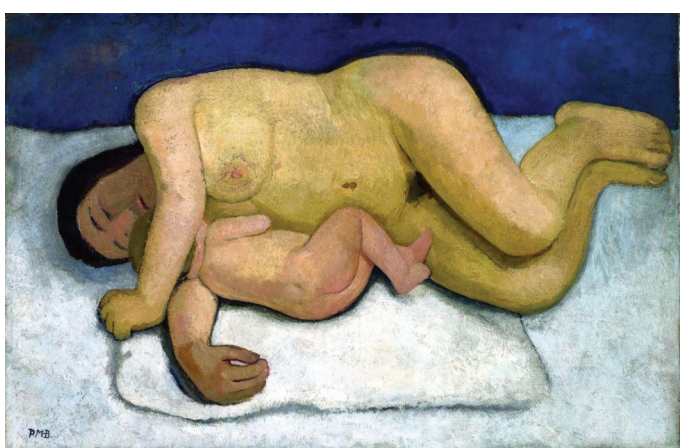
13 *Self-portrait, half nude, with amber necklace, II* by Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1906. Oil on canvas, 61.1 x 50 cm, Kunstmuseum, Basel

14 *Reclining mother and child nude* by Paula Modersohn-Becker, 1906. Oil on canvas, 82 x 124.7 cm, Paula Modersohn-Becker Foundation, Bremen



in 1868 by a women's collective as the first women's art school in the German-speaking world).¹⁵ There she produced a series of realistic sketches from nudes of both sexes (Pl 10). Moving to an artists' colony (Worpswede in 1898) gave her scope to work alongside male colleagues more freely and, above all, it provided her with greater opportunity to draw the nude (Pl 11), just like Laura Knight's move to the Newlyn colony. The primitivism which typifies her work first appears during this period (Pl 12). But the undeniable influence of Paris is clear in the painstaking technique of her later works such as *Self-portrait, half nude with amber necklace, II* (Pl 13) and *Reclining mother and child* (Pl 14) (both from 1906). It is clear that this artist draws on every ounce of her artistic education.

At the turn of the century Modersohn-Becker and John were working at a time of interesting intersection between the academic and the modern nude. They had both benefited considerably from attending progressive schools in their homeland which provided them with formal training in the life-class. Modersohn-Becker's time in the artists' colony also





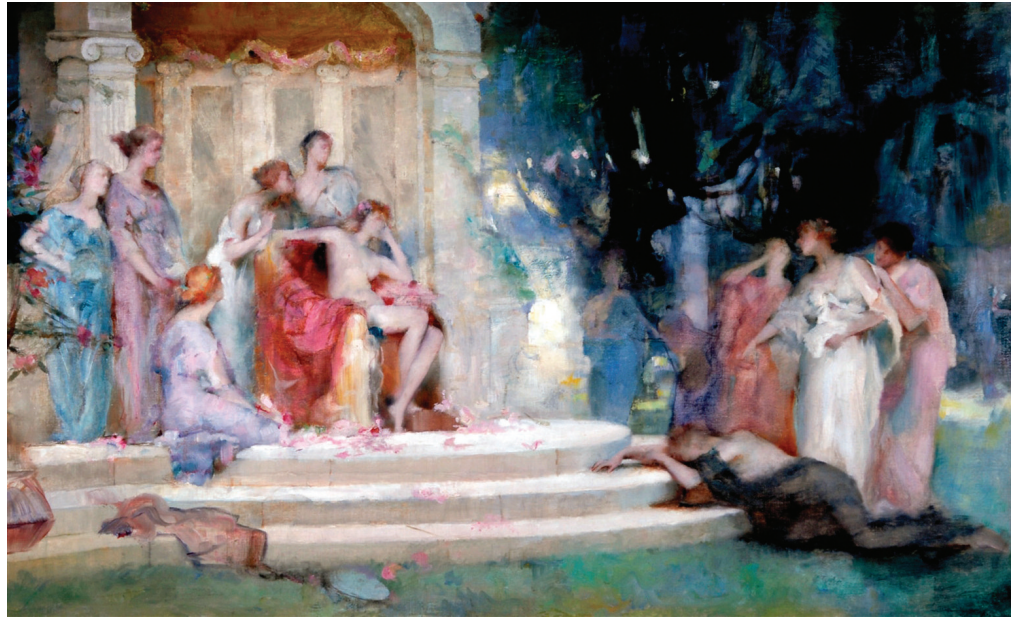
influenced the development of her distinctive style and provided further access to the nude model. But it was their experiences in Paris – both in training and exposure to modern masters – that led both artists to express themselves in nude self-portraiture.

The variety of artistic education available in Paris was undoubtedly appealing to aspiring women artists. At a time when women were not only denied access to the life-class in the academies but the women themselves were struggling to come to terms with their role as both artists and women, women-only ateliers, such as that of Charles Chaplin, were very attractive. In 1866 and 1867 Louise Jopling, Eva Gonzalès and Mary Cassatt all trained with Chaplin. As Jopling observed: ‘His was the only “atelier” where all the students were women, so that careful mothers could send their daughters there without any complications between the sexes.’¹⁶ Carolus-Duran and Jean-Jacques Henner also ran a popular ‘women’s studio’ from 1874–1889. Academies such as the Colarossi and the Julian, were especially influential because tuition in the life-class was an essential part of the training they offered and women were allowed to draw from the nude male model. It was a tough challenge for a female student to come to terms with drawing from the nude, particularly when society so strongly stigmatized the concept. Sadly the archives of the Colarossi no longer exist, but an account written in 1901 by the young convent-educated 23-year-old Kathleen Bruce about her first experience there of the male nude makes clear just how hard this could be: ‘Before reason could control instinct, I turned and fled, shut myself in the lavatory and was sick.’¹⁷

A progressive art education, in particular that provided by the Académie Julian, attracted ambitious women from across Europe and America. Proponents of the female nude who trained there included Annie Swynnerton (1878–79), Henrietta Rae (1890), Käthe Kollwitz (1904 in Rodin’s atelier) and Modersohn-Becker (1905). The Académie Julian was founded in 1867 by former prize-fighter Rodolphe Julian, ostensibly with the aim of facilitating entrance into the *École* (although female students were not admitted there for another 30 years).¹⁸ Men such as Julian and von Herkomer liked seeing themselves in the forefront of fashionable change and enjoyed the notoriety their schools gave them. At its inception the Julian offered mixed classes, which was especially appealing to foreign students. In the early 1870s, Julian replaced this with the women’s atelier system, partly to attract more French students as mixed studios with live models remained taboo for some French women.¹⁹ The diaries of the Ukrainian Marie Bashkirtseff, which were inspirational for many aspiring female artists including Paula Modersohn-Becker, reveal a rigorous training schedule that involved drawing from the male and female undraped nudes, the study of anatomy and observation of human dissections.²⁰ Although conditions at the Julian could be cramped, as clearly depicted by Bashkirtseff (Pl 15), it offered teaching to men and women on a reasonably equal basis (albeit charging female students twice as much – a measure deemed to weed out dilettantes). It also provided women with essential exhibition opportunities to prepare them for a professional career; encouraged competition between students of both sexes; and introduced students to the Parisian collections of



15 *The studio* by Marie Bashkirtseff (1858–1884), 1881.
Oil on canvas, 188 x 154 cm. Museum of Dnepropetrovsk



16 *A Bacchante* by Henrietta Rae (1859–1928), 1885.
Oil on canvas, 127 x 63.5 cm. Private collection

17 *Psyche before the throne of Venus* by Henrietta Rae, 1892–94.
Preparatory sketch. Oil on canvas, 47.5 x 76.8 cm. Private collection

modern art. Several of the great artists of the time, including Boulanger, Lefebvre and Bougereau, taught in the mixed studios. These men were all graduates of the École and, more importantly, members of the Salon jury – thereby increasing their students' chances of exhibiting there considerably. Of the 1,076 female foreigners whose work was admitted to the Salon between 1873–1900, 110 or roughly ten per cent, frequented the Académie Julian.²¹

There could hardly be a starker contrast between the work of John and Modersohn-Becker and that of Henrietta Rae (1859–1928) – and yet there are only 20 years between them. It would be utterly unthinkable for Rae to produce a nude self-portrait. Yet Rae is the only notable woman artist who produced female nudes to emerge from the RA schools during the 1880s. Female artists of the classical revival such as Rae and Anna Lea Merritt (1844–1930) faced a peculiar set of challenges. To emulate the masters of this movement, such as Lord Leighton, Lawrence Alma-Tadema and GF Watts, they had to come to terms with painting the female nude. At the same time, society deemed the nude unacceptable subject matter for a woman. The pressure of social mores as well as gaps in their training led to deficiencies in their art.

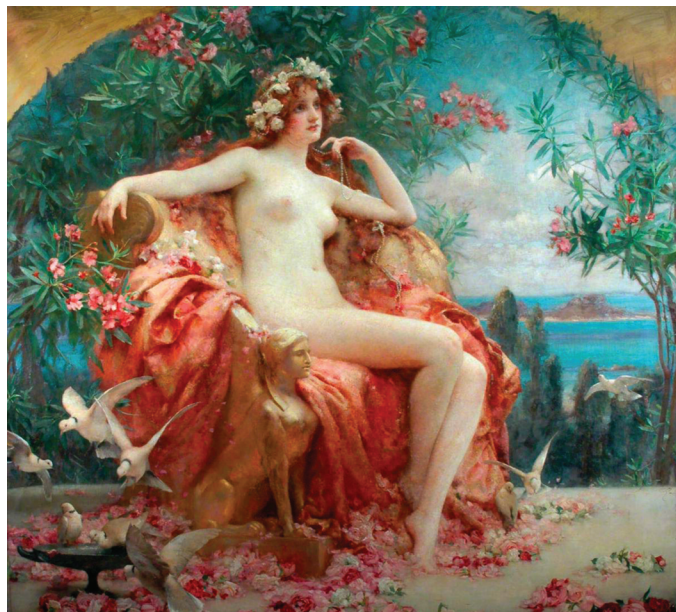
Rae first exhibited in the RA exhibition in 1880 but it took her five more years to have the courage to exhibit two nude figures: *Ariadne* (partially draped) and *A Bacchante* (Pl 16). As her biographer, Arthur Fish points out, this 'bid for success was a bold one'.²² This was just the period when JC 'Clothes' Horsley was spearheading a campaign on moral grounds not only to ban nude female models in art schools but to prohibit the appearance of female nudes in exhibitions.²³ Rae's works provoked a letter to her from 'one of those self-constituted guardians of artists' and the public's morals' imploring her 'to pause upon the brink' and 'not pervert her artistic gifts by painting such works'.²⁴ By contrast, the critic in the *Art Journal* criticized *Ariadne* for being 'a compromise between classicism and conventionality' because the figure was semi-draped.²⁵

Rae went on to exhibit several more female nudes with considerable success – *Eurydice* (private collection), for example, received an Honourable Mention at the Exposition Universelle, Paris in 1889 and a medal at the World's Columbian Exposition, Chicago in 1893 (which had a Woman's Building for artworks by women). Rae had, however, a marked tendency to prettify her works to make them socially acceptable. Eventually, in 1894, when she exhibited what she thought would be her magnum opus, *Psyche before the throne of Venus*, a massive canvas she had worked on for two years, the finished version of which is destroyed (see oil sketch for it, Pl 17), it was lacerated by male critics such as FG Stephens of the Athenaeum, who dubbed it 'meretricious – a sort of confectionary piece',²⁶ and even her chief mentor, Leighton, dismissed the work as 'it had a tendency to prettiness of which he could not approve'.²⁷

Rae fought hard to piece together her art education. As Fish, writing in 1905, points out: 'Public facilities for the acquisition of technical knowledge and training in relation to art – always under the control of men – have been grudgingly granted to women. When a woman has succeeded as an artist it has been in spite of the lack of such facilities, and by sheer force of will and talent'.²⁸

Bored by the teaching at the Female School of Art, in 1874 Rae, like many other students aspiring to enter the academy, learnt to draw the nude from classical statuary in the British Museum (as had the young Modersohn-Becker). Evening classes at Heatherley's, where she was the first female student, gave Rae some access to the live model. In 1877, on the sixth attempt, Rae finally gained admission to the RA Schools – where she was denied access to the academic life-class. A fellow student at the RA, Margaret Dicksee, set up informal life-classes on a co-operative basis in the studio of her artist father, Frank, enabling Rae and others to draw from the nude model: a prime example of the type of 'Art Sisterhood' so supportive to women artists in the battle for emancipation.

In order to address the deficiencies in her formal training, Rae sought informal tutelage from celebrated artist neighbours in Holland Park, notably Val Prinsep, John Millais, GF Watts and, above all, Lord Leighton, President of the Academy. As she acknowledged with regard to Leighton in her auto-biographical sketch of 1901: 'His dominating personality from the outset exercised on my impressionable nature a most wonderful and permanent influence, and to his fostering care I attribute the development of any powers of design I may possess'.²⁹ Rae herself was aware of her own



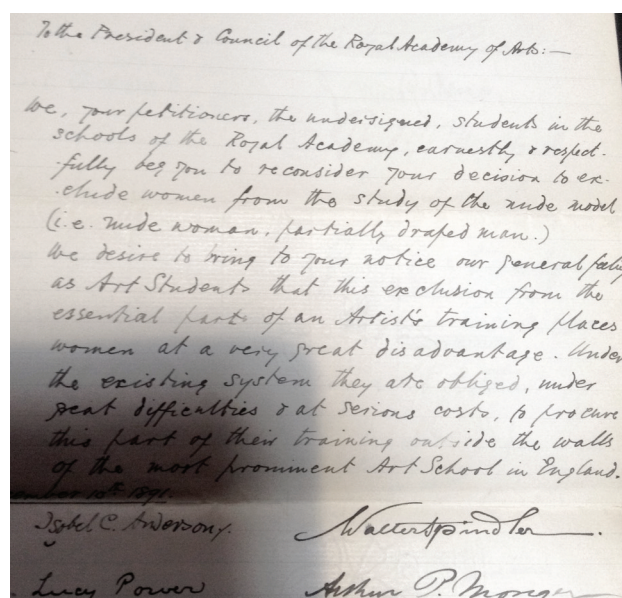
technical shortcomings. In 1890, after the disappointing hanging of her *Opbelia* at the RA exhibition the previous year, Rae and her husband went to study for a few months at the Académie Julian. The couple struggled with the rigours of the school routine and both were criticised by teacher Benjamin-Constant for not copying the nude realistically enough.³⁰ Clearly, this exposure to more progressive art and teaching came too late for Rae and she adhered to her prettified academic nudes as shown by *Roses of Youth* painted in 1905 (Pl 18). Clearly, Rae was a trailblazer but one whose career was beset with too many obstacles for her to achieve full artistic and personal self-expression.

For female students, gaining admission to the RA Schools was in many ways a Pyrrhic victory as the life-class, deemed so crucial, remained barred to them until 1893 while an increasing number of other schools offered access to it. A series of petitions by the RA's female students commencing with that of 1878 and running through to the final petition of 1901 clearly demonstrates how keenly they felt their exclusion from full academic training. The obsequious language of the first petition of 1878 (one year after Rae became a student) clearly also suggests the struggle these women were experiencing trying to grapple with becoming professional artists at the same time as overcoming middle-class mores:

We venture therefore, knowing that you have ever been our true friends, very respectfully to ask you to take into consideration the practicability of making some arrangement for which we might be enabled to study from the figure, semi-draped.³¹

Over time the language becomes bolder and the professional case for women to gain access to the life-class is more clearly stated. The petition of 1891 (Pl 19) was backed by von Herkomer, who had founded his own school offering the life-class in 1883, with assurances that 'there is absolutely no danger attached to such study for women'³². But it was not until 1893 that provision was finally made for women to study the partially draped model. The exact manner of this draping was eventually defined in very precise detail in 1894.³³ The RA's conservatism with regard to the life-class made it seem out of touch with the modern world and arguably did long-term damage to its image. As Gwen John opined in 1917: 'Nothing has changed in the 'Royal Academy', nor ever will. All other human institutions have seen some movement, [but] the 'Royal Academy' is superior and alone'.³⁴

Rae and Annie Swynnerton (1844–1933) were contemporaries, both striving for artistic and social emancipation. Both were signatories of the Declaration in Favour of Women's Suffrage in 1889. Both resorted initially to a classical narrative to make the nude acceptable subject matter for a lady artist.



18 *Roses of youth* by Henrietta Rae, 1905. Oil on canvas, 175 x 185.5 cm
Scarborough Collections

19 *Petition of female students to the President of the Royal Academy*,
10 December 1891, RA Archives, London, RAA/SEC/8/19

20 *Cupid and Psyche* by Annie Swynnerton (1844–1933) 1890.
Oil on canvas, 147 x 91 cm. Gallery Oldham

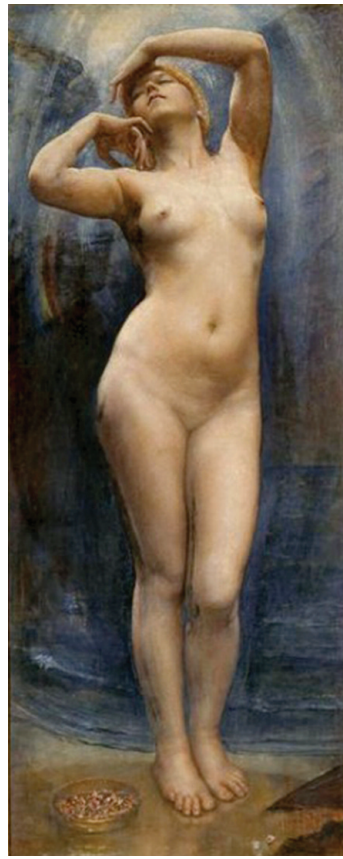
21 *Mater Triumphalis* by Annie Swynnerton, 1892.
Oil on canvas, 167 x 68 cm, Musée d'Orsay, Paris

22 *Oreads* by Annie Swynnerton, 1907. Oil on canvas, 177.8 x 177.8 cm.
Tate Britain

23 *Oceanid* by Annie Swynnerton, before 1908. Oil on canvas, 99.8 x 109.8 cm.
Museum and Galleries, City of Bradford

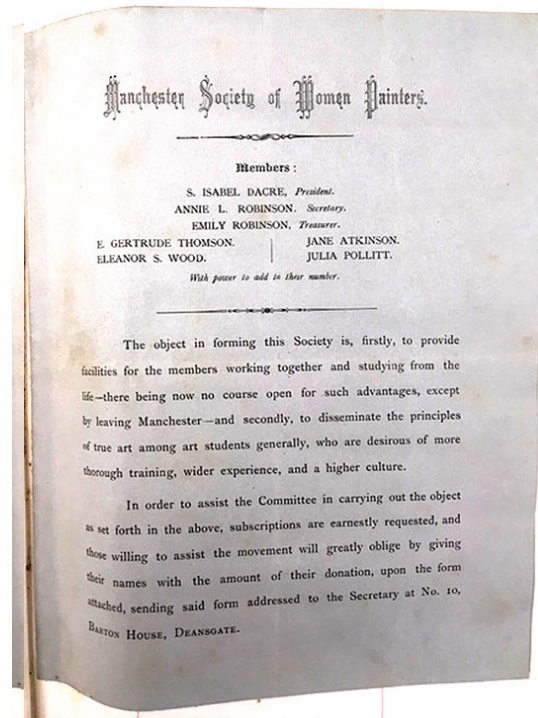
24 Subscription notice Manchester Society of Women Painters, MAFA cuttings
year book 1878–1883, Manchester Art Gallery Archive

But their vision of the female nude is completely different. Swynnerton's *Cupid and Psyche* (Pl 20) was painted in 1890, only three years after Rae's *Eurydice*, but they are worlds apart in style. The flesh of Rae's nude is alabaster and smoothly painted, like that of Leighton's and Alma-Tadema's, whereas the flesh of Swynnerton's lovers displays a range of tones and colour, even suggesting blue veins. As Claude Phillips puts it 'her flesh painting has a certain quivering reality not to be found in many renderings of the nude by contemporary English artists'.³⁵ Swynnerton's realism was startling to some. FG Stephens, ever the barometer of Victorian values, perceived Psyche's features to be 'coarse and blubbered' and 'her flesh is without the sweetness, evenness or purity of youth'.³⁶ Unlike Rae's prettified nudes, caught in a passive tableau, Swynnerton's nudes are real women, who touch their own bodies and reach out to each other – for example, *Oreads* (1907) (Pl 22). Painted at least partially 'en plein air', her *Oceanid* (1908) (Pl 23) also seems to be both at one with nature and a force within it. In *Mater Triumphalis* (painted in 1892 and exhibited at the Paris Salon in 1905) (Pl 21) heavy modelling makes the figure project from the two-dimensional space, giving this nude significant impact. Impasto and layered painting are techniques put to great effect in this artist's work to emphasise light effects or highlight skin tones. Swynnerton's brushwork throughout her oeuvre displays a strong sense of purpose which underpins her subject-matter. Her greater technical mastery enables her to express her own version of the female nude, which itself conveys her suffragist messages.



Both Rae and Swynnerton battled hard to secure their artistic training, but Swynnerton overcame the obstacles in a different way. A promising student from the start, she studied for five years between 1869 and 1873 at the Manchester School of Art, where she had access to study from clothed figures and draped nudes. Exhibiting at the Royal Manchester Institution from 1871, she won a number of national prizes as a result of these exhibitions, including the prestigious Princess of Wales Scholarship in 1873. The prize money from this facilitated her first trip to Rome, a place in which she lived and worked for long periods throughout her career and which had a considerable effect upon her art. However, one of the greatest influences was her lifelong friendship with fellow-artist and MSA colleague, Isabel Dacre (1844–1933).

The concept of 'Art Sisters' recurs in the history of female art emancipation from the 1860s onwards. When the doors of opportunity were kept shut by men, women often banded together to prize them open. Swynnerton and Dacre undertook the study trip to Rome together, and, on their return, began fighting to secure greater opportunities for female artists in Manchester. In 1874, Swynnerton and Dacre were among a group of nine women who petitioned the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts, the city's principal association for professional artists, to grant admission to female students. As a result, a ladies-only class was established (it being deemed inappropriate for women to participate in the life-class at MAFA) and a category of 'Lady Exhibitor' introduced – consequently Swynnerton submitted paintings to MAFA for a decade. In 1878–79, Swynnerton and Dacre studied together at the Académie Julian.³⁷ Inspired by what they learnt there and frustrated by the limited opportunities for female artists in their home city, they co-founded the Manchester Society of Women Painters in 1879 and became active participants in the suffragist community. Part of the MSWP's mission was the provision of 'facilities for members working together to study from the life' as well as exhibition opportunities (Pl 24).³⁸ Several Paris-trained pioneering women such as Briton Louise



Jopling, Austrian Tina Blau and the American Cecilia Beaux chose to benefit their art sisters by establishing women's art schools or teaching in their homeland. What is more remarkable is that it took Swynnerton 10 years following her return from the Académie Julian to exhibit her first nude, *Cupid and Psyche* in 1891. During the intervening decade, both Rae and Merritt had dared to exhibit female nudes despite meeting with opprobrium.

Paris had undoubtedly played a part in Swynnerton's development but Italy and London also provided important



influences. Swynnerton and her artist husband, a sculptor (whom she married in Rome in 1883), worked together in Italy for many years and her interest in depicting light comes from here. Her husband's work may also have influenced her use of heavy modelling. In London she mixed and mingled with a variety of important artists including John Everett Millais, Edward Burne-Jones, GF Watts, James McNeill Whistler, George Clausen and John Singer Sargent (who considered her a 'genius').³⁹ Swynnerton's level of technical accomplishment allowed her to embrace elements of different artistic movements without quashing personal creativity. She exhibited widely throughout the 1890s at various eminent institutions, including the RA, the Royal Scottish Academy and, most notably, at the Paris Salon in 1905 where Rodin admired *Mater Triumphalis* (which is still in the Musée d'Orsay). In 1895, she became the second woman (Rae being the first) to be asked to serve on the selection jury of the important Liverpool Autumn Exhibition. It was not until 1922 – at the age of seventy-eight – that the Royal

Academy finally acknowledged her lifelong achievement by making her the first female associate member (ARA) of the RA since its foundation in 1768. Her determination to paint had always driven her on: 'I have had to struggle so hard. You see when I was young, women could not paint – or so it was said. The world believed that and did not want the work of women, however sincere, however good. I refused to accept that. I fought and I suffered.'⁴⁰ Swynnerton's suffragist convictions and wider experience of life and art through travel and training enabled her to overcome the obstacles more effectively than Rae.

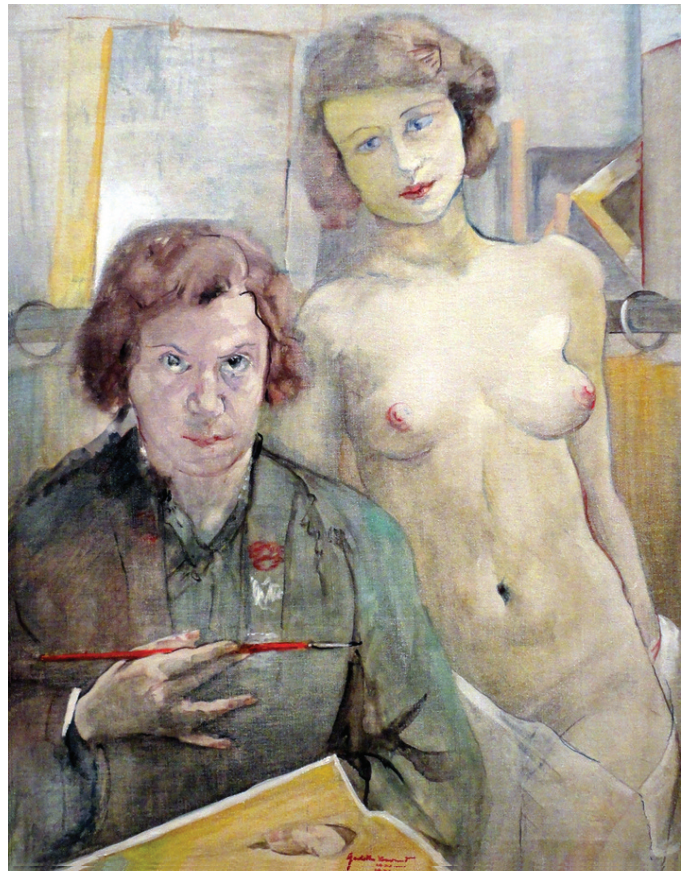
Following on a generation later, Laura Knight paid tribute to Swynnerton, saying, 'We women who have the good fortune to be born later than Mrs Swynnerton profit by her accomplishments,' attributing her with breaking down the barriers of prejudice,⁴¹ but it was not until the second decade of the 20th century that female artists such as Knight and Charlotte Berend-Corinth were emancipated enough to depict themselves in the role of artist with the female nude.

The self-portrait with female model had been a type favoured by male artists from the mid-19th century onwards as a way of advertising their bohemian status, as Frances Borzello points out:⁴² for example, Lovis Corinth's *Self-portrait with Charlotte Berend Corinth and a glass of champagne*, 1902; Walter Sickert's *The studio: the painting of a nude* (1906); and William Orpen's *Myself with Venus* (1910). The fundamental difference between these two images and that of Knight's celebrated *Self-portrait* (Pl 25) and Berend-Corinth's *Self-Portrait with model* (1931) (Pl 26) is the spirit of equality which shines out of the women's images: the model and the artist are seen engaged in a joint undertaking. This does suggest a 'New Woman' making a point not only about the way she is seen but also about the way the female nude is viewed. Indeed, Knight's image is both powerful and enigmatic partly because the viewpoint is novel and, to some extent, confusing.

At a very first glance, as Rosemary Betterton suggests, and as I myself perceived, it is possible to misread the image as being that of a woman looking at a nude through the window of a gallery or shop.⁴³ This could easily be Knight making a point about the still unusual phenomenon of a woman artist being given access to the nude. Yet at the same time, her brush and palette are barely visible, suggesting more of a social comment about the changing status of women. In this remarkable composition, the artist appears to be looking at something beyond the frame, thereby breaking the traditional relationship between artist and nude model, viewer and viewed. In fact, there are three figures in the painting: the artist, the model and the painted nude, emphasising again the importance of the nudity. The stark use of contrast and strong vertical lines mean that the artist and model inhabit different spaces – perhaps again suggesting the traditional divorce between female artist and nude model. Knight's image was undoubtedly disruptive and modern yet at the same time it pays tribute to the traditional academic nude. The model's stance is highly reminiscent of the Rokeby Venus, a painting much in the press at the time following its purchase by the National Gallery in 1906, and deemed to represent the ideal of feminine beauty. However, like many female artists before her, Knight had resorted to using a friend and fellow-artist as the model – and this gives an intimacy to the portrait. Ella Naper's shapely derriere is depicted with tenderness and imbued with warm, rosy tones, making it almost the focal point. The overall impact of the painting is strengthened by the fact that the image is virtually life-size.

The compelling combination of modern and traditional elements suggest that this is the painting of a confident artist at the top of her game. Yet, apart from those who were in Newlyn for the painting's unveiling on show day, the male critics slated it. The *Times* suggested it should 'provoke a smile not quite of admiration'⁴⁴ and, worse, Claude Philips in the *Daily Telegraph* wrote it off completely: 'It repels, not by any special inconvenience – for it is harmless enough and with an element of sensuous attraction – but by dullness and by something dangerously near to vulgarity'.⁴⁵ It is arguable that male artists who saw it may even have felt threatened by Knight's disruptive image. Gerrish Nunn, writing in *The British Art Journal*, suggests that Philip Connard painted his *Artist and model* (1915; whereabouts unknown, repr in *Colour*, February 1915, vol II, p5) as a direct riposte to Knight's self-portrait, reasserting the traditional male artist/female model relationship.⁴⁶ Either way, Knight was deterred, by traditional male condescension, from repeating anything as daring again, even though she did still produce some female nudes. The painting remained unsold in her studio until after her death in 1970, when it was promptly acquired by the National Portrait Gallery.

There is no doubt that Knight's *Self-Portrait* was strongly autobiographical. Her particular fight to gain access to the life-class was impeded by a different set of social barriers. Knight came from the impoverished middle class and had a



25 *Self-Portrait* by Laura Knight (1877–1970), 1913.
Oil on canvas, 152.4 x 127.6 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London

26 *Self-Portrait with model* by Charlotte Berend-Corinth, 1931.
Oil on canvas, 90 x 70.5 cm. Nationalgalerie, Berlin

tough childhood. Her father had deserted her mother and two sisters shortly after her birth. Her mother, herself artistic and a part-time art teacher at the government-run Nottingham Art School, managed to get the talented 13-year-old Knight enrolled as an artisan student there, and so no fees were paid. When her mother became seriously ill and died of cancer, Knight took on her teaching duties while studying at Nottingham and, after leaving art school, carried on earning money by giving private art lessons. The frustration Knight felt at being barred from the life-class at Nottingham was immense. Bravely, she invited one of the male models from the school, half-blind Jack Price, to pose nude for her in the art school studio out of hours, but she still struggled with middle-class mores: 'I, almost afraid to look at him, when the first hourly rest became due, took his outstretched hand in my own to help him down from the model throne. As it turned out, he was not asking for help, but for a piece of chalk to mark the exact position of his feet. I blushed at the thought that he might think I was making advances... It was a terrible ordeal altogether.'⁴⁷

Effectively, Knight learnt to draw the nude by looking over the shoulder of the most talented male student in the school, her future husband, Harold. 'Whenever possible I fixed my easel close to his; if he started to the drawing of a head by first blocking in the outline, I did the same; if he first of all drew details of an eye, I copied that method – though never to attain his subtle realisation of the whole head.'⁴⁸ For a female artist to gain moral support and respectability from being married to an artist husband was not at all unusual. With the exception of Gwen John, all the women artists featured in this article had artist spouses. In the case of Laura

Knight, the relationship was particularly fruitful.

Like Modersohn-Becker in the same era at the turn of the century, Knight worked in a rural artistic community with her husband. The Knights, after their marriage in 1903 and again in 1904, spent several weeks in the Laren colony in the Netherlands, a successor of the realist Hague School of Art. It was the Newlyn colony, however, founded by Stanhope Forbes in 1899, and typified by an Impressionistic style and painting 'en plein-air', which gave Knight her artistic liberation. Working amid this colony had a profound effect upon her work: 'Daring grew, I would work in my own way. An even greater freedom came – glorious sensation, promise for a future when anything might be attempted.'⁴⁹ Knight produced a series of female nudes, typified by *Daughters of the Sun* (1911) which showed a bevy of nude bathing beauties disporting among the rocks. Knight, unlike Modersohn-Becker, who paid impoverished peasant women in the Worpswede community to pose nude for her, hired models from London – thereby creating a rather more idyllic, less rustic female nude. Sadly, Knight's sketch books of female nudes, along with this painting, were destroyed, purportedly by damp: 'Among the work crowding my studio there is no record of that intensive study covering many years – that of the female nude in its natural surroundings.'⁵⁰ In some ways, *Self-portrait* can be seen as the culmination of Knight's series of Newlyn nudes, although this masterpiece shows a much greater level of technical accomplishment and self-expression.

Knight went on to establish herself as the pre-eminent painter of women and was particularly drawn to depicting celebrities and those who creatively broke new ground in the world of the circus, ballet and theatre. Her academic style eventually gained her the respect and position she longed for. In 1936, the RA, who had rejected her masterpiece, elected her the first female full member since its foundation.

During a 50-year period from 1870–1920 there was a remarkable transition in the development of the female nude as painted by women artists. Clearly, new movements in art and society played a considerable role in this evolution. But the importance of educational improvements in general and access to the life-class in particular played a very significant role in the emancipation of female artists. With very rare exceptions, the majority of women artists in the development of the female nude were middle-class and education helped them to conquer their middle-class inhibitions. Early trailblazers such as Henrietta Rae, in contrast, were severely impeded by a mix of social pressures and educational limitations. Exclusion from the academic life-class undoubtedly impacted the technical capability of such artists, but middle-class mores also prevented them from being able to express themselves authentically as female artists. Educational emancipation was the most crucial factor in providing female artists with the confidence and technique to express themselves in the form of female nude portraiture.

1 Rosemary Betterton, *Intimate Distances*, London 1996, p25.

2 The first female student, Laura Herford, gained admission in 1860 somewhat by stealth, signing her admission drawings with her initials only. The Academy could find nothing in its constitution to invalidate her tutelage.

3 Linda Nochlin, 'Why have there been no great women artists?' in *Women, Art and Power and Other Essays*, New York 1988, p159.

4 Tessa Mackenzie, *The Art Schools of London*, London 1896.

5 Mabel Kennington Cook writing in the *Women Magazine*, 3 February 1872.

6 John Ruskin, 'Sesame and Lilies', Lecture II, *Of Queen's Gardens*, London 1865.

7 Walter Shaw Sparrow, introduction to *Women Painters of the World from the Time of Caterina Vigri, 1413–1463, to Rosa Bonheur and the Present Day*, London 1905, p11.

8 Arthur Fish, *Henrietta Rae (Mrs Ernest Normand)*, London 1905, p13.

9 Augustus John, Eulogy to Edna Waugh, Gwen John, Ida Nettleship, Gwen Salmond (obituary notice for Lady Smith, née Salmond, *Times*, 1 February 1958).

10 The group also included Edna Waugh, Ethel Walker, Gwen Salmond and Ursula Trywhitt, as well as Gwen John's brother, Augustus.

11 Logic Whiteway, *The Slade Animal Land*, February 1898, UCL Special Collections, Ref: UCLCA/SS/3C 9 (i b).

12 John's father was so shocked by the décolleté costume she had created based on that of the barmaid in Manet's *Bar at the Folies Bergère* that it caused a major rift between them and she could no longer accept financial support from him.

13 Alessandra Comini, 'Gender or Genius? The Women Artists of German Expressionism' in *Feminism and Art History*, ed. Norma Broude and Mary Garrard, London 1982, p278.

14 James Hall, *The Self-Portrait: A Cultural History*, London 2014, p225.

15 Established by the women's art society *Verein der Berliner Künstlerinnen und Kunstfreundinnen*.

16 Louise Jopling, *Twenty Years of My Life: 1867–1887*, London 1925, p3.

17 Kathleen Bruce, *Self-portrait of an Artist: from the diaries and memories of Lady Kennet, Kathleen Lady Scott*, London 1949, p26.

18 In May 1897 the École opened for women to attend general lectures and have separate anatomy and drawing classes but it continued to exclude them from the ateliers. Full access was not granted until 1900. Mme Hélène Bertaux had founded the Union of Female Painters in 1881 specifically to campaign for women's access to the École.

19 Joëlle Bolloch, 'Female Painters at the Paris Salon' in *Women Artists in Paris, 1850–1900*, New Haven 2017, p263.

20 Marie Bashkirtseff was a champion for women's art education. After her tragic death from tuberculosis aged only 24 in 1884, an exhibition of 230 of her paintings organised by Mme Bertaux and the publication of Bashkirtseff's outspoken diaries made her a compelling role model for aspiring women artists.

21 Bolloch, p263.

22 Fish, p35.

23 Controversy was ignited by a letter published in the *Times* on 25 May 1885 supposedly from a 'British Matron' deploring the nudes on exhibition at the RA and the Grosvenor Gallery. John Callcott Horsley, rector and treasurer of the RA, was identified as the originator of the letter. He was dubbed 'Clothes' Horsley in a *Punch* cartoon (24 October 1885) showing him dressed as a British Matron looking disapprovingly at the Venus de' Medici. He was also ridiculed by James McNeil Whistler and Robert Browning, among others, and his wider campaign discredited.

24 Fish, p37.

25 Ibid.

26 FG Stephens, *The Athenaeum*, 2 June 1884, p716.

27 Fish, p81.

28 Fish, p10.

29 Fish, p48.

30 Fish, p62.

31 Petition of female students, 1878, Records of the Secretary of the Royal Academy of Arts, 1769–1968, RAA/SEC/8/6.

32 Hubert von Herkomer, Cover letter for the Petition of Female Students to the President of the Royal Academy, 11 December 1891, RAA/SEC/8/19.

33 Annual Report, 1894, p18. Records of the President and Council of the Royal Academy, 1768–1993, RAA/PC/10.

34 Ceridwen Lloyd-Morgan, *Gwen John Letters and Notebooks*, London 2004, p100.

35 Claude Phillips, 'The Summer Exhibitions at Home and Abroad II – the Academy and the New Gallery', *The Art Journal*, vol 53 (July 1891), p189.

36 FG Stephens, 'The New Gallery', *The Athenaeum*, 9 May 1891, p610.

37 Dacre is referred to by Bashkirtseff in her famous diary as coming first in the competitive concourse along with Bashkirtseff herself.

38 Quoted in Katie JF Herrington and Rebecca Milner, *Annie Swynnerton – Painting Light and Hope*, exh cat., Manchester 2018, p51.

39 Letter from John Singer Sargent to Nancy Astor, 13 May 1911, Special Collections Folder 1416/1/4, University of Reading Library, quoted in Stanley Olson, *John Singer Sargent: His Portrait*, New York 2001, pp187–188.

40 Annie Swynnerton, *The Evening News*, 15 February 1933 quoted in Herrington and Milner, p32.

41 Laura Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, vol 3, London 1936, p326 quoted in Herrington and Milner, p130.

42 Frances Borzello, *Seeing Ourselves – Women's Self-Portraits*, London 1998, p127.

43 Rosemary Betterton, *Looking On – Images of Femininity in the Visual Arts and Media*, London 1987, p3.

44 Anonymous journalist, *The Times*, 16 April 1914, p6.

45 Claude Philips, *Daily Telegraph*, 17 April 1914

46 Pamela Gerrish Nunn, 'Self-Portrait by Laura Knight (1877-1970)', *The British Art Journal*, VIII, 2 (2007), pp53–57.

47 Laura Knight, *The Magic of a Line: the Autobiography of Laura Knight*, DBE, London 1965, p97.

48 Ibid, p74.

49 Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, p169.

50 Knight, *Magic of a Line*, p140.