

Research Space

Journal article

Winifred Knights Retrospective

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WINIFRED KNIGHTS RETROSPECTIVE

Winifred Knights (1899–1947),
8 June–18 September 2016, Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.

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Winifred Knights (1899-1947) was one of that cohort of remarkable British artists who studied at the Slade under Henry Tonks. She joined the School in 1915, and in 1920 was awarded the Rome Scholarship in Decorative Painting. In Italy she was one of a group of young British artists, including Thomas Monnington, the 1922 Rome Scholar, whom she was to marry in 1924. The couple returned to England in December 1925, but after this, despite the support of her husband and Tonks, and eminent artists such as Sir D.Y. Cameron, Knights seems to have lost impetus. Always a meticulous, slow worker, she completed only one major work in subsequent years, before her death from brain cancer in 1947.

This exhibition at Dulwich Picture Gallery, guest-curated by Sacha Llewellyn of Liss Llewellyn Fine Arts, brought together a selection of Knights' major works for the first time since a 1995 exhibition curated by Llewellyn's co-director, Paul Liss. To coincide with the Dulwich exhibition Llewellyn has provided an excellent catalogue¹ with a detailed biography and perceptive commentary on Knights' work.

Dulwich made an ideal venue. Not only did its six temporary exhibition galleries provide a well-suited space, but Knights attended James Allen's Girls' School, less than a mile from the Gallery.

The focus was on five or six major works, enabling us to see Knight's evolution as an artist, while preparatory drawings and cartoons demonstrated her meticulous approach. For example, she varies the thickness of weave for her canvases and paint is very evenly and economically applied. Her work's predominately female narrative owes much to the influence of her aunt, Millicent Murby, a campaigner for women's rights and an associate of both Bernard Shaw and Edward Carpenter. Biblical, Christian and social themes predominate, and unsurprisingly women characters often outnumber men.

Knights' early work consists mainly of pencil drawings of her family and friends, many with delicate parallel hatching, which show the superb quality of her draughtsmanship. There are a number of self-portraits and throughout her life she included herself in her paintings. Her aptitude for portrayal of people's attitudes and expressions, together with folds of fabric and landscape, is one of the bedrocks of her work.

In 1917 she broke off her studies at the Slade following a breakdown after witnessing the explosion at the Silvertown munitions factory, and spent a year with relatives on their Worcestershire farm. It was this rural interlude combined with Carpenter's influence which drove Knights initially towards recording rural life and the traditions of rural labour: as Llewellyn reminds us, 'for all creative work, Carpenter professed "one should have the quietude and strength of nature at hand like a great reservoir on which to draw."'

¹ Sacha Llewellyn (2016), *Winifred Knights (1899-1947)*, London: Lund Humphries in association with Dulwich Picture Gallery

One of her first works on returning to the Slade was *Design for Wall Decoration* (1919), an idyllic representation of women and men storing the apple harvest. This painting has the strong lines which we will see in Knights' later work. Here they intersect at right angles, relieved by a single ladder on the diagonal and a distant river curving away through low green hills. Another work from this time is *Leaving the Munitions Works* (1919). Women teem through the factory gates to rejoin their families, a reminder of the part which women played in the First World War, manufacturing supplies of ammunition vital to the war effort.

The theme for 1920 Rome Scholarship was *The Deluge*. The energy which pours out of her painting of the aftermath of the Biblical deluge derives from strong opposing lines: the conflict of the horizontal lines of the water and of Noah's Ark with the diagonal lines of the people struggling to escape owes something to Vorticism. Each body follows its own shadow, giving an urgent impetus, which contrasts with the Stygian dullness of her palette: browns, black, greens and blues are relieved by occasional terracotta. We see the effects of the still falling rain; waters with a sinister sheen are rising nearly to the top of downstairs windows of the houses, and a field of haystacks on a distant hillock is threatened. Each face shows sheer terror: individuals at the bottom of the hill are already doomed as the waves undulate with menacing regularity around their feet. Those attempting to clamber up a steep slope will, we know, slither back. Nevertheless, an older woman tenderly cradles an infant, while another with Knights' own face looks back in horrified anger. Meanwhile the Ark floats in the distance, impenetrable: there are no evident entrances or windows. Even were those slithering on the slope able to reach it, there is no way in for them.

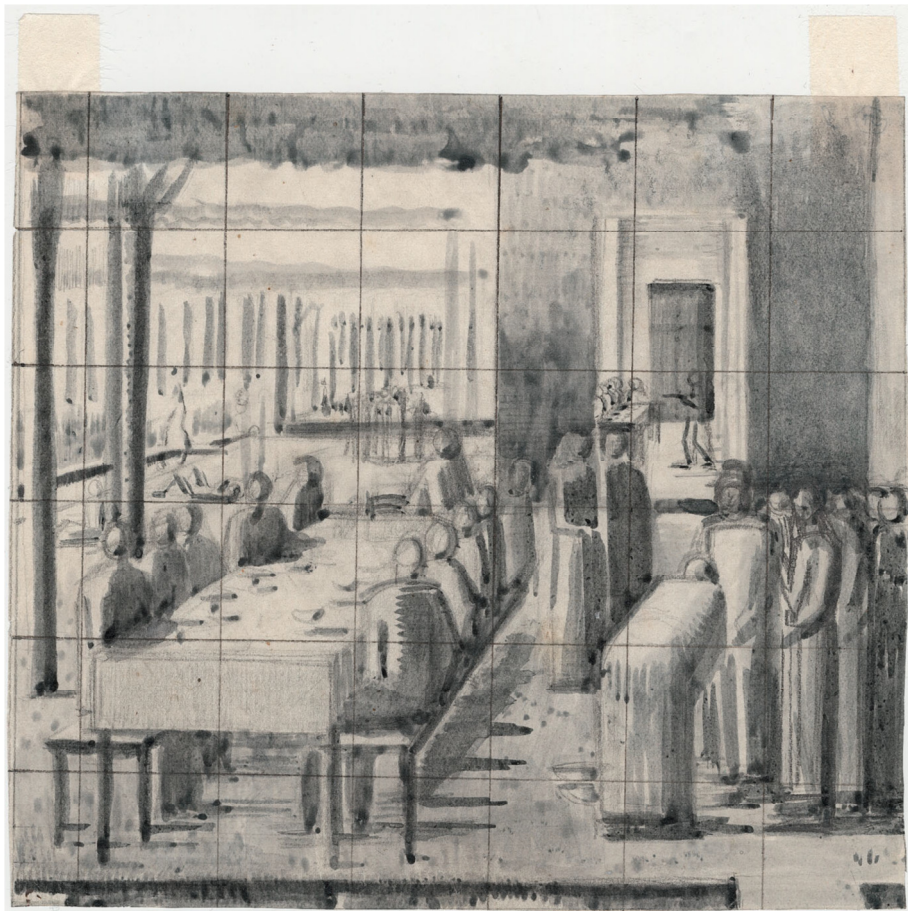


Figure 1. Winifred Knights, Compositional study for *The Marriage at Cana*, c.1922 © Sacha Llewellyn on behalf of the artist's estate.

Water features in many of her subsequent paintings, but is never again as evil as in *The Deluge*. In *The Marriage at Cana* (1923) a calm canal runs beside the loggia in which the marriage feast is taking place. This is a much more harmonious painting, brought about by the vertical and horizontal lines of trees and the loggia. (Fig.1) Guests are seated at rectangular tables. Those at the foremost table look expectantly towards Christ, their breath visibly held, as he stands encircled by a group, mainly women, wine jugs at his feet. His right hand is concealed and we cannot see what he is doing – it is a mystery. Here colours are warmer than in *The Deluge*, but still tentative: she uses a palette with tones of light brown and light green. The insinuation of red slices of water melon and a woman's coral necklace presage Christ's stigmata. Knights uses a canvas with a thick weave, giving a real sense of the coarse fabric of her characters' clothes.

In *The Santissima Trinita* (1924-1930), a lyrical painting of women resting on a pilgrimage, Knights breaks away from the straight line, introducing the voluptuous curves of the Italian countryside. The haystacks of *The Deluge* are now forefront, providing welcome couches, their ample roundness echoed by the women's parasols and the crowns of the trees on distant hillsides. She uses a fine canvas which enables her to give a shimmering quality of light. Colour is more varied and naturalistic, both in the landscape, and in the clothing of the women dozing or refreshing themselves in the canals which run around the field.

Llewellyn describes Knight's difficulties on her return to England, particularly her feeling that her husband was in the ascendant while she no longer was. However, in 1928 Sir D.Y. Cameron put her name forward for a commission for the reredos for the Milner Chapel in Canterbury Cathedral. The final work in this exhibition, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Martin of Tours* (c.1928-1933), depicts three episodes from the saint's life – the well-known act of dividing his cloak to give half to a beggar, his vision of Christ, and his bringing back to life of a dead infant. The latter miracle must have been intensely painful for Knights to contemplate, for not only she had given birth to a still-born son early in 1928, but a brother, David, had died in infancy. This is the central episode, in which the elderly Martin cradles the infant, kneeling beside the bereaved mother, while new life is promised by snowdrops piercing the ground in front of them. The circle of people round them, one of whom is Knights herself (Fig.2), regards the event with similar anticipation to those watching Christ in *The Marriage at Cana*. This painting differs from earlier ones in colour as well as composition. Knights employs a palette with strong reds and blues, drawn from the quattrocento works she and Monnington had so enjoyed discovering during their time in Italy, while the landscape behind is essentially Italian, recalling that of *The Santissima Trinita*.

One left the exhibition feeling that the reservoir on which Knights drew was indeed great and that, just as it was undertaken slowly, her work would reveal itself slowly to the viewer. Llewellyn and Dulwich Picture Gallery must be thanked for introducing her to a wider public. The catalogue enables further study, and there is also a website <http://www.winifredknights.com/>

The exhibition was part of Dulwich's series devoted to modern British Artists, which aims to shine a spotlight on 20th century artists, championing their unique qualities and style. Previous artists have included Paul Nash and Eric Ravilious. In 2017 an exhibition was devoted to Vanessa Bell.



Figure 2. Winifred Knights, self-portrait study for *Scenes from the Life of Saint Martin of Tours* c.1932 © Sacha Llewellyn on behalf of the artist's estate.

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About the Author

Diana Hirst is a PhD student at Canterbury Christ Church University, making a study of the verbal painting in the novels of Elizabeth Bowen.