

Winifred Knights

London

by SUSANNA AVERY-QUASH

THE EXHIBITION *Winifred Knights (1899–1947)* at **Dulwich Picture Gallery, London** (to 18th September), focuses on an artist (cat. no.16; Fig.52) who, despite being the first woman to win the prestigious Scholarship in Decorative Painting awarded by the British School at Rome and hailed ‘a genius’ in her own day, has largely been forgotten. Believing that art should serve the community, Knights moved away from an early interest in book illustration to become a passionate exponent of mural painting (what she called ‘decorations’). Although none of her murals was painted directly on a wall or ceiling, some were created for specific architectural settings, and all, by virtue of their striking compositions and colouring, create an immediate and lasting impression. This is the first major retrospective of Knights’s work but one that should be seen as part of larger recent projects by both guest curator and host institution to draw attention to the work of leading twentieth-century British



52. *Self-portrait sketching at a table*, by Winifred Knights. 1916. Watercolour over pencil on paper, 38.5 by 24 cm. (Private collection, London; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

artists. Sacha Llewellyn, who curated the exhibition and wrote its catalogue, has done much to revive the reputation of Knights and other students of the British School at Rome,¹ while Dulwich Picture Gallery is hosting a series of exhibitions on critically neglected modern British artists. Dulwich is an apt venue for an exhibition about Knights because she was a pupil at the local James Allen’s Girls’ School, and in fact a small exhibition of her work, including juvenilia, has recently been shown at her *alma mater*.²

The exhibition’s primary aim is to put Knights back on the artistic map, by bringing together, for the first time, Knights’s five most ambitious murals along with related sketches, many of which have never been exhibited. Arranged chronologically, the first room introduces Knights and discusses her family background and Slade School training, while the others each display a different mural. The emotional climax is *The Deluge* (no.82; Fig.53), Knights’s monumental and haunting depiction of the biblical Flood, for which she was awarded the Rome Scholarship. It is surrounded by the works that led up to and followed from it, including the contemplative *Marriage at Cana* (no.118; Fig.54), which was produced during Knights’s time in Italy. Dulwich’s cabinet-sized exhibition galleries,



53. *The Deluge*, by Winifred Knights. 1920. Canvas, 102 by 112 cm. (Tate, London; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).



54. *The Marriage at Cana*, by Winifred Knights. 1923. Canvas, 184 by 200 cm. (Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).

sensitively lit and painted to reflect Knights's harmonious yet restricted palette, work well for the display of her small-scale preparatory work, but within the constricted enfilade the viewer cannot confront her larger murals face-to-face on entering a room, which is how their impact would have had maximum effect.

Knights's student sketchbooks, including anatomical diagrams, her early oil paintings

of female nudes and the host of preparatory material for the exhibited murals (from small sketches for compositions and individual figures to full-size cartoons), produced in a range of media (from pencil, pen and ink, watercolour and oil, to the less-often-used Renaissance techniques of silverpoint and tempera), attest to the traditional and thorough training that Knights received at the Slade and to the meticulous nature of her

working practice. Probably such a demanding and time-consuming, if technically assured, approach hindered her productivity, and explains the fact that many of her works remained unfinished, although other factors contributed, not least her failure to find the peace of mind she needed to be creative.

The exhibition is strongly autobiographical. Knights often used herself as a model, sometimes more than once in the same painting. In the *Marriage at Cana*, for instance, her beguiling features which she constantly exaggerated – oval face, almond eyes and dark hair combed flat round her face like a painted manikin – appear at least three times. Other regular sitters were her mother, sister and aunt, and students from the Slade. Knights also chose to depict themes related to her experiences and convictions. Often ideas dear to her, for instance, her love of the countryside and fear of industrialisation and her interests in socialism and women's emancipation, are woven into fictional compositions such as *A Bank Holiday fair* (1919; no.49), where Knights portrays a group of gypsies, whom she admired for their way of life untainted by modernity, against a background of encroaching gasholders. At one remove, she regularly illustrated poems, fairy tales, pagan myths or the Bible, overlaying the original narratives with biographical references. Thus, in *The Deluge*, the petrified, fleeing figures that dominate the foreground derive from recollections of a Zeppelin attack on Streatham during the First World War. The sense of timeless contentment emanating from the *Marriage at Cana* recalls the joy of her courtship with Thomas Monnington, a fellow Rome Scholar and future President of the Royal Academy of Arts. By contrast, in the reredos depicting *Scenes from the life of St Martin of Tours*, which Knights produced for the Milner Memorial Chapel in Canterbury Cathedral, her only public commission (no.146; Fig.55), grief dominates the central scene in which the saint is about to revive a dead child, poignantly recalling Knights's

55. *Scenes from the life of St Martin of Tours*, by Winifred Knights. c.1928–33. Oil (or possibly tempera) on canvas, 73 by 159.9 cm. (Milner Memorial Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral; exh. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London).



own still-born son. Whatever the subject depicted, Knights's clarity of vision, intensity of observation, boldness of composition and beauty of line are ever-present.

The catalogue, scholarly yet highly readable, is important in expanding a number of themes central to the exhibition.³ Drawing on previously unpublished letters, diaries and notebooks, it explores how artistic talent ran through both sides of Knights's family, whose members included bookbinders, embroiderers and musicians, and how Knights's gifts were encouraged at school. It also discusses contemporary and earlier students from the Slade whose work she emulated, notably Stanley Spencer, whose influence, although not discussed in the exhibition, is clear in her choice of subjects (especially the way she sets biblical events in her own environment), style (her use of pared-down figures and flattened blocks of colour, for instance) and technique (like Spencer, she experimented with tempera). It would have been instructive to have interspersed examples of such work with Knights's in the exhibition.

Also related to the question of context, more might have been said about the renewal of interest in mural decoration during the Edwardian era. For instance, given that most of Knights's paintings show biblical subjects, it would have been helpful to have contextualised this in the religious revival that occurred in Britain in the aftermath of the First World War, which led, among other things, to the commissioning of new churches and their decoration. The links between the Slade's interest in modern mural painting and early Italian frescos could have been expanded, as well as the fact that the National Gallery's early Italian pictures were frequently cited as points of reference in the Slade's teaching programme and were Knights's first 'live' introduction to her 'beloved Masaccio, Giotto and all the rest of that blessed company'.⁴ A few of the postcards and Anderson and Alinari prints that Knights collected as visual sources could have been displayed, such as her postcard of *The vision of St Martin* from Simone Martini's fresco cycle in S. Francesco, Assisi, which influenced the composition of the Canterbury Cathedral reredos. A more detailed contextualisation would only have strengthened the case Llewellyn makes that Knights deserves recognition as one of the most talented artists of her generation.

¹ See Sacha Llewellyn's essay on Knights's *The Deluge* in A. Powers, P. Liss and S. Llewellyn: *British Murals & Decorative Painting 1920–1960: Rediscoveries and New Interpretations*, Bristol 2013; see also P. Liss: *Winifred Knights 1899–1947*, London 1995.

² 'Winifred Knights: JAGS pupil, 1912–1915' (closed 7th July). All the exhibits were donated to the school by Knights's son, John Monnington.

³ Catalogue: *Winifred Knights 1899–1947*. By Sacha Llewellyn. 207 pp. incl. 175 col. + b. & w. ill. (Dulwich Picture Gallery in association with Lund Humphries, London 2016), £25 (HB). ISBN 978-1-84822-177-2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10.

Lukas Duwenhögger

London

by MICHAEL BRACEWELL

THE ART OF Lukas Duwenhögger (born in Munich in 1956, now living in Istanbul) is made in a variety of genres, including figurative painting, collage, installations, sound recordings, objects and exhibition posters. *Lukas Duwenhögger: You Might Become a Park* at **Raven Row, London** (to 18th September) – a companion exhibition to *Undoolay*, a survey of Duwenhögger's work held recently at Artists Space, New York (1st May–5th June) – brings together sixty-seven

works by the artist, the earliest made in 1980 and the most recent in 2016.

The exhibition is well suited to its venue. Comprising two late seventeenth-century buildings, transformed during the 1750s into luxury goods' shops in the Rococo style, Raven Row's galleries across four floors – including the vast, bright, contemporary space of the lower-ground room – provide a wonderfully proportioned and elegant setting in which to display Duwenhögger's simultaneously grand, domestic, vivacious, intimate, theatrical and mysterious works.

Comparatively unknown beyond a coterie of enthusiasts, the art of Lukas Duwenhögger is defined by both the elegance of its own form and the elegance of the personage and milieu



56. *The Go-Between*, by Lukas Duwenhögger. 1999. Panel, 251.5 by 104.1 cm. (Collection Daniel Buchholz and Christopher Müller, Berlin; exh. Raven Row, London).