

Strawberries, cream & Pimm's, Housman Room, 10th July 2019

Notes from the talk by Helen Downes on the Slade School of Fine Art and UCL Art Museum – the new rehang of the Housman Room

Introduction

Hello, it's nice to be here this evening and to have the opportunity to tell you more about the paintings that surround you as you spend time in the room. All the works are from UCL Art Museum's Slade Collection and I've been fortunate enough to work on various projects for UCL Art Museum, the most recent of which was Spotlight on the Slade Collections, a Paul Mellon Centre funded project which ran for three years between 2015-2018 - to catalogue and research the Slade collections.

But this evening, I'm going to tell you a bit about the collection and its background, and about the works in this room.

My talk will be in two parts – I'll start with a brief, 10 minute introduction to the room and the works and then give you an opportunity to have a wander around before telling you a bit more about the prize system at the Slade and the works in this room.

Introduction to the room, background to the Slade Collection at UCL Art Museum and orientation with the hang:

As many of you will know, the room has recently been decorated and a new painting hang was curated by Dr Nina Pearlman, Manager of the Art Collections and Dr Andrea Fredericksen, Curator of the Art Collections.

All the works on display are from UCL Art Museum's collection. The collection as a whole is comprised of over 12,000 works: An amazing and rich collection dating from 1490: Prints and drawings by artists such as Durer, Rembrandt, Turner and Holbein, and one of the largest holdings of casts and drawings by the neo-classical artist John Flaxman, whose works formed the first gift and the beginning of the collection at UCL in 1847. The other main holding is the Slade Collection of over 3000 works by former students and staff of the Slade School of Fine Art from – from which the works in this room come.

Through the new hang, the curators have focused on a key period in the history of the school, 1900 – 1920, which is often referred to as the *Crisis of Brilliance* – a term coined by the influential Henry Tonks, who taught drawing at the School and subsequently became Slade Professor in 1918. It was a period when a number of very innovative and influential artists studied together at the Slade during the turbulent period of the early 20th Century: Winifred Knights, Augustus John, David Bomberg, Dora Carrington, to name a few.

And as well as taking the opportunity to showcase some of these artists' work, the re-hang tells a number of other stories.

Before I go any further, I'd like to give you a bit of background on the collection, how it came to the Art Museum and why it is important.

Background

When the Slade School was established in 1871, it was ground-breaking in a number of ways.

Firstly, it placed learning from the life model at the centre of the curriculum. Unlike other art schools at the time, students would progress quickly from the antique room to draw from the life model, sometimes in a matter of weeks, while in other schools it could take months, even years. Edward Poynter, the first Slade Professor, believed that once students could draw from life, they could master anything which didn't require technical training.

Thanks to being situated in a university, the life classes were also supplemented with anatomy lectures to give students a full understanding of the structure of the body. And, in addition, the students also had access to a remarkable teaching collection – the works I mentioned which make up the other part of the Museum's collection. They would often be told to go off and spend a few days studying the Old Masters - and they really engaged with this and really learned from it – not through simple copying but by studying, looking and learning from the works.

Secondly, and again unlike other art schools, the Slade was the first art school to offer equal access to male and female students. Right from the start, women were able to follow the same syllabus as male students, including access to the life model – which was not possible in other art schools, the RA for example, until some 20 years later. The male and female life drawing rooms were separate - and for women the male model was always draped, but we did discover during the recent research project that there was a mixed life room, where men and women could both work from the draped male model.

The third important point about the school is in relation to how the collection came about. From the establishment of the School, annual prizes were awarded by the Slade Professor and this practice continues today with the William Coldstream Prize. But from 1897, the school retained the prize-winning works, and that is why UCL Art Museum has this incredible collection - no other English art school collected in this way and so the collection essentially documents a history of art education at the School from 1897 to the present day, through the work of over 1,000 artists. And because of this, it contains examples of early work by some of our best-known artists: Gwen John, Augustus John, Stanley Spencer, Winifred Knights, Paula Rego, Euan Uglow – all collected with no knowledge of their future success.

And, again, because of the way the works were collected, works by well-known artists sit alongside those by lesser and unknown artists – their prize-winning contemporaries.

And because the School was the first to admit women on the same terms as men, and had a high percentage of women students, it contains an unusually high percentage of work by women artists for a public collection – a figure which we can now put at about 45%.

So the re-hang weaves in all these stories: It focuses on a particular period, but demonstrates the breadth of the collection, the well-known and the unknown placed side by side, it gives an insight into the prize system at the Slade, teaching at the school, and it re-dresses the balance between male and female artists.

So I'm going to stop there for the moment, and give you a chance to look round, but just to give you some orientation: there's examples from three key prizes: Life Painting at the top either side of the clock, beneath, Portrait Painting, at either end and on the fireplace wall, the most sought after award: Summer Composition.

Part 2 – The Slade Prize System and specific works in the room

As I said earlier, the Slade prizes were awarded annually by the Slade Professor from the establishment of the School in 1871, and they were an important form of recognition of the quality of a student's work and as such, very highly sought after.

The prize categories reflected the curriculum, and as such, changed over the years reflecting the school's shifting priorities and the preferences and input of changing professors and tutors, however Figure Drawing and Painting, Head (or Portrait) Drawing and Painting, Drawing of Drapery and the Summer Composition prizes were consistent into the 1950s.

In relation to woman's access to the school, it's also interesting to note that women received recognition through the prize system on a relatively equal basis to their male counterparts. Between 1871 and 1966, women received 47% and 41% of First Prizes for Figure Painting and Summer Composition respectively. Unfortunately, this often didn't translate to successful careers on leaving – society didn't yet mirror the equity of life for women inside the school.

The prize system underwent significant change in 1966 for a number of reasons - changes in art education, student practice and the influence and attraction of financial competition from dealers. But today, the William Coldstream Memorial Prize is awarded annually by the Slade Professor and prize-winning work is retained by UCL Art Museum. So, the collection now, in addition to the drawings, prints and paintings, also contains video and time-based media works and even a performance work.

Life painting

The prize sessions for life drawing and painting were specific timed sessions and we know that the same model would be used for both the male and female competition sessions.

Works entered for competition were judged on specific criteria. The Figure Drawing Prize emphasised proportion, positioning of the joints, head and limbs and correctness of outline. And the Figure Painting Prize took these qualities into account along with the standard of painting.

Students would be able to move on to figure painting once they were considered competent at drawing from life, and painting allowed them a little more freedom, as they could also depict the background / surrounding room and even the other students if they wished. As you can see from these two works, the colour palette was limited at this time and this was so that students could learn how to achieve depth and tone.

Dorothy Coke, *Female Figure Standing*, 1918 (UCLAC 5219 First Prize (Equal), Painting from Life, 1918

Walter Thomas Monnington, *Male Nude Figure*, 1921 (UCLAC 5236 First Prize (Equal) Painting from Life), 1921

The two works here are by Dorothy Coke, who won First Prize (Equal with two others - Alice Smith and Ida Knox) for Life Painting in 1918, and Walter Thomas Monnington who won joint First Prize with Muriel Hollinger Hope and Rodney Burn in 1921.

Both of these artists went on to have successful careers. Dorothy Coke enrolled at the Slade aged 17 and won numerous prizes whilst she was there. There is relatively little information about her, but we know that she taught at the Brighton School of Art for almost thirty years and was an active member of the New English Art Club. Monnington won the prestigious Rome scholarship in 1922

and went on to teach at the Royal College of Art and the Royal Academy Schools prior to WW2 and Camberwell and the Slade following the war. He became president of the RA in 1966. Monnington married fellow Slade student Winifred Knights in 1924.

Interestingly, both these artists were commissioned for work by the War Artists Advisory Committee during the Second World War. Dorothy Coke – who had submitted work to the WAAC during WW1 was subsequently commissioned during WW2 and was one of the few British artists to record women on the Home Front. Monnington, initially involved in camouflage design and subsequently bomber aircraft design, was commissioned after petitioning the WAAC and spent time in Germany and the Netherlands. His output included extraordinary paintings from an aerial perspective inside the aircraft.

Head Painting

Portrait, or Head Painting as it was termed at the Slade, was another key aspect of the Slade curriculum. The works on display here range from 1899, with the William Orpen, to 1920 with Winifred Knights' beautiful portrait of Anna Matilda Fryer. All are first or second prize winning works except for the Wadsworth and the Rosenberg, which were purchased for the collection in 2010 and 2016 respectively.

Like the other classes, once competent at portrait drawing, students could move on to painting and the criteria considered for the award of a prize were: Accurate physical portrayal as well as the ability to capture the character of the sitter – and I think all of these demonstrate that really strongly.

Head Painting was an important experience for emerging artists as they would be much more likely to make a living from portraiture than history or life painting after they graduated – William Orpen became one of the most financially successful and admired portrait artists of the twentieth century. It also afforded many women artists an opportunity to continue to practice.

There's a large number of portrait works in the UCL collection and, more often than not, we know nothing about the sitters, but in the case of a few, we do.

Wadsworth Kelly, *Portrait of Cuthbert Kelly*, 1910 (UCLAC 5732, non-prize work)

For example, Wadsworth's portrait of Cuthbert Kelly, a civil servant who held musical evenings, purchased for the collection in 2010. Wadsworth was a contemporary of Stanley Spencer, Dora Carrington and David Bomberg, and this is one of the few existing works from his Slade years - an important example of his work before he became influenced by modernism and his work took on a surrealist style in later years.

Winifred Knights, *Portrait of Anna Matilda Fryer*, 1920 (UCLAC 5089, Second Prize (Equal) for Head Painting, 1920)

Winifred Knights' portrait was recently identified as Anna Matilda Fryer (b. c.1863), mentor to Knights and wealthy owner of the Schoonoord Sugar Plantation Company for which Knights' father was Secretary and Treasurer. This work was awarded joint second prize with 11 others in 1920.

Knights was the first woman to win the prestigious Rome Scholarship in Decorative Painting in 1920. Students had to enter a number of works for consideration for the first stage of the competition and this portrait was submitted to fulfil the requirement of 'one painting of a head'.

Isaac Rosenberg, *Portrait of Clare Winsten*, 1913 (UCLAC 5653, non-prize work)

A particularly interesting work is Isaac Rosenberg's portrait of fellow student, Clare Winsten, of 1913.

Rosenberg studied at the Slade from 1911 to 1913 before going to fight in the war, from which, sadly, he never returned. He was one of an important group of contemporaries including David Bomberg, Dora Carrington, Stanley Spencer, and Edward Wadsworth. Rosenberg was one of the group later known as the 'Whitechapel Boys'. He was a talented painter, who exhibited at the New English Art Club and the Whitechapel Gallery, and was also a distinguished poet.

The sitter, Clare Winsten (born Clara Birnberg), was also a student at the Slade from 1910. She would go on to work for Heals and the Omega Workshops and she also executed a number of portraits of well-known figures including Gandhi, George Bernard Shaw and Kathleen Lonsdale, the first female professor at UCL. Winsten was the only female member of 'the Whitechapel boys'.

UCL Art Museum has a beautiful pencil sketch by Winsten of Isaac Rosenberg, so there is a lovely pairing between these two works, and that is a fascinating aspect of the works in the collection: When you find that students have drawn or painted each other, giving you an insight into the networks and connections among the students.

Summer Composition

The Summer Composition Prize was the most prestigious and highly sought after award, and it was the opportunity for students to bring together everything they had learned throughout the year: Figure study, anatomy, perspective, drapery, portrait, study of the old masters, composition.

Composition titles were set monthly throughout the year, but at the end of the summer term a title, usually a biblical subject or a subject from literature, would be given for students to produce a large scale painting which would be judged publicly at the beginning of the autumn term. It would be judged largely on strength of composition and interpretation of the subject, with less emphasis on the drawing technique.

The works in this room date from 1910 with Elsie McNaught above the fireplace, through to 1919 with Winifred Knights and James Wilkie on the back wall. No competition was set between 1916-1918 due to the war.

Stanley Spencer, *Nativity*, 1912 (UCLAC 5245, First Prize, Summer Composition, 1912)

I'm sure lots of you will be familiar with Stanley Spencer's *Nativity*, which won the prize in 1912 and which has hung in this room for many years, but its perhaps interesting now to see it alongside other prize-winning works from the period. This painting marked the end of Spencer's time at the Slade and shows a conscious effort to paint a significant work to complete his time at the School. But an interesting point to note is that it demonstrates how some artists had already developed their distinctive style – Spencer is one – Winifred Knights is another.

Two of the artists on display, Elsie McNaught and Violet Hamilton Bradshaw, have recently been researched by a group of MA Museum Studies students:

Violet Hamilton Bradshaw, *The Flight into Egypt*, 1915 (UCLAC 5267, First Prize Summer Composition, 1915)

Violet Hamilton Bradshaw won First Prize in 1915 (the last award for this competition until after the war) for this work, *The Flight into Egypt*. Bradshaw puts a contemporary twist on the religious subject matter, and it could be read as the artist's interpretation of the theme of migration and displacement in response to the war.

The research by MA Museum Studies students has confirmed that Bradshaw was born in Oxfordshire in 1890 and enrolled at the Slade in 1910. The students' study of this work revealed that Bradshaw's inspiration for the painting was probably neo classical sculptor John Gibson's drawing *Charity* of 1832, a drawing which he had donated as part of a study collection to the Royal Academy. He had worked in Antonio Canova's workshop. The positioning of Bradshaw's figures is almost identical, demonstrating the Slade's emphasis on studying from the old masters, but with Bradshaw's innovative interpretation of the subject and beautiful colourful, realist style.

Elsie McNaught, *A Frieze of Figures Standing in a Landscape*, 1910 (UCLAC 5264, First Prize (Equal), Summer Composition, 1910)

Elsie McNaught's work, which won the prize two years earlier than Spencer, demonstrates perhaps more clearly the culmination of the key aspects of the curriculum at this time, and was painted in McNaught's penultimate year at the school when she also won First Prize (equal) for Figure Painting.

McNaught was also a talented muralist, creating murals at Bishop Creighton House in Fulham in 1911 and at the entryway to the Whitechapel Art Gallery in 1918. She exhibited with New English Art Club between 1910 and 1920, and went on to work as a designer for textile manufacturer Tootal (now owned by Coates Viyella). Artwork by McNaught is also held in collections at Central St Martins and the University of Leeds.

Ruth Humphries, *A Group of Figures Standing in a Landscape*, 1913 (UCLAC 5265, First Prize, Summer Composition, 1913)

Ruth Humphries is an artist we, again, know very little about. This work won first prize for Summer Composition in 1913, narrowly beating Gilbert Spencer (Stanley's brother) and the painting was commended for its design and use of colour. This work has always been titled 'A Group of Figures Standing in a Landscape' but recent research in the UCL Union Magazine for that year has confirmed that the subject was the Seven Ages of Man.

Lastly, I'll just mention the two works at the back –

James Wilkie, *Reconstruction: A Horse and Cart with Figures in a Sandpit*, 1919 (UCLAC 5268 First Prize (Equal), Summer Composition, 1919)

Winifred Knights, *A Scene in a Village Street, Mill-Hands Conversing*, 1919 (UCLAC 5524, First Prize (Equal) Summer Composition, 1919)

James Wilkie and Winifred Knights were joint winners of the Summer Composition Prize in 1919, the first year it was awarded following the end of the war. The title set that year was not recorded, but given the subjects of the two works, it may have been the theme of 'work' or 'labour'.

Wilkie titled his painting 'Reconstruction'. The poses of the figures suggest these were based on studio models. There were sessions where the students could request the studio model to pose in a particular position, specifically so they could work towards their composition pieces. It was also not uncommon for horses to be brought in from the nearby stables – the men's life room downstairs had huge doors which would accommodate this.

Wilkie enrolled at the Slade 1913-1914 before serving in France during WWI and he returned to the School in 1919. He was elected to the New English Art Club in 1921, and exhibited at the Redfern and Leicester Galleries, the RA, Fine Art Society, Royal Glasgow Institute of Fine Arts and elsewhere. He taught at the Slade from 1920 until his death in 1957.

Winifred Knights' work, like Spencer's, is indicative of her distinctive style, demonstrating her move towards a flattening of perspective and tonal harmonies. It is interesting to note that many of these works would have hung in the Slade corridors for other students to see and according to Helen Lessore, a student during the 1920s, both the Knights and the Spencer were very prominent.

Knights' scene is thought to be in response to the numerous strikes which took place across England during the year and, as she often did in her works, the painting includes friends and relatives: The central figure in the red jacket is thought to be Knights' Aunt, Millicent Murby, a political activist – in the painting she is depicted as a trade unionist advocating improved rights for female workers. Knights appears behind her to the right and Knights' cousin, sister and mother are seated to the left. Fellow student Arnold Mason appears at upper right behind the wall.

After winning the Summer Composition Prize, Wilkie, Knights and two fellow students were selected to enter the Rome Scholarship competition, which, as I mentioned earlier, Knights became the first woman to be awarded in 1920.

Thank you, closing & end.

Thank you to MA students Hannah Blaine, Francesco Capitummino, Guilia Gilesi, Alyssa Parsons and Inga Ristau for their research into Violet Bradshaw and Elsie McNaught.

FURTHER INFORMATION

Helen Downes was Paul Mellon Centre Research Curator for Spotlight on the Slade Collections at UCL Art Museum 2015-2018. HelenLDownes@gmail.com.

If you wish to find out more about UCL Art Museum's collections, or view other works, please contact the Museum at college.art@ucl.ac.uk to enquire or make an appointment.

Useful reference books about the collection:

UCL Art Collections: An Introduction and Collections Guide, edited by Emma Chambers (UCL Art Collections, 2008)

Oil Paintings in Public Ownership: The Slade and UCL (Public Catalogue Foundation, 2005)

Useful Websites:

<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/culture/ucl-art-museum/about>

<https://artuk.org/visit/venues/ucl-art-museum-3457>