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GWEN JOHN AND SUZANNE VALADON

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G W E N J O H N A N D S U Z A N N E V A L A D O N

"A WOMAN WHO BREAKS THE MOULD MAY MAKE HER OWN NORMALITY" (Germaine Greer: The Obstacle Race.P67)

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ILLUSTRATIONS

INTRODUCTION

Some years ago while doing some research, I first read a number of books dealing specifically with women artists, their lives and their work. It was an important and somewhat traumatic experience. I had not previously fully realized the extent to which almost all female creativity in the visual arts had been neglected or mistreated by art historians and criti cs in the past. What made this disturbing and frustrating was that I personally considered a number of these artists to be extremely accomplished and on a par with many of their male contemporaries who were, of course, widely recognized, documented and much lauded by these same historians. I realize that women were not totally excluded but usually apart from some cursory paragraphs and a very rare token page or two, with few exceptions they tended to be more or less ignored.[1] A lot of the time what was written about women and their art was misleading and irrelevant and very much an arbitrary, haphazard representation. "Any work by a woman however trifling is as astonishing as the pearl in the head of the toad, it is not part of the natural order and need not be related to the natural order[2] - this was often the attitude and thus an unrealistic isolated and patronizing situation existed for women in the male orientated art world as in many other

spheres. To make matters even worse women artists were often mentioned solely in the context of the role they might have played in some male artists sex life. One finds the most illuminating tit bits of gossip and speculation about who might or might not have fathered their offspring or about how many 'great' artists they have modelled for and consequently slept with but very little real information or solid critical analysis of the work that they did.

This kind of patronizing and titillating attitude to individuals who in many cases produced very exciting and notable works and who were consistantly committed to their work is blatant discrimination. This comparative shortage and inadequacy of good evaluation and record of the work of past women artists is one of the curellest legacies of a long tradition of sexism in the visual arts. My concern at this situation combined with a genuine interest in and admiration for the work of many female artists made me feel that to write my thesis about two such individuals would be important and satisfactory. I chose two people who were alive and working at roughly the same time: Gwen John and Suzanne Valadon I do not intend, simply, to go through their lives year by year or their work piece by piece regurgitating what I have read in the few books written about them. Insteak to make this a valuable personal excercise I would like to consider

perhaps emphasize certain facets of their situation and examine certain pieces of work that particularly interest me or bear some relation to my own work. It is hard to decide exactly why I chose these particular two artists and not some others. They seem to be an unlikely combination at first sight but on closer examination I feel that they have some very fundamental qualities in common. They compliment each other well and raise a number of lively and stimulating questions and issues. I think the the one enduring facet of their work that interests me is their strength and single-mindedness in the face of many obstacles and their refusal to conform to male definition of a woman's role - to submit to male concepts of 'feminine beauty'. such determination in the face of many adversities is intriguing and invites examination. I will discuss each of them separately and then look at them together, in relation to each other, as women and as artists.

Introduction - footnotes

1. An example of this discrimination is the fact that in The Story of Art by Gombrich there is absolutely no reference to any women artists.

2. Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race p.4.

GWEN JOHN (1876 - 1939)

I THE EARLY YEARS

Gwendolen Mary John was born in Wales on the 27 June,1876. She was the second eldest in a family of four, her infamous and flambouyant brother Augustus was to follow eighteen months later. Their mother was very unhealthy and she died when Gwen was eight years old. Her relationship with her father was not very inspiring as he was a very anxious person with a strong religious vocation which he may have felt was thwarted by his young motherless children. They were a shy insular family. The formidable respectability and parsimony of their class-conscious father limited their number of friends whilefailing to win them entry into the upper echelons of Havardwest society. Augustus made an unusual comment on this years later:

> "Our invincible shyness comparable only to the dwarf inhabitants of Equatorial Africa, resisted every advance on the part of strangers"[1].

They certainly seemed to be a rather odd family. Gwen probably inherited her extreme social reticence from her father There are tales of her liking to remove all her clothes and

run naked along the secluded beaches and coves in the fresh sea air. It is difficult to reconcile this sort of abandoned behavious with Gwen John's almost painfully quiet and 'proper' self-portrait. The unlikeliness of this aspect of her personality makes it all the more interesting. At a very y9ung age Gwen had already begun to cultivate her renowned desire and need for solitude. She was a unique and private individual a mixture of freedom and repression, eccentricity and convention - a product of a strnage childhood and family. I feel that all this feeds directly into her work and results in the most exquisite atmosphere of highly charged emotions mixed with calm. Augustus once commented on these ambigious elements in his sister - her 'deceptiveness'. It is a very striking description of her which I would imagine was just as true of her as a child as it was when she grew older:

> "With our common contempt for sentimentality, Gwen and I were not opposites but much the same really but we had a different attitude. I am rarely exuberant, she was always so, latterly in a tragic way. She wasn't chaste and subdued but amorous and proud. She didn't steal through life but preserved a haughty independence. Her passions for both men and women were both outrageous and irrational She was never unnoticed by those who had access to her"[2].

October 1894 saw Augustus' departure to the Slade School much to Gwen's chagrin. She was frustrated by the atmosphere at home and wrote to her friend Ursula Tyrwhitt of how it sapped her energy and will to work. This situation did not last long, Gwen joined Augustus in London a year later. Newly established the Slade was to provide an alternative to the English Art Academy. The Slade in the words of its first director E.J. Poynter "stressed the free and intellectual manner of drawing that was found in the Paris Ateliers Sketching done form life not casts"[3]. Gwen did not share 'digs' with Augustus very much during her college life as in his company she found it hard to maintain the single-mindedness and determination that was so necessary to her work. Augustus did not belong to the part of her heart and her mind that was dedicated to her painting. This part could perhaps only be shared by those, mostly women, whose sensibility came directly from the soul and not like her brother from the nerves. She needed space - a chaotic person like Augustus simply invaded that and dissapated her mind. In order for Gwen to realize her feelings, express her thoughts - to make her work she had to confine herself to a small private 'world' which she could control. She spoke of this to Ursula Tyrwhitt:

"I should like to go and live somewhere where I met nobody I knew until I am so strong that people and things could not affect me beyond reason"[4].

Her constant need for distance from Augustus and others however did not stop her from having a productive and reasonably normal time at the Slade. She did well there and received some prizes, notably one for drawing. She was an inconspicious but steady member of a precociously talented group, did not lack for friends or companionship but as always appears to have kept her own personality intact drawing an invisible line beyond which people and their influences were not welcome The Slade at this time while professing a 'free and intelligent' attitude was still pretty archaic in its attitude to women, few were expected to persist in their work after the delights of marriage and motherhood were bestowed upon them and, unfortunately, few did.

In 1898 Gwen and two friends, Ida Nettleship and Gwen Salmond went to Paris where through a certain amount of rule-bending Gwen was able to study at the Acadamie Carmen[5] under the great 'master' Whistler. Whistler had a considerable effect on Gwen John's work. He was very much the 'master' offering nothing easy - no short cuts. Seemingly, Augustus visited Paris around that time and on meeting Whistler remarked, somewhat patronizingly I feel, that in his opinion Gwen's work

had a sense of character. Whistler is said to have replied most emphatically "Character, what's character? It's tone that matters, your sister shows a sense of tone"[6] Whistler, unlike the Slade, was a great believer in painting rather than drawing. He said "I do not teach art, I teach the scientific application of paint and brushes"[7]. In this atmosphere Gwen developed a very methodical technique and learned a lot about the physical qualities of paint and perhaps during this time she acquired the near reverence with which she approached it. It was a relatively short but vitally important period of her career.

II SELF PORTRAIT IN A RED BLOUSE

In 1899 they returned to England and it was in this year that Gwen began one of the more well-known of her oil paintings - her Self-Portrait (Fig.1). She painted herself in a still and quite sombre pose wearing a red blouse. It was to a certain extent, as was common among her Slade contemporaries at the time, in the manner of the 17th century Dutch interiors in its warm red and brown tones. In this painting, I think that what she has learned at the Slade and perhaps more importantly some of the knowledge imparted to her by Whistler during her stay in Paris fused with her own complex self to result in a fine and arresting piece of work.

It is a self-portrait in the truest sense, each brushstroke tells us as much about her as do the arrangement of features or the characteristic composition. It embodies all the facets of her contradictory personality which is consequently portrayed and mirrored in her physical appearance. As Susan Chitty says:

> "It is a picture which conveys her character perfectly according to people who knew her. The gentleness of the eyes is contradicted by the obstinacy of the mouth and yet an over-riding impression of calm is given"[8].

Indeed I think that the receding John chin which Augustus has sucessfully camoflaged with a beard could almost be said to symbolize her withdrawn nature. There is a strange mixture of diffidence and stubbourness of strength and passivity. In the same way the pervading darkness of colour is interrupted and relieved by the red of the blouse, the plainness alleviated by the relative ornateness of the cameo brooch and her earrings. I think that these latter things reflect and heighten the other contrasts that were jpart of Gwen John. All in all it is, in my opinion, an excellent painting and it has a sense of timelessness that I find very special. I think that in this painting Gwen not only brought herself (personality-wise) to the canvas but the sum of what she had learned from others. Sir John Rotherstein[9] although feeling it was "one of the finest portraits of the time" pointed out that it owed

the technical perfection of its glazes to the knowledge of Ambrose McEvoy, a fellow student and special friend at the Slade, which was "as generously imparted as it was laboriously acquired". It is strange how everything successful in a woman's work must automatically be attributed to the help of some 'wise' male who generously shared his superior experience. However, she probably did benefit from her familiarity with McEvoy's work and also from the new appreciation of the physical qualities of paint obtained via Whistler as opposed to the graphic emphasis of the Slade. The painting despite the subtlety and translucency of the glazes has a solidity that expresses this. The self portrait was exhibited in the NEAC[10] show in 1900 - Gwen's first time to exhibit there. It was bought by Frederick Brown, a former professor of Gwen's at the Slade who was a generous patron to his students.

Around this time the close relationship that had existed between Gwen and Ambrose McEvoy came to an abrupt end when he became engaged to somebody else. Naturally, this was a traumatic experience for Gwen and upset her greatly. However, also at this time she had what is somewhat misleadingly called a joint exhibition with Augustus in the newly opened Carafax gallery - Augustus hung fortyfive paintings - Gwen only three!

Augustus appeared to be always admiring of his sister's work and said of the show:

> "Gwen has the honours or should have for alas our smug critics don't appear to have noticed the presence in the gallery of two rare blossoms from most delicate trees. The little pictures of me are almost painfully charged with feeling even as their neighbours are empty of it. And to think that Gwen so rarely brings herself to paint"[11].

The above may sound slightly exagerrated coming from the confident Augustus but his respect for Gwen's work does appear to have been genuine and consistent throughtout his lifetime. In fact later in life he became almost maudlin on the subject saying that in fifty years time he would be remembered only as the brother of Gwen John[12]. He ovviously seriously underestimated the sexism of art connoiseurs and society in general at that time. Despite marginal improvements, mainly in the shape of one book and a few exhibition catalogues, you still meet blank faces when your mention her name and instant recognition in the case of Augustus. However, the Carafax Show did nothing to help Gwen's distraught conditions Unlike Augustus she could not externalize her emotional condition but she finally managed to shut off her feelings for McEvoy and decided to leave London. It seemed fitting that she should distance herself from her sad recent past geographically as well as emotionally. She decided, along with a

friend to walk to Rome! Her companion was Dorelia McNeill, a young woman Gwen had met at a party and who was to figure prominently in the John family affairs as well as in a number of Gwen's paintings. They left England in September 1903 and, by steamer, travelled to Bordeaux where they started walking This was an amazing feat for two women to attempt at that time and it is further evidence of the strength and unconventionality of this unique person. The travelling was difficult but only typical of the kind of hardship that seems to have been so necessary to Gwen and consequently her work. To make money for food and occasionally sparse accomodation, the two of them made portrait sketches of the local farmers in the cafés. By November they had reached Toulouse, rented a room and begun to work. Ambitious plans for reaching Rome seem to have been abandoned. Gwen set herself a target of five paintings to finish before leaving for Paris, three of which were portraits of Dorelia. She wrote interestingly of this period to Ursula Tyrwhitt:

> "I am hurrying so, because we are so tired of Toulouse. We do not want to stay a day longer than necessary - I do nothing but paint - but you know how slowly that gets on, a week is nothing. One thinks one can do so much in a week but if one can do one square inch that pleases, one ought to be happy for after all to do in a year something beautiful a joy forever, would be splendid"[13].

Eventually the paintings were finished, for the time being at least and the two of them set off for Paris in March 1904. On arrival in Paris Gwen simply resumed painting and both

of them survived on money that they earned form modelling. Then Doretia ran off to Belgium with a young artist that they had encountered on their travels to escape the attentions of the persistent Augustus. Gwen was now alone in Paris with very little to distract her from her work. One of the paintings that Gwen had worked on in Toulouse and which she now presumably completed was the Portrait of Dorelia by Lamplight at Toulouse (Fig.2). In it Doretia is seated at a table reading a book. The colouring is notably different from that of her earlier self portrait in that, apart from the dark background the tones are fresher, for example a lifely grey on the dress and the pink on the lips and cheeks. It is a beautiful painting. The influence of Whistler's cool and muted palette is becoming more apparent. Again the composition is simple and typical of Gwen John - a solitary figure in the forefront of the canvas - a woman. The figure is quiet and pale but strong in its self-contained stillness and inner life. The life is conveyed by the translucent and appealing skin tones. It is another example of Gwen John's ability to make a painting just right without going too far or stopping short of what she wanted to achieve. Its very simplicity of aim is what makes it so successful. What Germaine Greer has to say about Gwen John's work is particularily applicable in this case:

> "A Gwen John painting, however small, diffident in its colour scheme and apparent subject is a sharp point of concentrated feeling, haunting and challenging in its modesty"[14].

Dorelia by Lamplight at Toulouse is simply a portrait of a woman by a woman. It is interesting to note that Gwen portrayed Dorelia as she was, quite rounded and plump while the renowned Augustus, who always chided her for her fat, consistently painted her as someone extremely skinny - almost to the point of anorexia in some cases!

III RODIN AND HER MIDDLE PAINTINGS

In 1904, Gwen briefly considered returning to England (Dore ia had already done so) and attending the Chelsea Art School which Augustus had just opened with Orpen. However something happened which was to change her life and perhaps her work considerably - she met Rodin. Gwen 'fell in love' with hi m and he soon became her lover, father-figure and artistic 'guru', playing a large part in her life intermittently for the next thirteen eyars until his death. Gwen was seen modelling regularly for him and while she did discuss art with him and probably benefitted from his experience and advice, enriched herself generally, during the years of her involvement with Rodin her output fell drastically. This kind of situation and its depressing outcome seems to have been habitual in the lives of women artists[15]. Much is made of this protracted affair with Rodin, especially by Susan Chitty in her book and assuredly it appears to have been of paramount importance to Gwen John, but I feel that is a pity she became

so submissive toward Rodin for it interrupted her work flow quite considerably. However, as the affair waned she began to get some real work done again and it cannot be denied that some good did emerge from this association with regard to her art. Rodin encouraged her to draw more freely. Under his influence Gwen abandoned the Slade's technique of drawing with its careful interior modelling, developing instead, to an extent, a kind of looseness and spontaneity similar to Rodin's own style. He also deepened and reiterated her already finely-tuned appreciation of nature. She wrote lovingly and admiringly of him to Ursula Tyrwhitt:

"There is only one way to follow Rodin and that is to study nature with this humble and patient love"[16].

She also described how he taught others to look, paraphrasing his words

"Observe the grace of life, make it without timidity - not to be preoccupied with details but not leave gaps either"[17].

During this periodwhen Gwen was spending much time participating in Rodin's "banquet of buttocks"[18] she did get a certain amount done. She found time to experiment briefly with etching which she found interesting but never really followed up. Etching would probably not have suited her because using metal and "drawing with acid" would totally exclude the kind of extreme control that was necessary to her. In 1907, Gwen painted what is one of her best known pieces of work which, ironically is not a portrait of a woman but one of a room in

which she lived. A Corner of the Artists Room in Paris (Fig.3) might also be seen in some way as a self-portrait as it is so evocative of her life at this time and of herself generally. If Dorelia by Lamplight at Toulouse could be seen as a transition from the Salde style with its flemish interior overtones towards paler and fresher tones and colours (initiated by her period of study with Whistler) then undoubtedly this is the full blown arrival at this stage. It is full of mystical greys and touches of pink and pale, pale primrose yellow. It is very painterly with great cultivation of the surface resulting in a kind of shimmering, tactile slightly out of focus or soft focus effect. Again it tells us so much about her in its curious contradictions - the austere unadorned cheap furniture with the pretty flowers and the lacy umberella and muslin curtains. one can so easily liken this to her own mixture of severity and gaiety, her appearance combining plainness with dashes of vanity. Quite certainly it is impressionistic in that it traps such a fleeting vein of a room in a certain light and manner. Its overall ambience is very impressionistic. Although she was recognizably linked to Impressionism in her treatment of some things, she was more truthfully in the literal sense Post-Impressionist, in that, like everything and everbody that she came in contact with, she took only what she wanted of it. She adapted it to her own unique style and philosophy and then moved on uninhibited by true stylistic or movement-orientated shackles. She did not veer from her

own course. It must have been difficult to resist at that time in Paris. This painting also reminds me of Morandi's still-life in that there is amongst inaminate objects an almost tangible sense of human life and presence. Thre is something vibrant and 'expectant' about them. This painting and some of Morandi's are also quite similar in the use of colour and application of paint although Gwen's chalky colours do not detract at all from the wet glazey quality of the paint. Susan Chitty gives quite an interesting description of this particular painting;

> "A Corner of the Artists Room in Paris was painted soon after she moved there in March 1907 in order to convey the feeling she had about the room to Rodin ... she painted an interior that has a powerful effect on all who see it. She presented a room that is practically unfurnished, devoid of carpets, curtains and ornaments. A cheap table and a wicker chair stand on base tiles. The only decoration is a bunch of primroses on the table. Yet these objects are transformed by the diffused light from a french window hung with muslin. The chair and table each assume a compelling and expectant stillness. Somebody or something is in the room"[19].

Gwen was reasonably happy and she felt very attached to this room - this shows in the painting. In 1908, due to combined shortage of money and encouragement from Ursula Tyrwhitt, she

sent two paintings to the NEAC show. Augustus, displaying his materialistic tendencies, described them as "staggering" and "worth more money than his own"[20]. The entry of these paintings signifies a return to work by Gwen John, although she continued to spend much time sketching as opposed to concentrating and working on her paintings. She was convinced, like Rodin, that nature was the artist's true inspiration. She felt that there is poetry in the depiction of natural objects such as an attic, a family group, a basket of kittens or a portrait of a person. The style of her drawing at this time became increasingly simple and almost severe, reflecting her admiration of Japanese drawing[21].

She also did some experimenting with gouaches. She considered that this would benefit her greatly when she resumed painting in oils.

Perhaps she was right - not long after this, in 1910, Gwen painted two interesting pieces that are maybe the strongest of any of her work. They were entitled Girl with Bare Shoulders (Fig.4) and Nude Girl (Fig.5) respectively. They are both portraits of a friend Fenella Lovell, one with the subject wearing a white dress off her shoulders and the other with the same model. When I look at them I think immediately of the much quoted remark that Gwen John made about her own

work:

"A search for strange formis what the best drawing has always been concerned with"[22].

The form is certainly strange in these paintings, for example the arms are very elongated as is the white trunk of the body. I think that they also serve as an example of the unconventional and undeniable confidence she had in work in that through these two paintings she displayed her willingness to take on Goya himself - who was wont to set himself just such an exercise. Goya also had executed two Studies for the Figure Stratonice in this manner. Gwen's two paintings in comparison to these firmly rooted in reality, despite her playing around with anatomy and bear more relation to everyday women - a habitual strength in women's art. A sensitive critic noted a growing trust in the eyes of the second painting - replacing the slightly wary look in the clothed study. This is interesting, I feel that they are very much a woman's portrait of another woman, there is no idealization, no need for the proper curves to confirm to any 'artist model' fashion of the day. Here we have 'strange form' indeed but realistic as opposed to idealized or sterotypical. There is no voluptuousness, no sense of voyeurism; just that feeling of trust uniquely present between two women encompassed in the emotive portraits. Technically they are reminiscent of her earlier work, for example her Self Portrait in that they do not have the later 'frosty' slightly ice-cream colours quite so

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evident but more 'body', depth and darkness. The long tortuous neck reminds me of Modigliani's but they are more severe, exclusively a product of Gwen John. I find them the most absorbing of her paintings. There is a poignancy that I don not feel in the later more 'attractive' work - for me they represent the height of her painting. After these two pieces Gwen John, for me, slipped a little into 'lightness' never to reach point of concentrated feeling again.

In 1911 Gwen exhibited with the NEAC and she wrote to a friend describing her feelings about participating in shows like this.

> "I paint a good deal but I don't often get a picture done - that requires for me a very long time of quiet mind, and never to think of exhibitions"[23]

But she also appears to have been quietly determined at this time telling Ursula Tyrwhitt in a letter:

> "I cannot imagine why my vision will have some value in the wrold and yet I know it will"[24]

IV JOHN QUINN AND HIS PATRONAGE

Meanwhile, Augustus had met an American patron of the arts through the Yeats family. This was John Quinn and he was a highly successful New York Corporate Lawyer, who had jsut begun to

to build up his art collections. Quinn saw himself not merely as a collector but more as a collaborator who by his patronage of an artist freed him of financial worries. It is interesting to note that it was Quinn's monetary assistance that enabled T.S. E liot to leave his bank job and devote himself seriously to his writing. At any rate, at this time Quinn was in the process of moving away from collecting the art works of acknowledged masters towards the infinitely more challenging task of identifying and supporting younger artists in whom he 'believed'. He was seen paying Augustus a yearly income and they carried on an animated correspondence. Augustus offered news of the London art scene and recommended the work of several young English artists among them Epstein, Wyndham Lewis and his own sister Gwen. Quinn promptly wrote to Gwen offering her the generous sum of £30 for any painting of her choice - Gwen replied reasonably favourably thus launching the long, if somewhat erratic, business relationship between the two. From this time until his death in 1924, Quinn paid Gwen an annual stipend and they exchanged letters regularly. Unfortunately for Quinn, despite the acquisition of many drawings and gouaches, he received relatively few of her major oil paintings. Typically Gwen John's antipathy for working towards exhibitoin or other deadlines resulted in John Quinn getting a very poor return for his long and dedicated investment in her. It was by no means merely

financial. Even when Quinn had ceased his arrangement with Augustus he never faltered in his belief in and support of Gwen's work. He realized that perhaps Augustus had "the spark of brilliance that proved erratic" and Gwen "the small but steadier beam"[25]. He expressed the value he placed upon her work when he wrote to her on receipt of the painting Mere Poussepin (Fig.6), he said "If I had to make a choice between the painting by you that I boug ht from the nuns and the Picasso's, I should cheerfully sacrifice the Picasso's, for your painting does have much charm for me and is a very beautiful and sincere and fine thing"[26]. This was high praise indeed and considered in retrospect it is mind-boggling! However, Quinn appears to have been an enlightened and unbiased patron with very original and personal criteria and taste. He was also the patron for a brief time of the French artist Marie Laurencin and clearly in no way discriminated against the work of female artists - which was unusual and refreshing in itself.

In 1913, Gwen John simultaneously moved to the Parisian suburb of Meudon and became converted to Catholicism. She was not a conventional Roman Catholic but always an ardent one. This embracing of the faith was not totally out of character in view of the religious inclinations of Rodin, her father and her maternal aunts. In Meudon she spent much time in the

local church of the Dominican Sisters of Charity. They commissioned her to do a series of portraits of their founder nun. She had much difficulty with the commision. The American poet Jeanne Robert Foster, who was visiting Paris at the time and had met Gwen John, wrote of this to her close friend John Quinn

> "She painted and repainted seven Mere Poussetier (sic) hiding or destroying all of them. Seven years of agony passed. She never had a portrait she dared show the priest. Finally he lost his patience and said 'Are you or are you not going to paint Mere Poussetier?' Then, desperate, she began this painting the miracle happened, the technique born of seven years of travail and of great love had been perfected. She was an artist. She said she would never have been an artist if it had not been for this priest"[28].

So finally the first of the Mere Poussepin paintings was completed and Quinn eagerly purchased it and thought very highly of it. In it the subjects face/figure is based upon a prayer card and this accounts for the smiling expression which is so uncharacteristic of Gwen John's work. It is very typical of her later painting. Whereas, sometimes in the early formative works the figures were small in this as is consistent with her later style, the figure is large and almost bordering on monumental. Also in keeping with her more mature pieces the paint is applied in small dabs as

opposed to glazes and use of varnish. The brush is often 'dragged' leaving frequent skips in the paint. This results in a dry fresco-like surface and a more notably chalky effect that is reminiscent of P de Cha vannes who Gwen held in great esteem once saying "surely he is the greatest painter of the century[29]. Her brush strokes also bear comparison to some of her English Camdentown contemporaries such as Sickert. In this painting also, as opposed to earlier work such as Dorelia by Lamplight at Toulouse the light is generalized and constant, with no obvious source. This works well as a unifying factor as do the slmost patterned brushstrokes. Apart entirely from the concrete establishment of these stylistic changes it is an appealing painting It has a calm, restful quality - pensive and reposed as one might ideally expect a portrait of a nun to be. The colours are more monotone than before - perhaps an indication of things to come? The painting seems to have lost some of the translucent but suppressed emotions that always appeared to simmer so near the calm surface of Gwen John's paintings lending them that incomparable air of tenseness and depth. Perhps this is due to an actual dearth of these troubled feelings in Gwen John as by the time this painting was finished, Rodin was dead for some time. Gwen appears to have been sadly and quietly working away in Meridan more cut off than ever befoer from people and 'commonplace' activities

such as love affairs and friendships other than those conducted by post. She had begun to retreat more and more toward her religion and escape into her work and she wrote to Quinn describing this monotonous life style

> "I am quiet in my work now and think of nothing else. I paint till it is dark and the days are longer now and lighter and then have supper, and then I read for about an hour and think of my painting and then I go to bed. Every day is the same. I like this life very much"[30].

Unfortunately I do not think this hermitic life paid off in terms of her work. She grew rather obsessed with her religious beliefs, referring to herself as "God's little artist"[31] and yet she never really made any definite statement about them in her work. She never channelled them towards any visual conclusion or comment unlike Chagall or Roualt whose wrok she greatly admired[32]. She became increasingly repetitive and churned out up to ten versions of some of her pieces, each one with an almost imperceptible difference in colour or compositional emphasis

V THE LATER YEARS

Another influence at this time was the fact that Gwen John fell in love rather tragically with a neighbour in Meudon. the affair was tragic in that the object of her affections, Vera Oumanc ff (sister-in-law of the Catholic philosopher

Maritian) did not return her devotion beyond further encouraging masochistic penances and her religious beliefs. Most of the wrok, therefore, is connected with religion but not in a particularly serious or didactic way. An example of this is the gouache Two Women Seated in Church One Wearing a Check Coat (Fig.7). I feel that this picture displays how she has lost her 'edge'. For me, although it is attractive and charming enough, it is too pretty and illustrative. It is in no way as worthwhile as her earlier work technically conceptually or emotionally.

From now on Gwen John's health deteriorated rapidly. She closeted herself sway with her cats in Meudon resisting pressure to return home to England. She had less communication with the outside world than ever b fore. She head more or less ceased to paint and by her domestic negligence was practically letting herself die. In September 1939 she fell ill and longed to be beside the sea. she travelled to Dieppe but collapsed on arrival and was taken to the local hospital where she died.

Augustus wrote of her after her death:

"Few on meeting this retiring person in black with her tiny hands and feet, a soft almost inaudible voice and delicate Pembrokeshire accent would have guessed that here was the

greatest woman artist of her age and I think of any other"[33].

At her zenith Gwen John was certainly a gifted painter worthy of examination but sadly, I think, that somehow to a large extent through conditoning she failed to realize her full potential and achieve true greatness as a painter. She made some very good paintings, full of strength and ability but in time unfortunately, put less and less feeling into the work and consequently painted it less memorably. I think that she was a strong and unique woman who in many ways was unaffected by social constraints (including those exclusively placed upon women) and make her work independently andtherefore with immense strength. However, in some deeply ingrained, irredeemable way she was a product of 19th century middle class bourgeois Britian in all its sexist glory. A fraction of her bowed to those with more obvious facilities and talents (such as Rodin) and she baulked at really 'letting herself go' and being arrogantly confident of her own ability. I think that this fraction of her, however infinitessimal, made a difference to the amount and the consistency of the work that she produced.

Chapter One - GWEN JOHN (1876 - 1939) - footnotes

1. Michael Holroyd, Augustus John, P.76
2. Ibid,
3. Ibid,P. 54
4. Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses, P110-113
5. The Acadamie Carmen was run by a former model of Whistler's called Carmen Rossi. He attended twice a week to instruct pupils.
6. Michael Holroyd, Augustus John, P.112
7. Ibid.
8. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.54
9. Ibid.
10. New English Art Club
11. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.55
12. Betsy Fryberger and Cecily Langdale, Stanford Museum of Art Catalogue, P.6
13. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.61
14. Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race, P.110
15. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.37
16. Betsy Fryberger and Cecily Langdale, Stanford Museum of Art Catalogue, P.6
17. Ibid.
18. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.67
19. Ibid, P.95

20. M. Holroyd, Augustus John, P.235

21. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.97

22. Karen Peterson and JJ Wilson, Women Artists, P.100

23. Betsy Fryberger and Cecily Langdale, Stanford Museum of Art Catalogue .

24. Ibid.

25. Ibid, P.7

26. Ibid, P.12

27. Rodin attended Mass regularly at Notre Dame.

28. Betsy Fryberger and Cecily Langdale, Stanford Museum of Art Catalogue,P.12.

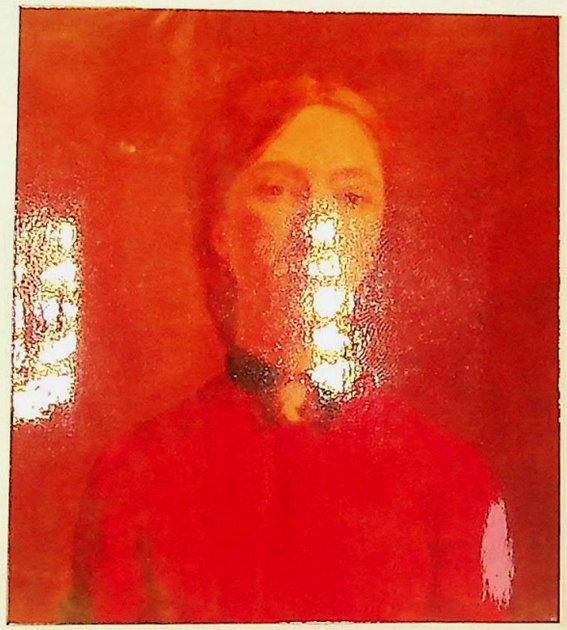
29. Ibid. p.18

30. Ibid.P.11

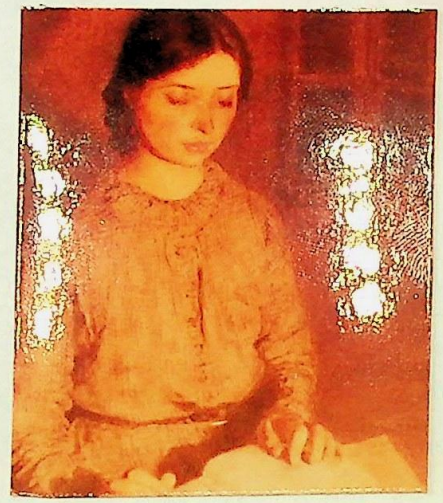
31. Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses, P.110 - 113.

32. Betsy Fryberger and Cecily Langdale,Stanford Museum of Art Catalogue, P.17

33. Michael Holroyd, Augustus John, P.676

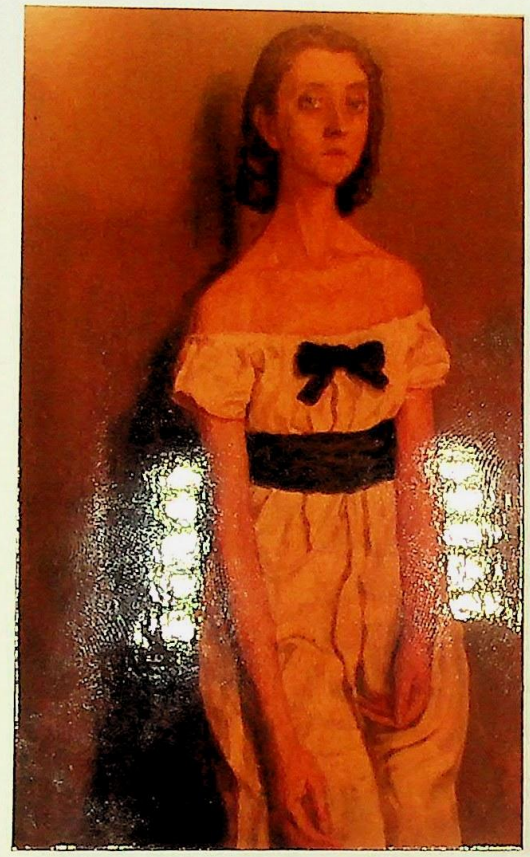


(Fig.1) SELF-PORTRAIT by Gwen John

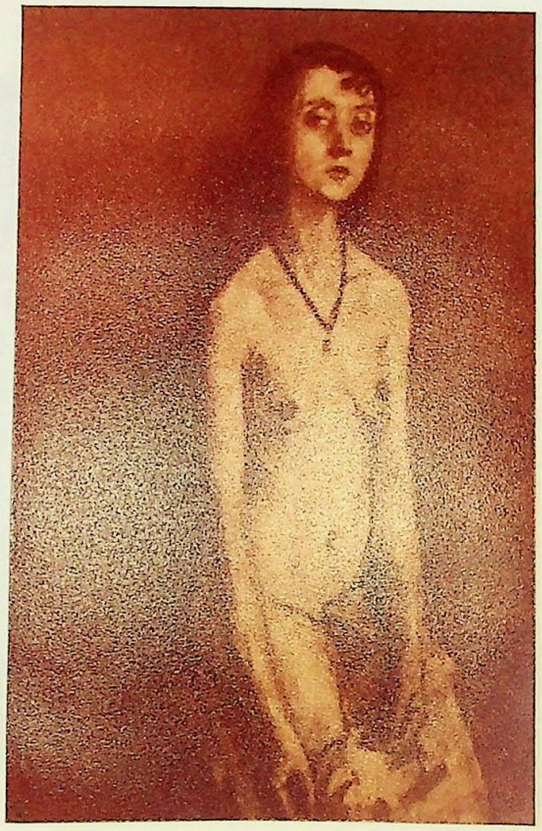


(Fig.2) PORTRAIT OF DORELIA BY LAMPLIGHT AT TOULOUSE BY Gwen John

(Fig.3) A CORNER OF THE ARTISTS ROOM IN PARIS by Gwen John



(Fig.4) GIRL WITH BARE SHOULDERS by Gwen John



(Fig.5) NUDE GIRL by Gwen John

(Fig.6) MERE POUSSEPIN by Gwen John

(Fig.7) TWO WOMEN SEATED IN CHURCH ONE WEARING A CHECK COAT by Gwen John

SUZANNE VALADON (1867 - 1938)

I EARLY DEVELOPMENT

Suzanne Valadon[1] was born in Limoges outside Paris in 1867 she was the illegitimate daughter of a peasant woman. Her mother was the local laundress. When Suzanne was a young child they moved to Paris and settled in Montmartre. Her early life as a tough Parisian street Gamine made her very precocious, a quality that was to persist throughout her entire life and work. As a child the only person she was said to hold in any esteem or to ape in any way was the medieval outlaw poet Francois Villon. She used to call herself Madamoiselle Villon and practice a walk and 'devil-may-care' attitude modelled on her hero[2]. She needed audacity and courage to tear any satisfaction from this often grim life on the streets. However, audacity was certainly never a problem for her and her first job was with a circus - as a trapeze artist! Unfortunately for Suzanne (but fortunately for the world of art) this strange career came to an abrupt end when she injured herself in a fall from the trapeze. By chance she became an artists model in the Montparnasse studios. She posed for Renoir, Degas, Lautrec and the renowned P. de Chavannes, and also lesser-known artists

such as the Czeckoslovakian painter Inais and the American Howland. This contact was the beginning of her own life as an artist. She is recorded as having felt an immediate sense of belonging:

> "I remember the first sitting I did. I remember saying to myself over and over again 'This is it! This is it!' Over and over I said it all day. I did not know why . But I knew that I was somewhere at last and that I should never leave"[3].

She began to make drawings and to paint. Although she had no formal training she drew instinctively well. While she was still young she sold some drawings to Ambrose Vollard and to others. To some extent Toulouse-Lautrec and Degas saw beyond her role as an artists model and encouraged her work, The latter was to carry on an animated correspondence with her for many years - often referring to her "tough and supple" drawings[4], discussing art with her and generally recognizing her as "one of us", far more than he had ever done with Mary Casatt.[5] Of course that tacit acceptance of a woman into that elite male clique of 20th century French art was very much an exception, Suzanne a freak - "the pearl in the head of the toad".

Although suzanne clearly understood the work of Puvis de chavannes, Toulouse-Lautrec, Renoir, Degas, Van Gogh and Gauguin, She was not <u>so</u> impressed that she ever abandoned

her own individual and highly charged modes of representation for any current "ism". For example, I think it is clear that her widely remarked debt to Degas has been much exagerated in that her line is much harder less sentimental and more decisive than his. Suzanne Valadon's work could be seen as a kind of link between the work of the Nabis and the more aggressive Fauves. She resembled the Nabis by her frequent recourse to the boundary line, occasional low tones and flatness of form and her experiments, very often successful, in decoration. She was sympathetic to the Fauvist movement in the vibrant intensity of some of her colours and the expressive method and motifs she employed. However, as I have said, she very refreshingly refrained from attaching herself completely to either movement, retaining her own style.

II SELF PORTRAIT IN PASTELS

In 1883, Suzanne Valadon did a self portrait (Fig.8) in pastels. Unlike Renois's stereotypical treatment of her face in his painting the Bathers with its chocolate-box sweetness, "allpouting mouth and retroussé nose"[6] this is a strong and expressive self portrait. It is an effective piece. In it I feel that Suzanne used the inherent qualities of the pastels very well in that she exploited fully the range

of softness, both of tone and surface, without detracting from the strength or hardness of some parts of it. Its success its choice of emphasis and its effect as an image of a woman dispute other pieces like Renoir's The Bathers in many ways. Looking at this I can imagine the youthful vital Suzanne enjoying drawing - enjoying life not over-concerned wtih perhaps harsh circumstances or by her past. What Germaine Greer said about her work applied to this relatively early piece as much as to later ones:

> "The bodies that she liked best are used, ample, pregnant with sexual power, innocent of idealization or sentimentality"[7].

I feel that this piece despite, or perhaps because of, its simplicity ahs a certain power. The face is strong and definitely free from overt idealization or prettiness. The artist chooses, perhaps significantly, to depict herself clothed. She concentrates on the face and emphatically underlines the heavy jawline, the dark eyebrows and the indifferent but nonetheless assertive and uncompromising gaze turned upon herself and therefore the spectator. It is a successful portrait of a confident but vulnerable and somewhat sad peasant girl - with all her strength of mind contained within the almost crudely drawn face. IronicallySuzanne was pregnant indeed and her son Maurice Utrillo was born in

December 1883. Much attention is paid in art history books to the parentage of Maurice Utrillo but I think that it is rather irrelevant at this point - apparently Suzanne Valadon considered it so. The reality of motherhood did little to disturb her eccentric lifestyle or her art. she is said to have introduced the very young Maurice to the dubious 'delights' of cognac to stop him interfering with her social life or her work. It certainly proved to be a novel solution resulting in his later alcoholism and severe emotional problems. She also, more kindly perhaps, taught him to paint and it is ironic that in several art history books she is merely mentioned in passing as the mother of that 'well known French Artist' Maurice Utrillo and not in her own right. This is ironic indeed because Maurice was totally in awe of his mother. As a young artist he was in a similar situation to many women who 'fall in love with' or marry senior and admired male painters. He was invaded and swamped by his mother's artistic personality for years.

III THE MIDDLE PERIOD - HER SUBJECT PAINTINGS

Suzanne worked steadily away on her 'hard, graceful and malign'[5] drawings and her crude but expressive paintings showing little interest in or care for convention, or the question of acceptance into the right art circles or movements. She simply

seems to have wallowed in the delights of line and paint and colour. I think that all this is evident in an undated painting of hers called Girl in White Stockings (Fig.9). This painting is full of unquenchable joie de vivre. The colours and the pose and indeed the whole rhythmic way that it is painted, seem to to be shouting from the canvas in her unmistakeable way. Of this painting, particularly, I agree with Germaine Greer's commetns in the Obstacle Race:

> "Boldness was her hallmark,, boldness of conception, boldness of design and boldness of execution and she lived with the same uncompromising boldness. A fierce emotional sensuality lights up the most banal subject in her hands"[9].

Certainly Suzanne did not see portraits of people, more particularly of herself or other women, as banal. She once said that she admired and was "intrigued by the technique of the Pont-Aven" and vowed to apply it to her own more naturalistic subjects in her own way "without any trace of aestheticism or artiness"[10]. I also admire the unconventional model she has used,for a change we see a real woman with her fat thighs and rosy cheeks - in other words "warts and all"! It is distant from many of the current representations of women that so many of the contemporaries made. Critics of Valadon often spoke of her "unfeminine nudes"[11] but I feel that this description of them is very invalid.

Her female nudes might not conform to male fantasy expectations or to fashionable 'vital statistics' but they are undeniably very 'feminine' if one must use that tag, in that they exude femaleness in a realistic and unidealized sense - a Way that certainly women can understand and identify with. At some stage in his life Utrillo is supposed to have shown a painting to Suzanne and asked "is it ugly?" Her reply is reputed to have been "It can't be ugly enough!"[12]., thus showing her great dislike of and resentment for that superficial pleasantness upheld by the academics as the only acceptable beauty. For that particular period of art her attitude and her lively practice of it is, in my opinion, very refreshing. The woman in the painting is rather beautiful in herself and this is conveyed in many ways including the great tactile quality of some of the painted surface and the bright reds and glowing, warm skintones. All in all it is one of my favourite pieces and I consider it one of Suzanne Valadon's most successful. It is important to note at this point that her strong decorative sense evident in this as in many of her paintings was not so much a matter of appeal but more a natural rhythmic part of her, an expression of her emotional energy.

Suzanne was briefly married to a business man, Paul Moussis, but in 1910 she left him to set up a menage-a-trois studio

situation with her son and his friend, her newlover, Andre Utter. Utter was twenty two and at this stage a practicing artist. Eventually he, as well as Maurice, became overwhelmed by Suzanne's work and he almost completely abandoned his own work. In 1913, suzanne made a painting called Nets (Fig.10). This was an unusual undertaking for a woman at the time as the canvas was 'full' of male nudes. Andre Utter posed for it. Women were not in the habit of such risque practices. It is a very lively and powerful painting. Suzanne has not flaunted her unconventionality to too great an extent - the one full-fronted male figure is cleverly, if somewhat 'phallically' dressed in places with the ropes of a fishing net. in this painting her great strength of line is evident. The outlines of the figures are heavy and taut if somewhat flat and stylised. This tautness is in keeping with the energy contained within the male figures. The nets work interestingly as a pattern partly obscuring sections of the body and also as a compositional device that creates a strong flow and unity of movement within the whole piece. It is an interesting pai nting in itself as well as in its use of subject matter for that time

In her frankly sensual celebration of the body of Andre Utter Suzanne Valadon threw down a challenge to her contemporaries both male and female and to a century's old tradition which was one of incredible oppression of the female. At this time women were irretrievably labelling themselves loose and immoral

by studying the male nude but Suzanne Valadon thankfully cared little for these niceties. Although this piece might be considered rather over self-conscious in the shielding of the genitals, it was a brave undertaking for that era and must surely have played a part in paving the way for a much more realistic appraoch in this area. It look forward to new ways of seeing and depicting male nudes - is a forerunner of Alice Neil and Sylvia Sleigh and their more explicit work.

Antoher undated painting that was unusual in some aspects of its subject matter was The Blue Room (Fig.11). It is a painting of a reclining woman (perhaps herself) but beyond that all traditional elements disappear. The woman is wearing stripped pants that would not be out of place in our own 'fashion' conscious world and is smoking what looks suspiciously like a Galuois. To depict a reclining female smoking a cigarette must surely break countless unspoken codes of behavious in early 20th century French art. It is a very strong painting and such incongruous aspects as the pants or the cigarette do not detract from its impact. The background and the couch on which the figure reclines are very rigorously and decoratively painted. To me it is on a par with Girl in White Stockings (Fig.9) a strong and sensuously female painting and a pun on a long tradition of 'stuffy' passive and voyeuristically-treated reclining female figures.

In 1920, suzanne painted one of her more conventional and many French genre scenes entitled Rittrato Collectivo (Fig.12). This piece serves as an illustration both of her strong use of pattern and central composition. It also demonstrates her affinity to many of her contemporaries - such as Matisse. This affinity does not in any way rob her of her individuality. In the almost heavy and unattractive (in the conventional sense) figures we discern Suzanne Valadon's style. We get a brief insight into the lives of the strait-laced bourgeois ladies of the time - as far removed from the artist as could be imagined. Another painting of this time is the Abandoned Doll (Fig.13). It is a sparse but unusual and interesting painting. In it the mother explains to her daughter the changes taking place in her body. Abandoning her doll the child searches the mirror to see if the effects are going to show. It is an accurate and effective image and because of its emotive truthfulness can strike a chord in every female viewer. This important part of womanhood is captured and acknowledged by Valadon. Therefore, the impact of the painting is carried in the story she is telling and the primitive quality of the figures or the simplicity of the treatment of many shapes in no way detracts from this. The empathy and 'compassion' that prompted her to paint this are yet more facets of this woman - ones that are almost out of place in this less than conventional perfect mother

IV THE LAST SELF-PORTRAIT

In Valadon's later life things began to fall apart. Maurice Utrillo married and Valadon's relationship with Andre Utter deteriorated and she was more or less alone. she painted her last major Self Portrait (Fig.14). In it she aptly displays the ravages her hectic life style had wrought on her face and former beauty. She sets in tension a poignant, fashionably made up face, short bobbed haircut and jewellery with her nude torso. This juxtaposition of portrait head and portrait nude is unexpected and interesting She uses the solitary necklace not so much as a piece of adornment or to enhance but as a device that successfully heightens the sagging and wrinkled neck. As in the last painting decoration and pattern are minimal and it is very sparse. I feel that it mirrors the story of her own life especially the position at that time. Alone - still full of her experiences and feelings but no longer surrounded by people and things, no longer full of expectation. It is a strong work and extremely effective when compared to the earlier self-portrait. It is almost as if she has turned full circle and now it is all over.

Suzanne Valadon had no false pride and on viewing a major European exhibition of women's art[13] including work by Laurencin, Morisot, Vigee Lebrun and others, declared them good and of her - "France's greatest woman painter".

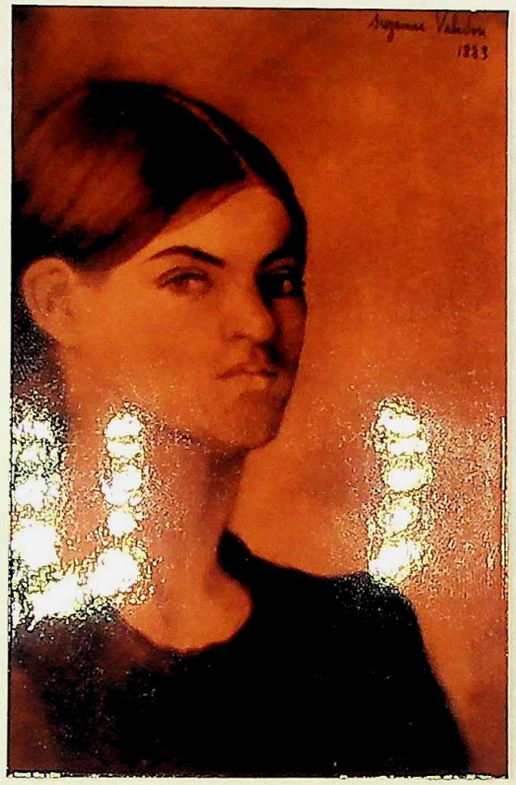
Suzanne Valadon died in 1938 and at her funeral the parting words were spoken by Eduard Herriot, three times Premier of France and an author of note. He called her, perhaps somewhat belatedly "the greatest light among the artists of this century"[14]. I would not go quite so far but she was an interesting and stimulating painter. I think that Valadon, less voyeuristically integrated Degas' attempts to produce a rigorous and realist treatment of the female model engaged in typical daily activities. I also think her work calls into question the role of women as models - as simply bystander to the male artist, object of his work rather than agent of her own. It resists and defies certain worn out codes of representation and at its best creates new ones.

Suzanne Valadon was an extraordinary woman whose character and work I find stimulating. She was endowed with great natural talent and energy and she chanelled these into unrestrainedly creating some lively and interesting paintings I feel that it is unfortunate that she did not have more tangible training and encouragement. Society was largely unsupportive to a woman like this but this seems to have hampered her only marginally. She is most notable in that she was a challenge to a lot of outdated concepts and 'ways of seeing' and must be seen as a forerunner to many questioning female artists in relatively recent years. She posed some

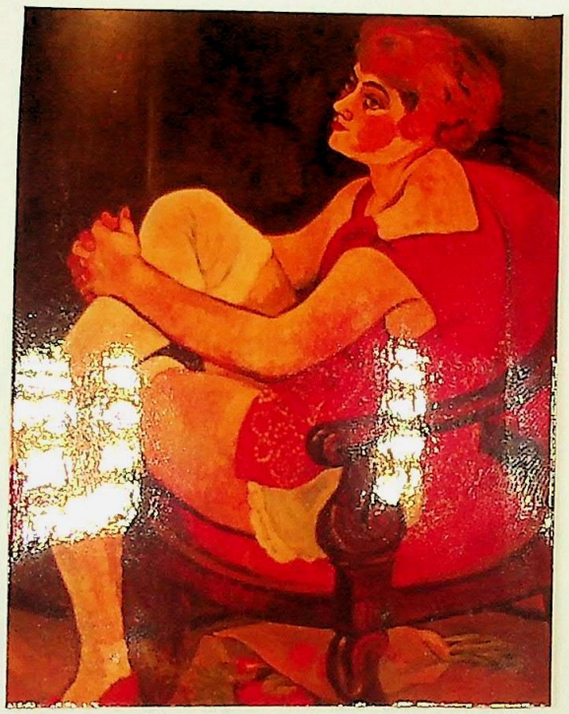
interesting questions in her own work, explored some very valid, previously ignored issues. for example, at one stage she designed a poster to advertize a benefit dance for the L'Aide Amical des Artistes. She used as a motif a naked woman - evidently an artists model - with a palette in hand at work on a canvas, perhaps a self-portrait. In doing this Valadon explored her dual roles and her own experience of being a passive object of male attention and also being an active artist, disputing and entering a predominantly male world of art activity. This was a very progressive exercise for a woman at that time to undertake and must have disorientated a large number of 'ego-trips' at the time. the audacity of an artist model engaging herself in the sacrosanct male activity of painting - her cheek was boundless. Male critics, as indeed all of them probably were, found her hard to deal with but one resolved this by calling her work "virile"[15] thus demonstrating his pitiful inability to cope with something female and strong and his need to equate it to the male monopoly on strength and 'macho' sexuality. It is sad that he had to do this. It is sadder still that Valadon should be so ignored in many art history books - that is, usually those written by men.

Chapter Two - SUZANNE VALADON (1867 - 1938) - footnotes

1. Nesto Jacometti, Suzanne Valadon, P.2
2. Karen Peterson and J.J. Wilson, Women Artists, P.95
3. Ibid.
4. Nesto Jacometti, Suzanne Valadon, P.9
5. Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race, P.64
6. Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses, P.121
7. Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race, P.67
8. Ibid, P.64.
9. Ibid., P.66
10. John Rewald, Post Impressionism: From Van Gogh to Gauguin, P.264
11. Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses, P.110-3
12. Alfred Werner, Utrillo, P.78
13. Karen Peterson and J.J. wilson, Women Artists, P.97
14. Alfred Werner, Utrillo, P.31.
15. Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock, Old Mistresses, P.110-3

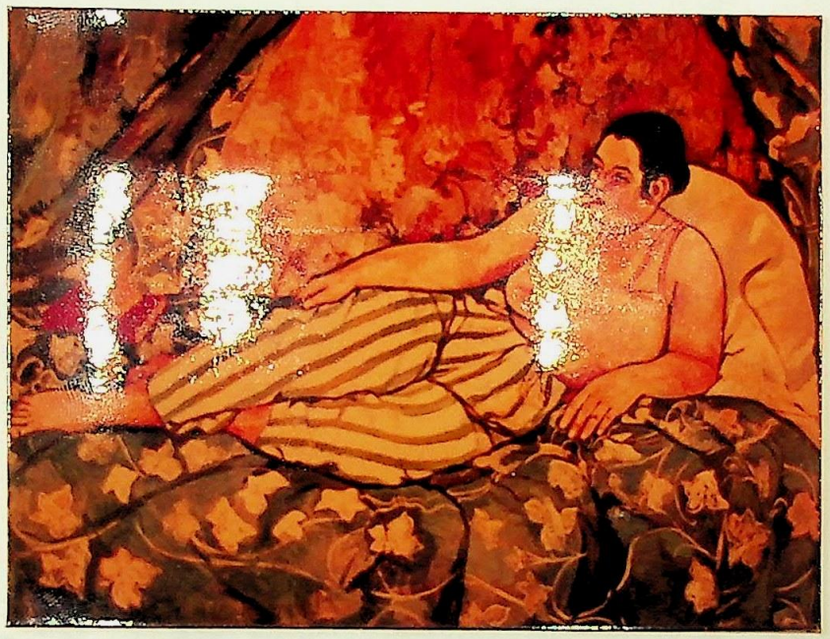


(Fig.8) SELF-PORTRAIT by Suzanne Valadon



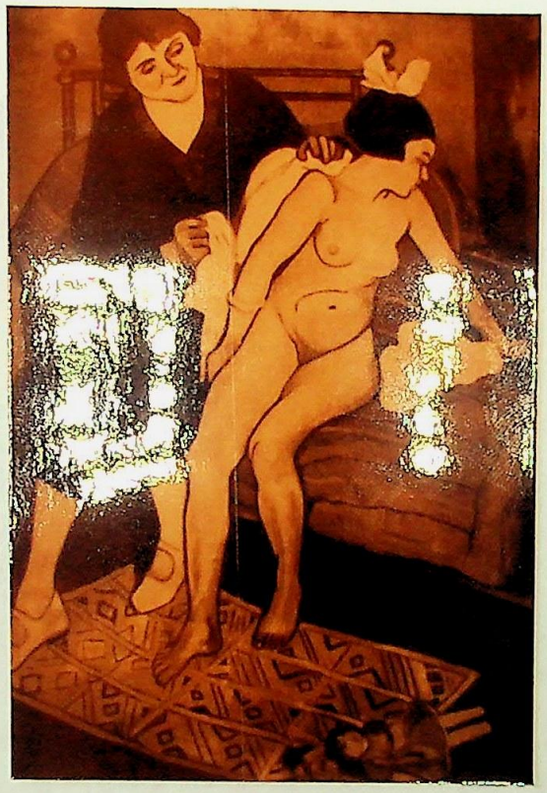
(fig.9) GIRL IN WHITE STOCKINGS by Suzanne Valadon

(fig.10) NETS by Suzanne Valadon



(fig.11) THE BLUE ROOM by Suzanne Valadon

(Fig.12) RITTRATO COLLECTIVO by Suzanne Valadon



(Fig.13) THE ABANDONED DOLL by Suzanne Valadon

(fig.14) SELF-PORTRAIT by Suzanne Valadon

A COMPARISON OF THE TWO ARTISTS

Gwen John and Suzanne Valadon were obviously two very different people and on superficial examnation they had next to nothing in common. Gwen John, despite her eccentricities was very much an English gentlewoman. She was an introvert and although she was outwardly shy and self-effacing, she contained inner depths and emotions. She eloquently expressed herself in her quiet but complex small paintings. On the other hand, Suzanne Valadon was almost stereotypically French very extrovert and colourful with a different, more immediately outrageous set of eccentricities. Her paintings aptly mirrored her dramatic and sensual personality. Valadon made progress - 'blazed the trail' somewhat for women's art in her use of the male nude and new perspective on the female nude model. She was an uncompromising and reasonably prominent member of the Parisian art world without being synonymous with any of its trends or styles. Gwen John however, withdrew almost completely from the contemporary art scene and all its disturbing and intrusive connotations and worked in isolation not making any strides exclusively for women artists simply demanding the necessary privacy for her own work and making a stand as an individual. She did not outwardly challenge many of the conventions but by her ignoring them showed her disdain and made her point to an extent, but very differently from Valadon.

Gwen John had the dubious advantage of an art education at the Slade School. She belonged to a financially and socially 'secure' class that by tradition allowed its 'womenfolk' to dabble in painting and, of course, to sketch. I do not think that this made it easy for her to devote herself seriously to painting or to openly deny all the occupations considered suitable for a young lady of her class and status, like marriage or motherhood. That achievement took courage, determination and acceptance of the fact that she would not in her own lifetime be taken as seriously as most male artists such as Augustus - and, indeed, she was not. In some strange way it may have been easier for the totally untrained Valadon to become a serious female artist because she belonged to no such rigid class system and by virtue of her own personality ignored all such social convention. However, it undoubtedly took a lot of determination to make the transition from artist's model to artist. they had in common this determination. They shared this will and desire to paint and both had different but nonetheless inextricably allied struggles within the societies they inhabited to achieve their goal.

The figures that Gwen John and Suzanne Valadon painted were in many ways far from alike. Gwen John usually used thin, almost gaunt, women - still, mystical and soulful types.

Valadon favoured ample bodies, heavy and fleshy, moving and sweating. Their colours were very different too. Gwen's were subtle and 'pastelly' echoing the nervous sensitivity of her subjects while Suzanne Valadon assailed our senses with reds and blues, extreme and very 'gutsy' colours in keeping with her handling of her work generally. Perhaps the most obvious and enduring difference or contrast between these two artists occurs in their painting 'styles'. Gwen John was, technically, an extremely knowledgable and gifted painter. She manipulated glazes and paint to achieve exactly what she wanted and she also had a noticeable respect of the inherent qualities of the medium and never abused it. suzanne Valadon, in my opinion, was not quite so fine a painter or more accurately - a 'handler of paint'. Her work owes its success more to her very accomplished feeling for composition and pattern, line and colour than the physical application of the paint. In terms of painting technique they were, indeed, very unalike but despite this and other sharp contrasts, both in their life and their work, I feel that they had some interesting and fundamentally important things in common

Women artists had so often tended to completely fulfil and live up to all the stupid restrictions and narrow definitions that had been consistently placed upon them. Like so very many of Gwen John's contemporaries in the Slade[1] they often married young and sank without trace into the annonymity of

of married life and parenthood, their talent and work rapidly disappearing down the same inevitable domestic plughole. some others simply 'passed the time' and painted stereotypically 'feminine' subjects such as flowers and babies. While I do not have any preconceived prejudices against these or any other subjects, nor do I deny their validity as subject matter or stimuli, it is important that they are chosen out of interest and necessity to the artist and not out of timidity, lack of ambition or social position. As we have seen, due to their remarkable determination neither Gwen John nor Suzanne Valadon succumbed to this. they both worked from themselves and for themselves when and how they alone chose to - as male artists had usually done. They ignored social pressure to marry or to have socially conventional domestic lives. They both lend individual life styles very much geared to their own needs and nobody elses expectations of them. I find that this honesty and uniqueness, this refusal to conform to any of society's dictates, resulted in interesting work for their era and not only in a professional sense but in the purity of its motivation. They overcame the problems - 'The Obstacle Race' with their single-mindedness, commitment and healthy selfishness so akin to that of many of their male contemporaries and regretably few female. Another factor they had in common was a judicial dose of arrogance. Degas' advice - "Il faut avoir plus dorgueil"[2] to Valadon was unnecessary -

pride was usually in abundance. This is illustrated well in their common indifference to being 'accepted'. Both of them were acknowledged by a small elite number of people but ignored in the wider, more commercially successful sense, neither cared about this or sought to remedy the situation. They were both undeniably aware of interest and awareness in no way detracted from their own intrinsic styles or individuality or distracted them from their course in life and work. Integrity was a key issue and this quality shows in the best of their work and even, I feel, the more crude or naive pieces.

They both used everyday subject-matter with no great intellectual or conceptual overtones. However, they dealt with the most complex subject matter available - human beings - and although it was superficially in a simplistic manner it can in no way undermine its effectiveness. I think that it is notable that both these artists were interested in portraying more than half the human race as rather more than saccherine 'ladies' or seductresses. Instead, they as artists portrayed women realistically, in challenging, previously untypically female poses and attitudes. As we have seen, Gwen John and Suzanne Valadon were concerned with exploring themselves within their work without any prevalent or overt self esteem. These honestly self-exploratory tendancies are something that they not only share with each other but also with countless other female artists both

before and after them. So, although superficially John and Valadon might be tagged as 'chalk and cheese' as women and as artists, they had quite an important amount in common. Perhaps it was an unconcious, unknowing 'sisterhood' amongst 20th century artists?

CONCLUSION

Obviously Gwen John and Suzanne Valadon cannot both have been the 'greatest' painters or 'lights' of their time, but I think that their being acknowledged as 'great' is not that important. What does matter about these women is that they both shattered the mould. They both achieved what they did in spite of a lot of barriers and if for nothing else they deserve acknowledgemetn for this. They were interesting people and they did some solid work but perhaps due to their sex they were not sufficietnly rewarded at the time and undoubtedly not recorded enough in the art history books. I feel that it is sad that while Augustus John and Maurice Utrillo are present in every relevant book, their respective sister and mother were, until the very recent past, noticeably absent! It is also a pity that people like Germaine Greer, Rosika Parker and Griselda Pollock have to write books exclusively about 'women artists' to fill the void. It is disgraceful that the prefix exists and must so consistently still be used. However, undeniably this discriminative situation did prevail in the past and there is no point in our knowing next to nothing about past women, painters, printmakers and sculptors. Thankfully it is changing somewhat. It may appear petty to gripe on and on about it but we cannot ignore, amongst many other discriminatory practices, the plague of sexism that was rampant throughout art history.

What I have done has been rewarding for me - sifting through the information available, looking at the work, thinking about it and finally trying to write it down. These are two individuals who bear some relevance to my own work and this thesis has allowed me to explore that. It simply would have been easier, less frustrating, had their been more books of a better quality available, more colour reproductions and above all less titillating biographical detail.

Chapter Three - A COMPARISON OF THE TWO ARTISTS - footnotes

1. Susan Chitty, Gwen John, P.37 and
   Michael Holroyd, Augustus John, Ps.81-82

2. Germaine Greer, The Obstacle Race, P.67

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