

This paper was delivered by Mari Beynon Owen at the 2017 Conference, Aberystwyth

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GWENNY GRIFFITHS, 1867 – 1953

PORTRAIT PAINTER

FROM SWANSEA TO THE RIVIERA

Gweny Griffiths is not an artist who has had much attention, and it has meant quite some detective work. Only five of her paintings are to be found in public collections, although I have noted some 30 works in various exhibition catalogues from Swansea, Paris and around Britain.

On the 22nd December, 1953, 86 year old, Miss Rosa Gweny Griffiths, Portrait Painter died in Cannes, South of France.

Her home address was Villa Canteraine, Avenue Notre Dame des Pins, a building of architectural interest, built by the artist and entrepreneur, Georges Capron, in 1930, adjacent to his art gallery, Galerie Alexandre III.

Villa Canteraine was home to Capron himself, other artists, who also had studios there, so Gweny was living right in the centre of artistic activity, where artists such as Picabia and Picasso hung out and showed at the gallery.

In her tribute to her in The Evening Post, her friend Annie L Matthews from Pencwar, Treboeth, describes her apartment:

“Her dining room in Cannes was furnished as an old Welsh kitchen with furniture sent out from Wales. Willow pattern and lustre jugs adorned the dresser. She often played Welsh airs on her grand piano. Her Welsh costume and top hat were expected, after her death, to go to the National Museum of Wales”

Since the death of her father, Dr T Dryslwyn Griffiths in 1914, her mother, Frances, and sister Mabel had gone to live on the Riviera.

Her father was a renowned surgeon, former president of the British Medical Association, and director of several companies in Swansea, and as a result he left an estate of what today would be worth 2 million pounds to this wife and three daughters.

By now Gwenny, who was 47 years old, was a prolific artist who exhibited in shows all over Europe, and it would seem that she didn't stop working nor seek out commissions on receiving her inheritance.

She had a studio, where she also lived, in Sydney Mews, on the Fulham Road in Chelsea, an area which had become famous as an artistic, bohemian colony. As the numbers of professional artists increased, there was more demand for studio space and so groups of artists would establish a studio complex.

Here came Gwenny, at first to no. 1A, then no. 5. A neighbour of hers was the renowned artist, John Singer Sargent; also one of her fellow Slade students, Annie Louisa Swynnerton.

Annie was one of the founders of the Manchester Society of Women Painters and very active in the suffragette movement.

In 1914, the suffragette Mary Wood [Mary Aldham], vandalised John Singer Sargent's portrait of Henry James in the Royal Academy's Summer Exhibition. The painting by one of the elder statesmen of the artistic elite, commissioned on the seventieth birthday of a celebrated author, represented the iron grip of men on the arts establishment.

According to one of the artists currently living and working in Sydney Mews, and who has taken an interest in the buildings' history, the suffragettes had a secret printing press in no. 5 – Gwenny's studio, so it's possible that Gwenny also played a crucial role in the campaign. I wonder if John Singer Sargent ever realized his neighbours' role in the fight for women's rights? A campaign which brought personal success to Swynnerton as eight years later she was made an Associate of the Royal Academy, the first woman since 1768.

During this period, Gwenny's work was being exhibited in the Royal Academy; also in the annual exhibitions of the Society of Women Artists; the Royal Society of Artists, Birmingham; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; in Glasgow and the Royal Cambrian Academy. So she was working hard producing work and selling her paintings. In 1906 one of her paintings was for sale at £16 - around £1,500 today.

Gwenny had started her artistic training in the Swansea School of Art and Design, a private art school established in 1869, in the building on Alexandra Rd opposite the Glynn Vivian Gallery.

At nineteen, she enrolled as a student in the Slade School of Fine Art, a department of University College London.

Since the opening of the Slade in 1868, women had been allowed to enrol and also had the right to attend every class, including Life Drawing, although the models would be partly draped with fabric. There were scholarships for students under nineteen as the main aim of the college's founder Felix Slade, was to give younger students the opportunity to study painting, drawing and sculpture as an university subject, especially as the Royal Academy would only accept more experienced artists.

There was an entrance exam or candidates had to demonstrate knowledge of English Language; History of England; Greek and Roman History; Modern and Ancient Geography; Arithmetic, Foreign Language or one book of Euclid.

As most pupils of government schools would have left long before they could have mastered any subjects in this long list, it's probable that only students who had received a private education would have gained entry. And of course, there were fees to pay. In her first year, this was £19. 19 shillings, around £2000 today; or if only attending for a term, this would cost £7.7 shillings, almost £800.

Also women were only admitted on recommendation of the Lady Superintendent, and supported by a personal reference. As Gwenny's father was a former UCL student, and such a prominent doctor, this would not have posed a problem for her.

Another reason the Slade was so popular with women was the area around Gower St was considered safe, being so close to the main railway stations and no need to travel across London. The women would either stay in a college hall of residence, with relatives, or in 'digs', In 1889, Gwenny's address is 'Dryslwyn', no. 98 Gower St, which suggests that Dr.T Dryslwyn Griffiths had bought a house in London for the period of his daughter's university studies.

Gwenny studied under Professor Alphonse Legros, the French artist, who introduced the French syllabus to the college, and students were expected to study in Paris as part of the course. The Paris academies and ateliers were renowned for their 'party' atmosphere and so it was necessary to persuade parents that their daughters would be safe from any wrongdoings. Gwenny attended the Academie Julian and one can only imagine the sense of adventure and fun which Paris provided.

The Julian was a progressive private art college attended by students from all over the world who came to learn the latest techniques. Unlike the Ecole des Beaux Arts, the Julian accepted women and allowed them to draw the male form using naked models rather than statues. It was also a way of getting into the Paris Salons, and indeed Gwenny made the most of this opportunity, with several of her paintings being accepted over a twenty year period.

Some of these paintings came back to Swansea for a solo show in the Glynn Vivian in 1922. In the exhibition there are landscapes in the South of France, portraits of prominent Swansea people; friends and family members.

In the Evening Post's report on the exhibition there's a photograph of Gwenny in front of her portrait of Mrs D M Glasbrook. But where is this painting? It's a complete mystery. David Mansel Glasbrook, and his brothers, had inherited the Glasbrook Company, which owned several coalmines in the Swansea area. Mrs D M Glasbrook was present at the exhibition but there is no trace of this large painting.

The portrait of Roger Beck, benefactor of Singleton Hospital now hangs in the hospital's Board Room; and the painting of Mrs Olivia Howell, founder of the Swansea Orphanage, is possibly the most well-known, held in the Glynn Vivian Collection.

Evidently, her father's connections in the medical world and Swansea's commercial sphere, stood her in good stead in terms of winning commissions. On the left is Robert F C Leith, doctor and president of the University of Birmingham; on the right, Major General J E Dickie.

(These portraits can be seen at www.artuk.org)

She also painted members of her family – here is her nephew, Henry James and niece, Olive Mary Bath, her sister Olive Mary's children, who had married Henry James Bath, owner of one of Swansea's foremost copper smelting companies.

By 1935, the list of portraits contributed to the show by former students of the Swansea School of Art and Design, in the Glynn Vivian include far more exotic names such as Duchessa Litta, Comte Morando-Bolognini, which suggests a very different social set on the Riviera.

In 1938 Gwenny's mother died in Nice; and during the Second World War, Gwenny came back to Abergavenny to live with her mother's family.

Her sister Mabel had married Mr Brownlow Fforde and still lived on the Riviera. The family must have been well known during this period Mabel featured in the international news as robbers had broken into her villa, believing that there was a stash of gold there. Mabel was

tied up, tortured by burning her feet, but after turning the place over, the thieves came to the conclusion that the gold wasn't there after all – and thankfully Mabel was spared! The gold was stored far away in a safe in London.

And a footnote to this exciting story is that the Griffiths - Brownlow Fforde Foundation, is still based at Dryslwyn House, Swansea, the family's first home and where Gwenny was born. Perhaps this charitable foundation was founded on that store of gold?

And where did that Welsh dresser in the Villa Canteraine, which Gwenny was so proud of end up I wonder?

Gwenny maintained a close association with her birthplace, Swansea; the Glyn Vivian Gallery, and was proud of her Welsh heritage. Her family's roots lay deep in rural Carmarthenshire. Her father was from Dryslwyn, a cousin, Elizabeth Beynon, my great grandmother from Lan farm, Gwyddgrug, Carmarthenshire.

I would like to acknowledge the support of :

Ellie Dawkins from Oriel Glyn Vivian, and Ronald Austin, Swansea, for allowing me access to their research work on Gwenny; Peter Lord, for his encouragement.

(If anyone has further information about Gwenny and her family, or indeed knows where some of these paintings may be located, I would be extremely grateful if you could contact me: mari.beynon.owen@ntlworld.com)

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