

# Basic Detail Report

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## Portrait of Miss Iris Tree

### Date

c. 1912 - 1914

### Primary Maker

Augustus Edwin John

### Medium

Oil on canvas

### Dimensions

76.2 x 63.6 cm

### Description

Iris Tree (1897-1968), was a poet, actress and painter, the second daughter of Sir Herbert Beerbohm Tree and niece of the writer and caricaturist Max Beerbohm. As an artist's model, she was in demand and was sculpted by Jacob

Epstein, painted by Augustus John, and photographed by Man Ray and Cecil Beaton. Among the Bloomsbury Group she sat for Duncan Grant and Roger Fry, as well as for Vanessa Bell. Tree was one of the exciting and eccentric guests who stayed with Augustus John and his wife Dorelia in their first home, Alderney Manor near Wimborne in Dorset. The Johns first moved there in 1911 and from 1912 they entertained a constant stream of interesting visitors. She performed in several plays at His Majesty's Theatre, London which was then owned and operated by her father. With her elegant looks and charisma, she was the muse of a book by Daphne Fielding *The Rainbow Picnic: A Portrait of Iris Tree*. She married twice, first to the American photographer, Curtis Moffat and her second marriage was to the actor Friedrich von Ledebur-Wicheln. She and von Ledebur both appear (after their divorce) in the 1956 film version of *Moby-Dick*. She also appears in cameo, essentially as herself, in Federico Fellini's *La dolce vita* (1960). This portrait conveys a sense of Tree's forceful character even though it was painted when she was still young and had not yet become the poet and actress she was destined to be. A sense of theatricality is evident in her pose with her hands placed jauntily on her hips projecting her body outwards and her eyes challenging the viewer. Her hairstyle was distinctive and apparently she was one of the first women in England to 'bob' her hair. The portrait is painted directly onto the support with no underpainting, with the canvas still visible in some areas. John's palette is restricted with the green of her cardigan setting off the vibrant red of her lipstick. Her bohemian personality and sense of panache was clearly what attracted John to paint her in this informal portrait. She whistled for taxis with her fingers in her mouth or else would step out onto the road in front of them to bring them to a halt. Once, on finding the taxi occupied, she jumped onto the running board and was seen clinging to the side as it travelled down Cromwell Road. John probably met Lane through William Orpen, with whom he had been a student at the Slade School and had subsequently

established the Chelsea Art School in late 1903. Orpen introduced John to many of his Irish circle and by December 1905 Lane was buying examples of the artist's work. John visited Ireland in 1907 passing through Dublin before going to stay with Lady Gregory at Coole Park who wanted him to do a portrait of W B Yeats. He arrived, a flamboyant figure, with shoulder length hair and earrings and all his luggage hanging from one finger. He later described Lady Gregory as being "just like Queen Victoria only uglier". On a further trip in 1912 he spent time with Oliver St. John Gogarty. On a subsequent trip to Coole in May 1915 he did a number of portraits of George Bernard Shaw. John was also employed to produce a series of large panels for Lindsey House, Lane's London home but by early December 1909 John had become exasperated with his patron due to his "constant state of nervous agitation" and the panels were removed to his studio. Lane in turn was horrified to discover that John had invited "a lovely gypsy girl" into his house and asked her to sit for him. She was soon joined by "a whole band of ruffians" who made merry in every room and "nearly frightened Lane out of his wits". However, despite these disagreements the two remained on good terms. This work was the final purchase Hugh Lane made before leaving for New York in April 1915. John sold it to Lane for £150. MC Literature: Michael Holroyd, Augustus John, Chatto & Windus, London 1996, Iris Tree mentioned on pages 374, 381, 405, 415 and 609 Frances Spalding, Roger Fry, Art and Life, 1980