



Study of a Young Girl (Recto): Study of a Young Girl with a Hat (Verso)

Date

c. 1918-1922

Primary Maker

Gwen John

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

44.5 x 37 cm

Description

Gwen John was a painter, chiefly of portrait and single figure studies of women and children such as this intimate work. She studied at the Slade School from 1894 -7 and at

Whistler's School in Paris, where she continued to live from 1898. She modelled for Rodin with whom she had a passionate affair that lasted a decade. Gwen John was taught in a traditional style, which involved laborious copying of Old Master paintings. As a woman in a career still largely dominated by men, including her successful brother Augustus, Gwen had to struggle for recognition. This work belongs to series of related paintings from the mid-1910s to the early 1920s, considered the maturation of Gwen John's oeuvre. Within this period, nearly all John's paintings are female portraits of an unknown sitter, referred to as the 'convalescent' model. Some fifty images of her exist with only subtle variations upon the theme: a young woman in a blue or grey dress in two-third or three-quarter length profile, a pyramidal body, her expression impassive, behind her a plain background or the simplified interior of her studio in the rue Terre Neuve. Her hands are large, and either rest heavy in her lap, or she holds a book, a black cat or, as in the present work, a piece of fabric. These enigmatic portraits are viewed as some of her finest and most original works. The reason for the repetition is not explicit, but the subject undoubtedly served as a vehicle for John to explore her primary concern: the formal aspects of painting. They are not an exercise in portraiture in the conventional sense - they are not commissioned, the sitter is unknown and they do not convey an overwhelming concern with character. Rather, in the subtle variations of tone, colour, texture and arrangement, they reveal a typically modernist engagement with the process of picture-making. In Portrait of a Girl, superfluous details are stripped from the scene, the background reduced to a minimal setting. Emphasis is thus placed on form and mood. The applied paint is thick and chalky, leaving a wonderfully dry, textured surface. Muted blues and greys are closely graded with the occasional accent of colour, and the sense of light and space is achieved through these tonal variations. This careful modulation, the soft colours and broken surface dissolves the figure into her surroundings and strengthens

the overall sense of harmony. In the application of paint, the figure's proportions, simple pose and John's detached approach to her, the influence of Cézanne, like many of her contemporaries, has been recognised. The end result, however, remains distinctly John's. The balance of colour and form, the still pose and soft features convey an alluringly meditative atmosphere. It compels one to pause and reflect; to contemplate a single moment, unremarkable on the surface, which John has imbued with radiance and rendered beautiful. This work also has another portrait of the same woman on the verso of the canvas. --- Gwendolin John was born in Wales and studied at the Slade School of Fine Art in London, as did her brother Augustus. She studied both in Paris and London and in 1903 returned to Paris and settled there permanently in the suburb of Meudon. Figure-painting and self-portraiture were her main subject-matter, the mood always contemplative, intimiste. Her output of finished work, in sets of similar subject matter, was sparse. Leading a solitary almost reclusive existence, she was extremely single-minded in her attitude to painting and quite reluctant to sell or exhibit. As yet unidentified, the girl who appears in *Study of a Young Girl* was portrayed by Gwen John more often than any other sitter. It is likely that the sitter was a local girl from Meudon. The interior is taken from the artist's little active flat at 29 rue Terre Neuve. The room can be identified by the angular shape of the window embrasure, characteristic of her 1920s paintings, which is placed in the top right hand corner of the canvas; through it soft light enters to subtly bathe the forms in the room. On the reverse of the canvas, upside down, is an unfinished portrait of a girl with a hat, a study for a work now in a private collection. Though she visited England occasionally, her work was seldom seen until the Memorial exhibition at the Matthiesen Gallery in 1946 established her reputation.