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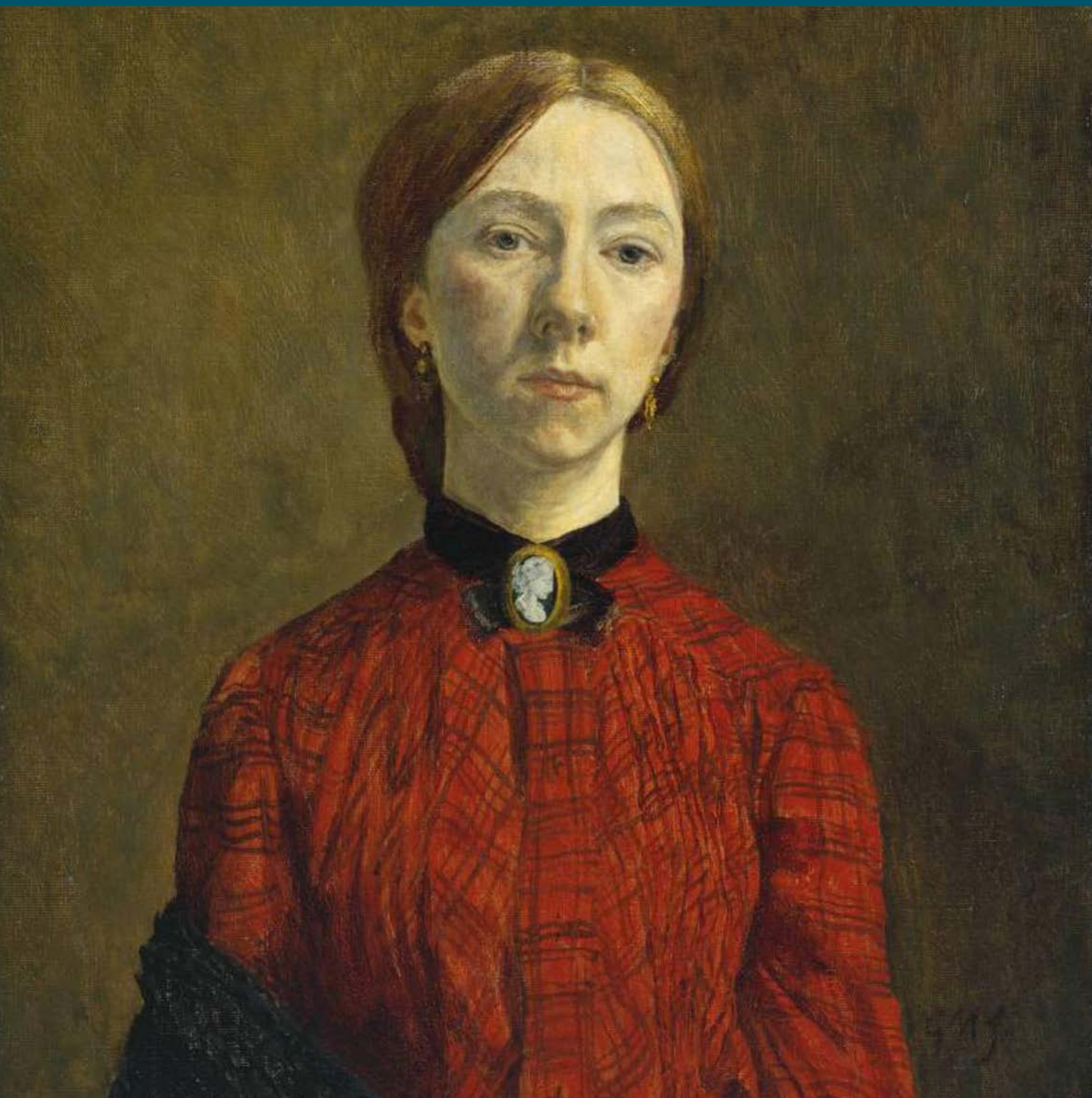
TRAILBLAZERS

Gwen John - Artist

by Joanna Davies



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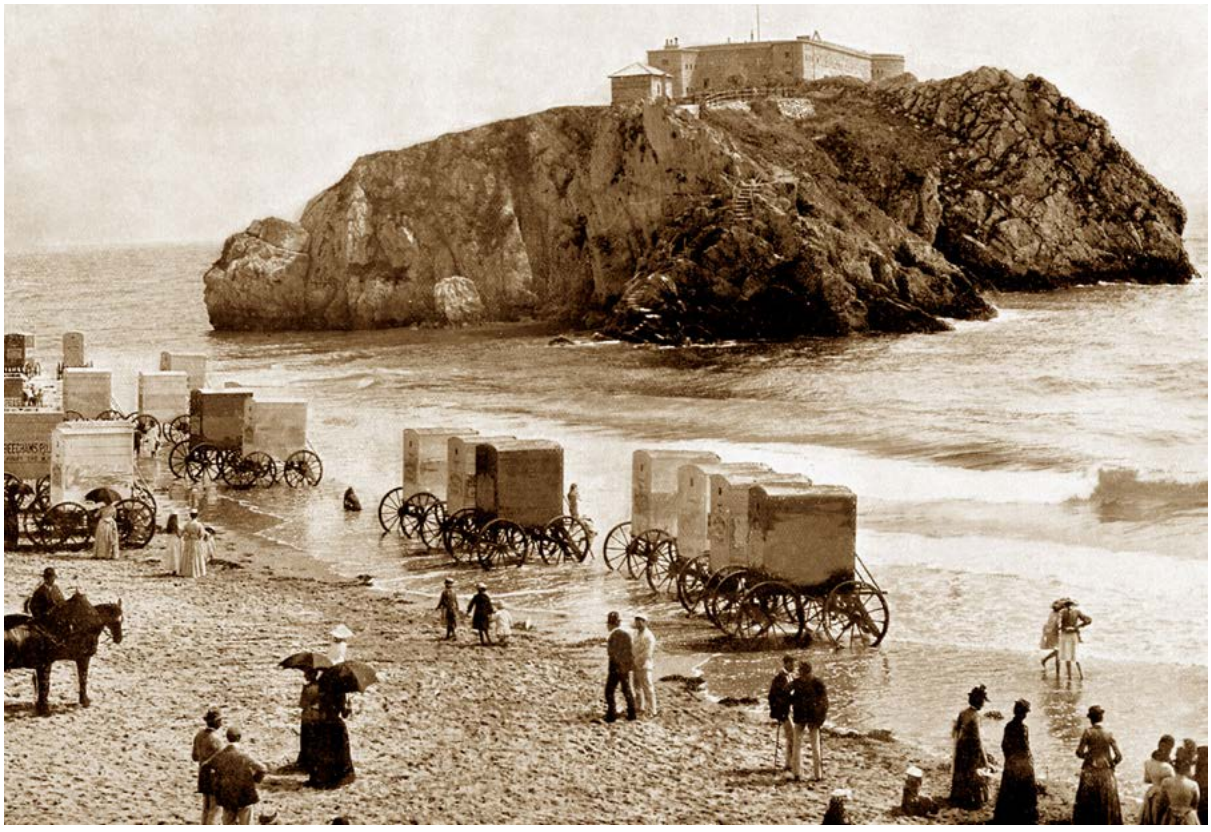
"This is a story of connection, rather than isolation, of a woman who was part of the culture of her age"
- Alicia Foster

Gwen John (1876-1939)

If you happened to be walking on the beach in Tenby around 1890, you might have come across a fourteen year old girl carefully sketching seashells in her sketch-book. There's nothing remarkable about her at first glance. She's just an average teenage girl of her time.

But if you looked closer, you'd see a determined glint in her eye as she sketches a particularly tricky shell over and over again. She would grow up to be Gwen John, one of the most important modern artists of the twentieth century. But it's only now, well into the twenty first century, that her talents are being fully appreciated.

'Study of a Girl' by Gwen John (1918). © Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales



Tenby beach in Pembrokeshire (c1890). ©KGPA Ltd / Alamy

Who was Gwen John?

'A strange cat lady.'
'A religious recluse.'
'Rodin's stalker!''.

Since Gwen John's dramatic death in 1939, she has been described as many things. These often unflattering descriptions have nothing to do with her art. The story that's often told about her is that she was an artist overshadowed by her brilliant artist brother, Augustus John, (1878-1961), and her world famous lover, the artist and sculptor, Auguste Rodin, (1840-1917).

Rules to keep people away

Her assocation with Rodin, which began when she worked as an artist's model for him in Paris, is the first thing people mention when you say her name. Some writers like to paint a picture of her as a tragic and often rather pathetic figure:

She was, for her entire life,
in a state of unrequited love, not just with individual people, but with the world in general, and with her own existence. - Kristy McGrory

But she was much more than that. She was a trailblazer, a unique female artist, who pursued a successful career in Paris and was also feted in America. She is now considered a superior artist to her brother. She was not 'all doom or gloom', even though she was more solitary as she grew older. She did write a set of 'Rules to keep people away' in her diary after all! These make comical reading today and many of us can relate to the need to have some 'me time':

- *'Do not listen to people (more than is necessary)',*
- *'Do not look at people (ditto)',*
- *'When you have to come into contact with people, talk as little as possible'...*

In her excellent book, 'Gwen John, Art and Life in London and Paris' (2023), Alicia Foster admits she also fell into this trap at first:

"The myth of the recluse is incredibly seductive... For many years she's been misrepresented. A persistent myth about her as a reclusive figure, isolated from the art world. She emerges as a self-possessed figure, a determined figure... Ruthless in her commitment to her art." - *Alicia Foster*

The relationship with Rodin ended badly but it's important to remember that Gwen recovered and carried on and produced her greatest work afterwards. She also never really withdrew from life. She kept in touch with many of her family members and friends and was a part of a religious community in Meudon in her later years.

"Her 'nun paintings' from that period are among her most impressive works. Her portrait of Mère Marie Poussepin – the founder of the local convent which John painted from a prayer card – is an almost supernatural oddity. It has shades of Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot, and Pierre Bonnard – a dry, mottled canvas from which mother superior stares out at you with an almost-perceptible smirk." - *Katie McCabe*

Mère Marie Poussepin (1653–1744) by Gwen John c.1915–1920 © Amgueddfa Cymru- Museum Wales

The idea that Gwen became a loner after the failure of her relationship with Rodin is also exaggerated. As a young woman, she even wrote to Rodin noting her preference for solitude:

'I was a little solitaire, no-one helped me or awoke me before I met you.'

Her final years were spent in no-frills, sparse home in the Parisian suburb, Meudon. But this was a lifestyle that suited her. With no distractions, she could focus on her painting.

When the art historian, John Rothenstein, studied Gwen's papers, he found multiple copies she'd even made of her own letters. This is how she approached her art too. She kept redrafting, redrawing, until she got the results she wanted. She wanted her art to look 'lived in' and this is what makes her unique.

The Girl in a Blue Dress
© Amgueddfa Cymru –Museum Wales

"The light, chalky palette seen in portraits such as Girl in a Blue Dress makes it feel as though we lived with them for years, like old photographs of grandparents that have been bleached by the sun."
- Katie McCabe

The Barbican Arts Centre in London exhibited Gwen's work in 1985 and chose the title, 'An Interior Life', a nod to a line from one of Gwen's letters:

'I may never have anything to express, except this desire for a more interior life.'

Rather than celebrating her choice to live her life as she wished, she was portrayed as an erratic woman in the attic with her cats. This interpretation of her character unfortunately still persists to this day. But now, more and more people are realising that Gwen chose this lifestyle for herself. Just like the characters she painted, the 'quiet isolation' suited her.

"John's women look contained and self-possessed. Often they sit with their hands on their lap and a slight tilt of the head; with dropped shoulders and a blank expression. A young brunette holding a black cat stares into the distance. A convalescent in a plain blue dress examines a letter, a pot of tea at her side. A woman reads a book by a gingham-curtained window, relishing the seclusion." - *Jim Carroll*

The early years

"Fifty years after my ðeath, I shall be remembereð as Gwen John's brother." - *Augustus John*

Seashells anð sketchbooks

Gwen and her brother, Augustus, would often take their sketchbooks on walks around the Pembrokeshire coast. Born in Haverfordwest, Gwen moved with her family to the beautiful seaside town of Tenby when she was a young child. She and Augustus were the middle set of siblings in a family of four children. Their father was a solicitor and the family was considered 'respectable' but not rich.

Gwen loved the sea, painting watercolor pictures of shells she found on Tenby beach. In one of her last letters, we catch a possible glimpse of 'hiraeth' or longing for home in her writing, "I long for the sea." It was a connection she maintained all her life, beginning with her childhood on the Pembrokeshire coast.

Young girl in a brown hat and coat by Gwen John
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales.

Both siblings showed a talent for drawing at an early age. They converted the attic in their family home into a studio and Gwen drew portraits of their young friends. Augustus had already settled in the Slade School of Art, a year before his older sister. Being a boy, he didn't have to seek 'permission' from his strict father to pursue a career in art.

They both won prizes at Art School but only Augustus was spoken about as an artistic genius. He was even called the new 'Michaelangelo' at the time. Today, his work could be said to appear more 'old fashioned' to us in the 21st century. Whilst Gwen's deceptively 'simple' work still seems very modern.

Augustus became famous in Britain and America, but he wasn't well-known in France. Gwen, however, had already made a name for herself there as early as the 1920s. She was much more interested in modernism, which was all the rage in France at the time, whilst Augustus became a society portrait painter. To be fair to him, his work had to be more conventional to please the rich patrons paying him for their likenesses in art. Augustus, who lived to the riple old age of 83, acknowledged that Gwen was the 'superior' artist.

When critics ignored her work at an exibition he wrote:

"To me the little pictures are almost painfully charged with feeling, even as their neighbours are empty of it. Gwen's pictures are simply staggering."

He also astutely recognised Gwen was a far more complex character than she appeared to those who didn't know her well:

"Gwen and I were not opposites, but much the same really, but we took a different attitude. I am rarely 'exuberant'. She was always so; latterly in a tragic way. She wasn't chaste or subdued, but amorous and proud. She didn't steal through life, but preserved a haughty independence which some people mistook for humility. Her passions for both men and women were outrageous and irrational. She was never 'unnoticed' by those who had access to her."

Self-portrait by Augustus John, 1913 ©Artepics/Alamy

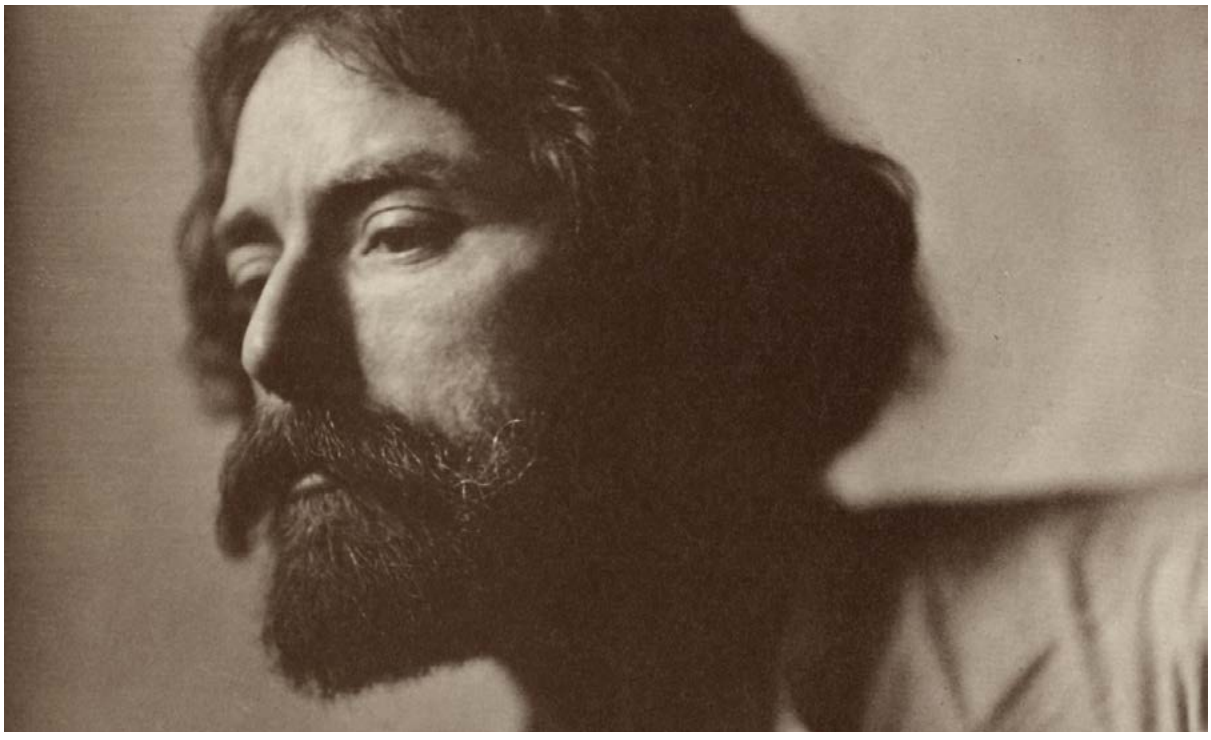


Photo portrait of Augustus John in 1909 by Jacob Hilsdorf

Memories of a mother

Their mother, Augusta, who died when Gwen was eight, was a talented amateur artist. She too had studied art in London, in a small private art school. She had decorated the walls of her children's nursery with her art, which must have been inspiring for Gwen and Augustus.

'Head of a Woman' drawing, Gwen John c1910

You can see two of Gwen's early works in Tenby Museum and Art Gallery, one of which, an oil painting, 'Landscape at Tenby with Figures' is rather special. This is one of Gwen John's earliest works and the only surviving example of her using her childhood home as a setting in her art. It shows a young woman and a girl walking on Tenby's North Beach.

The figure of the woman was modelled by Gwen's sister, Winifred. However, some art experts think that the 'dream-like', and 'yearning', quality of the painting, with the young girl looking up affectionately at the woman, suggests that the figure really represents Gwen's mother. The way the light hits the buildings behind the two figures shows Gwen's skill as an artist.

Oil on canvas, Landscape at Tenby with Figures circa 1900.
© Tenby Museum and Art Gallery.

London life

Study for 'Young Woman in a Mulberry Dress' by Gwen John © Museum Wales

In 1895 young Gwendolen Mary John left her home in Tenby to attend a 'finishing school'. This was where middle and upper class girls of the time were sent to 'finish' their education. Gwen attended the very proper sounding "Miss Philpott's Educational Establishment" in Bayswater near London. It's thought that she'd always intended to go to art school, but had shrewdly suggested a stint at the 'finishing school' to persuade her father to allow her to leave home in the first place.

She didn't stay with Miss Philpott for long. As soon as she could, Gwen enrolled at the Slade School of Fine Art, the best art school of its time in Britain. She moved to 23 Euston Square, which was close to the college, in a rather 'rough and ready' area of Camden. This was very different from her sheltered life in West Wales. The Slade was one of the first Art Schools to admit female students. Gwen was part of the first generation of women artists to receive a formal art education.

The Slade was seen as a 'Cockney' University, not as 'posh' as it could be. It was also a progressive School, because the women students were allowed for the first time to draw 'nude' models. Although female students weren't allowed to paint a completely 'nude' male model. Their models always wore underpants for modesty!

A Life Class in the Slade c1880s. Note the model is wearing underpants.© Pictorial Press Ltd / Alamy

A bearded Augustus (second left) and a beaming Gwen beside him with other Slade students at a picnic April 1899 © National Portrait Gallery

For a young artist, London was an amazing place to be in the late 1890s. Full of inspiring art collections and museums, students could live relatively cheaply there too. Augustus probably helped Gwen to persuade her strict father that Slade was a suitable College for her to attend. Gwen spent eight years in London. During her time there, the city went through many changes. Gwen's stomping ground near Euston Square was described by Charles Booth, who mapped the London street as:

"...Alive with a mixture of people: the miɗɗle-class anɗ well-to-ɗo, those in chronic want anɗ 'shaɗy characters' all living cheek by jowl."

Gwen lived in a series of cheap rooms, even staying in a derelict house for a short while. During her last year at Slade, Gwen moved to Fitzroy Street, near Tottenham Court Road, in a lodging house shared with other students, including her brother, Augustus and music student sister, Winifred. It was an 'arty' area as it was so close to the Art School. James Abott McNeill Whistler, (1834-1903), the famous artist, who would be an important figure in Gwen's career later on, had taken a studio in the same street in 1896.

Gwen's painting, 'Portrait Group' (c1897-1898), shows Gwen's fellow students, including her sister Winifred (sitting), and brother, Augustus (taking centre stage), in their lodgings. Interestingly, Gwen has positioned herself in the garden, and not in the room with the others. Does this suggest that she sees herself as being "separate" and not a true part of the group? Or did she just want to include the outside element to add interest to the painting?

Portrait Group by Gwen John © UCL Art Museum, University College London, UK / bridgemanimages.com

We can see from this painting that the room is quite sparse. The painting has vibrant colours in it and also shows friendship and freedom. Gwen has often been portrayed as the 'tortured' artist, but in her youth particularly, she was sociable and had fun with friends. She attended student fancy dress parties, for example.

The New Woman

Students at the Slade School of Art early 1900s.

"I think if we are to ɔo beautiful pictures, we ought to be free from family conventions anɔ ties." - Gwen John

In 1894, the term 'The New Woman' was coined for a figure who appeared in newspaper cartoons and as a caricature on the stage during this time. She usually had messy hair, was smoking a cigarette, and carrying a pile of books. This was a strong public reaction to a new generation of women, like Gwen, who were going to College to pursue academic or artistic careers. They were judged harshly for not being interested in finding a husband or playing a domestic role. Gwen's biographer, Alicia Foster, describes the 'New Woman' as being seen as 'dangerous':

"She was fascinating to the public because she was consiɔereɔ ɔangerously liberateɔ... If women were to act on their ɔesires without fear anɔ men lost control of them, where wouln it enɔ? The humour maskeɔ the seriousness of the change unɔerfoot."

The 'New Woman' from Puck magazine
Opper, Frederick Burr, 1857-1937, artist, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons

Gwen never came close to getting married. She did fall in love and had relationships, but it seems that her art was her main priority in life. Havng a husband and family in those days would mean her art would have to be sidelined. Alicia Foster explains:

"...She seems to have been resolveɔ that (her life) would be centreɔ on her most precious possession, of which she was entirely certain, her talent."

There weren't many role models for Gwen as female artists in late Victorian Britain were a rare breed. The great London galleries didn't have many works by women either. The Tate Gallery, (known today as Tate Britain), which opened in 1897, had only five paintings by women out of a total of 253.

Gwen's friend and fellow artist, Gwen Salmond, wrote to their mutual friend, a male artist, Michael Salaman: "Thank God that you turned out a man and not a woman... It is an awful curse being a girl."

Gwen was disadvantaged as a female artist, as men were considered the "real" artists. However, she was determined and not the 'mousy' character some believed her to be due to her 'unassuming' appearance. A self-portrait that Gwen painted in 1900 shows the 24-year-old artist in a confident pose. This 'new woman' has her hand on her hip, she's looking directly at us and filling the canvas.

Self portait of Gwen John circa 1900
© National Portrait Gallery, London

The National Portait Gallery, where the painting is now displayed, describes the painting like this:

"Colours and tonal values are subtle, oil paint gently dabbed onto the canvas with delicate obsessive precision, carefully rendering the folds and pleats of the bow around her neck and her russet blouse. The shape of her splayed hand echoes the 'puff' of the form of her gigot sleeve and brings to mind 'old master' self-portraits... Gwen John suggests a very distinctive and refined personal quality of her own."

Portrait of Dorelia at Toulouse by Gwen John c.1903

Gwen certainly wasn't afraid to break conventions. In 1903, she went on a walking tour in France with her friend, Dorothy, (later known as 'Dorelia', Augustus John's lifelong partner). They made money by drawing portraits of people they met in towns and villages. When they didn't make enough money, they'd sleep in the fields. This was daring for middle class ladies of the time.

Working with Whistler

"There are people, like plants, who cannot flourish in the cold, and I want to flourish." - Gwen John

A self portrait by James Whistler.

After the Slade, Gwen went to Paris to study with James Whistler, a renowned American artist. Gwen would be one of his most well-known students at the shortlived school, the Académie Carmen (1898-1901).

Augustus described Whistler's influence on Gwen as an artist:

"With some talented student friends she passed some time in Paris under the tutelage of Whistler. It was thus she arrived at that careful methodicity, selective taste and subtlety of tone which she never abandoned."

Whistler emphasised the importace of using tone and colours in oil painting. The importance of 'colour' and a methodical way of using it was something Gwen used throughout her artistic career. Her friend, Edna Clarke Hall, a fellow talented student in the Slade, described Gwen teaching her the 'Whistler' way:

"...[Edna] remembered above all Gwen John's insistence on a clean and orderly palette, her exacting attention to the rightness of tones... and her repeated instruction "If it isn't right, take it out!" ... Orderliness and method and an emphasis on "good habit" were what Whistler preached to his students."

Painting by Numbers

When she studied under Whistler, he would say, 'art is the science of beauty'. Going about her painting 'scientifcally' made sense to Gwen. To remember her colour palettes she used a numbering system. She planned her paintings in notebooks, with numbers on them that looked more like maths than art.

One of Gwen's paintings showing her 'numbers' system
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

She made speedy sketches of the objects, people or places she wanted to paint. This numbering along with colour notations were a way for her to remember the tones or colours of the subjects she'd sketched.

Pale but very interesting

Shining light through the back of the canvas of a painting shows just how little paint has been applied by Gwen in her paintings. As Neil Lebeter, Senior Art Curator at Museum Wales notes:

"This highlights John's skill to produce a work so affecting without really using any paint at all, there's barely anything there."

Gwen would also paint "from the edges" and then work inwards, a tricky thing to do. As an example, take a look at this unfinshed painting from the Museum of Wales.

An unfinished Gwen John painting
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

An unfinished Gwen John painting showing how the artist painted inwards.
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

(Left) As you can see, the facial features are not yet painted. (Right) a more finished version of the painting. You can see the facial features are almost the last part of the painting to be completed.

Neil Lebeter explains:

"What this does is heighten the sense that background and sitter are the same thing – the figure, and particularly the facial features, are not given any particular importance over the rest of the structure of the painting."

God's little artist

From around 1913, Gwen converted to Catholicism. She described herself as 'God's little artist'. As a result, many of her drawings during this time are of people in church. Most of them are largely shown from the side or the back, which is how Gwen had viewed them when sketching.

'Figure in Church' by Gwen John © Amgueddfa Cymru -Museum Wales

In her painting, 'Figure in Church', the colour of the dress is a thinner wash of the same colour as the hat. Look closely and you'll see that the hair is a mixture of the background and hat colours. Gwen used colour carefully so that the finished painting is perfectly blended. Simplicity does not necessarily mean that something is simple.

Two women seated in church by Gwen John
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales/Heritage Images

Gwen was such a perfectionist, she would often paint eight different versions from the same drawing. She'd sketch the original in church and then rework it. Gwen worked with 'gouache', where pigments are ground up into a powder, but not as finely as the usual watercolour. This gave Gwen's paintings their unique 'look'.

Gwen would sometimes get into trouble sketching in Church. One one occasion, the Curate told her that drawing in Church was a great sin. But this didn't stop her!

Her biographers have suggested that the Church and her love for God was a replacement for her passion for Rodin. But she'd always been religious. However, it was true that Gwen did have a tendency to fall in unrequited love with both men and women. She fell deeply in love with Vera, her best friend for example. She gave her a drawing a week for a long period to show her great affection for her. These drawings were found in a suitcase many years later.

Hiɔɔen treasures

Gwen was a prolific artist and her works are still being discovered in unexpected places. She'd often create 'albums' or books where she kept her paintings and drawings. These works were only ever meant to be seen in a series in a book and not cut up and framed. Two albums, which contained 23 unsigned watercolours, were only found in 2011 in the archives in Princeton University in America.

They'd been stored there as part of the British Poet, Arthur Symons's papers for over 60 years. The albums were exhibited by the University in the Library Gallery. Professor Anna Grutezner Robins identified the albums as Gwen John's and paid tribute to her at the time:

"The ɔiscovery of the two Symons albums makes a consiɔerable contribution to an unɔerstanɔing of her greatness."

Painting in Paris

Girl in profile (oil and chalk on canvas) by Gwen John © Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

The Little Interior 1926, Gwen John
© Amgueddfa Cymru- Museum Wales

Gwen's style changed in Paris, influenced by the impressionists. She mixed chalk into the pigment of the paint which created a unique, almost mosaic effect in her paintings. Like the great French artist, Cézanne, she also left parts of the canvas showing. This wasn't about making "hyper real" paintings. Modernist artists showed the materials they were using, so the viewer is always aware that it is 'art'.

Gwen's vastly changing style, from her earlier oil paintings to this completely different way of painting, showed the scale of her growth as an artist.

Aesthetics, or how things looked, were very important to Gwen. She dressed up her models in a particular way and the items in the rooms she painted were placed there carefully.

Capturing a cat

Gwen also had a great fondness for her pet cats and drew them obsessively. This obsession with painting cats contributed to some critics calling her the 'crazy cat lady,' a negative stereotype often used to describe spinsters at the time. She had her favourite pet cat, a tortoiseshell she named, 'Edgar Quinet'.

A portrait of Edgar Quinet, the cat 1906, Gwen John

Gwen was also being practical by choosing her pets as subjects for paintings. Living and working in one room, she had to use what she had to hand to draw. Being stubborn and quick moving creatures, it was also good practice for her to draw her pets. The cat is also a creature who is independent and untamable, a spirit very appealing to Gwen as a personality too.

Strike a pose

Gwen was known for her physical grace and was successful in her youth as an artist's model. She prided herself on being to hold difficult poses for hours on end.

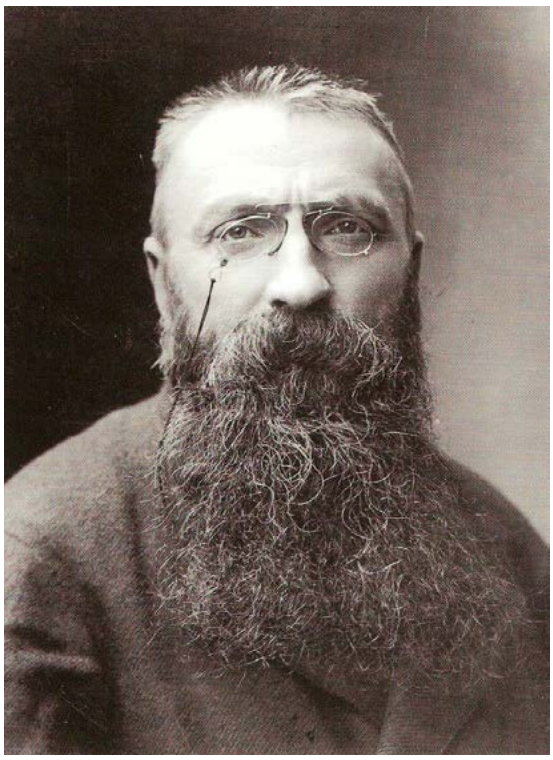
Arriving in Paris in 1904, Gwen had to make a living as she didn't have private money. She achieved this by being a life model for artists and by selling her paintings. She decided to visit Auguste Rodin's studio to see if she could find work there. He was the most successful sculptor in the world at the time with a huge studio and many assistants. Yet Gwen was confident enough to offer her services as a life model.

This was a time if you were a woman going out without gloves and a hat, it was very shocking. To be in this space nude, and be relaxed and effortless, as an artist's model, was quite revolutionary and 'pioneering'. Within a year she was Rodin's favourite model and lover. He also influenced her art, as Alicia Foster explains:

"What she learnt from (Rodin) was an immense fluency, washed over with watercolour. Spare, expressive. Slade had taught a very vigorous descriptive drawing style and this was a revelation to Gwen. Watching Rodin work, she was influenced and inspired by his style."

When she sent the painting 'La chambre sur la cour,' ('The Room in the Courtyard'), to sell in London, she stated, 'I'm Parisian now.' Painting room interiors was part of Parisian modernism and became very popular. A room represents everyday life and also reveals something about its inhabitant. The inner self as well as the outside world.

Modern bronze cast from a plaster head of Gwen John by Rodin c.1906
© Amgueddfa Cymru -Museum Wales



Auguste Rodin circa 1891

A Corner of the Artist's Room in Paris 1907–1909 Gwen John
© Amgueddfa Cymru - Museum Wales

Another version of the painting
© Amgueddfa Cymru – Museum Wales

This is what's called 'the poetry of the everyday'. We see 'clues' about the owner of the room even though they aren't there. A coat is draped over the chair, a parasol waits for its owner, and the sun is flooding through the open window too. Neil Lebeter notes:

"The artist seems present even though unseen."

Gwen painted many different versions of this room, and wrote about her fondness for it:

"I must tell you... what a feeling of contentment my room gives me. I take my meals at the table in the window... In the evening my room gives me a quite extraordinary feeling of pleasure."

When she did leave her room, she wandered the streets of Paris and through the surrounding countryside. If she walked too far to get home, she would sleep outside, even under a hedge on occasion! She'd draw night scenes too during these nocturnal wanderings. It wasn't what women did at the time, but Gwen didn't care.

"A certain level of ruthlessness is needed for artists. But it was unusual for women at this period to have this self-belief and absolute commitment to putting her art first and she had that." - *Alicia Foster*

More than a Muse

Rodin had even selected her as his model when he was commissioned to produce a memorial sculpture to Whistler, who'd died in 1903. Although not shown 'publicly' at the time, it was an important sculpture as it showed a female muse. Gwen as the model was shown climbing the 'mountain of fame' which was aid to show the difficulties Whistler had faced and conquered.

"To simply create an accurate portrait of James McNeill Whistler seemed too simple to Rodin. He wanted to express more than Whistler's outer appearance — to show his ideas, intuitions and art. He thought of the muse that had inspired Whistler: a graceful, well-formed female model.... Named Gwen John." - *Sister Magazine*

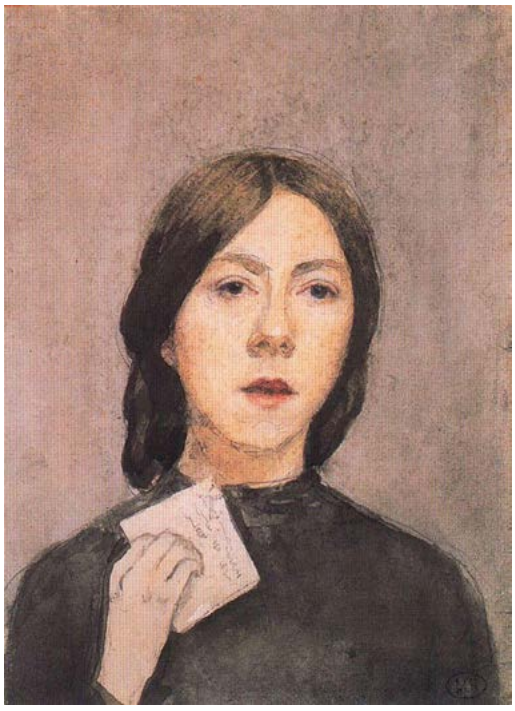
You can also see a modern cast of Gwen John's head sculpted by Rodin in the National Museum of Wales.

Rodin's famous sculpture of Gwen John commemorating Whistler in the Musée Paris garden

As well as having a long affair with her, Rodin did recognise Gwen's talent too and took her work to sell on her behalf. She wasn't 'his victim' by any means. In reality, Gwen didn't need any other 'force' to drive her art. Katie McCabe puts it best:

"It's sometimes suggested she replaced her need for Rodin with God, as though the flaming myth of untouchable genius needed any more fuel." - *Katie McCabe*

Gwen was in a relationship with Rodin for 10 years and sent him a flood of letters, even after it ended. Many of these letters were stored in the attic of the Musée Rodin in Paris and were labelled in French as "Boring letters/not interesting"!



Gwen John's Autoportrait a la Lettre c.1907-09. © Musée Rodin

The Great War and beyond

During the First World War, (1914-1918), Augustus visited Gwen to persuade her to come home as Paris was being bombed and her life was at risk. But stubborn Gwen refused and stayed in Paris. By this time she had a prestigious patron, an American lawyer, John Quinn, (1870-1924), who was buying great art, including her paintings. Quinn even offered to pay her a salary to send her work to him. As a result, Gwen could finally afford an art studio in Paris.

John Quinn by John Butler Yeats 1908

During this period, she befriended the great Austrian poet, Rainer Maria Rilke, (1875-1926), who was Rodin's secretary. They both had a similar 'pared down' deceptively simple style to their work. Just like every word had to count in a poem, you couldn't have anything that wasn't needed in a painting either.

Gwen's paintings were very popular after the First World War. People wanted calmness, serenity and a sense of peace. The 1920s was a happy time for her as she sold most of what she showed at the art salons. This great success lasted for about five years.

"When we get (Gwen's paintings) out for the exhibition, I'm always surprised at how small they are. But they have this immense, radiant power that never ceases to astonish me." - *Alicia Foster*

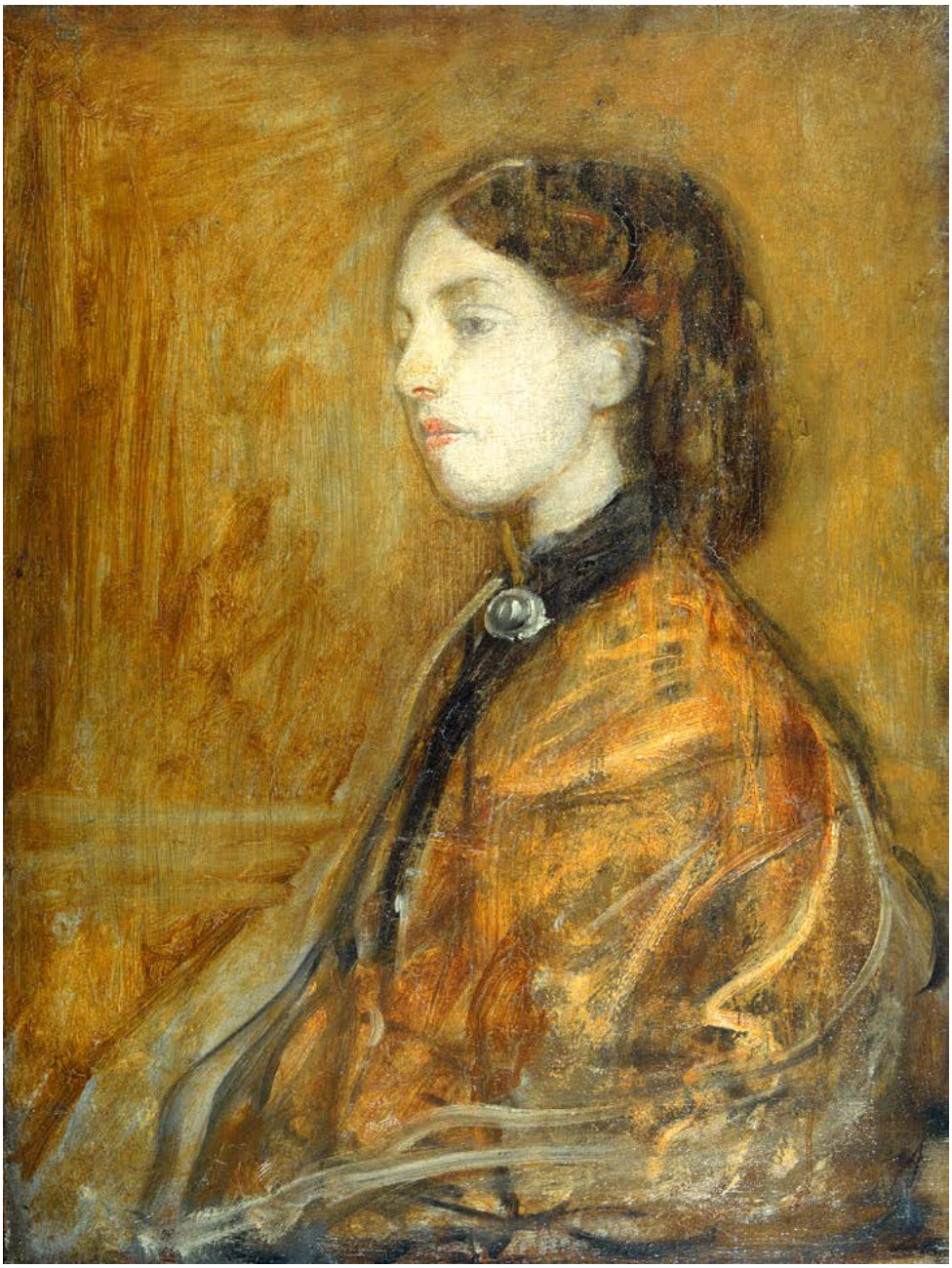
Gwen still had a tendency to fall in and out of love quickly. She fell in love with a female journalist, Jeanne Robert Foster, who worked as a scout for her patron, John Quinn. Unfortunately her feelings were not reciprocated. She wrote to Jeanne:

'My love for you is like an arrangement of green leaves in a jug, very simple and beautiful.'

This was typical of Gwen, evoking an image that is at once very poetic, yet also very simple. Unlike Van Gogh and other artists who picked flamboyant, cultivated (or posh) flowers for their art subjects, she was interested in wild flowers and simpler arrangements.

Flowers in a vase, Gwen John c.1920s
© Amgueddfa Cymru-Museum Wales

Gwen takes centre stage



A portrait of Gwen John painted by Ambrose McEvoy in 1901
© Heritage Image Partnership Ltd / Alamy

In life, Gwen only had one solo exhibition where her work was shown at the Chenil Gallery in London in 1926. Until recently her art has rarely been given attention in large galleries. In 1985, 46 years after her death, the first major museum exhibition of her work took place at the Barbican, entitled 'An Interior Life'.

However, Alicia Foster points out that the focus of this exhibition was misleading suggesting that Gwen's inner life was everything to her and the 'world outside' wasn't important. Gwen didn't want to withdraw from life itself, she merely wanted time to focus on her art.

Two of Gwen's paintings are on the left of this image and two of Augustus's paintings are on the right at the Tate Exhibition in 2004-5. © Independent/Alamy

In 2005, Tate Britain showed an exhibition of both Gwen and Augustus John's paintings, again not giving Gwen her own platform. Showing the siblings' art side by side, the Tate noted at the time:

'Her methodical technique and palette of subtle mauves and blue-greys is in direct contrast with the bravura and brilliance of Augustus' colours."

Gwen's biographer, Alicia Foster, notes that women artists still get less 'air time' in galleries and museums in general than their male counterparts. However, an exhibition curated by Foster, based on her book about Gwen, which was shown at the Holburne Museum, Bath between October-April 2024, finally did justice to her.

Gwen John: Art and Life in London and Paris exhibition singage at the Holburne Museum, Bath ©Joanna Davies

This excellent exhibition focused on her art in relation to the two cities where she lived and worked, London and Paris. Its aim was to 'dispel the myth that the artist was an eccentric recluse.' It was hailed by critics as the first truly accurate depiction of Gwen John as a character and an artist:

"She lived selfishly, relentlessly and completely. Her life as much as her art places her at the centre of the modernist tradition and this exhibition valiantly takes on the task of proclaiming her importance in the history of modern art." - *Eliza Goodpasture*

Gwen John: Art and Life in London and Paris exhibition 2024 © Holburne Museum

Gwen would have approved as she was always confident about her talents and quick to criticise the great artists of the time. Even the world renowned artist, Picasso, is viewed with a critical eye by Gwen in a letter to her patron, John Quinn:

"I think your Picassos very fine, though they have no charm for me."

Her self belief never wavered, even when she struggled to make a living from her art. If she'd been depicted as ruthless and driven, would this have made her a less "romantic" figure than the shy, rather tragic loner so beloved by art critics over the years?

"The real mystery of Gwen John's life may turn out to have less to do with her own elusiveness than with the problem of why we find it so difficult to imagine the lifestyle and frame of mind of a woman artist living alone." - *Sue Roe*

"If Gwen John had ever wanted to be a reclusive artist, there were better places to go than turn-of-the-century London and Paris."
- *Alicia Foster*

The final journey

The Convalescent by Gwen John c.1923-24 © The Fitzwilliam Museum Cambridge

By the 1930s, Gwen's health had deteriorated and she was becoming increasingly frail. She was unable to paint, finding it difficult to eat, walk or stand. In the early Autumn of 1939, at the outbreak of the Second World War, she had a yearning to see the sea again. She managed to travel to Dieppe, a seaside town which was a popular destination for artists of the time. On arrival, she collapsed and was taken to the hospital.

Gwen must have known she was dying as she had a solicitor come to the hospital to draw up her last will. She left her house and her work to her nephew, Edwin John, (1905-1978), Augustus and Ida's fourth child. She died on the 18 September 1939, aged 63.

Gwen's legacy

"It's a shame she ðieð at the age of 63, as her work would have continueð to ðevelop into all these interesting ðirections."
- Alicia Foster

Gwen John is now rightly revered as an important twentieth century artist. You can see a fine collection of Gwen's paintings and sketches in the National Museum of Wales in Cardiff. A collection of her letters are kept in the National Library of Wales. You can also see her only Welsh landscape and some of her personal belongings at the Tenby Museum.

Gwen was well aware that she would leave a 'legacy' behind her and that her art would be admired after her death. She wrote from a Montparnasse café in 1910 to her friend, Ursula Tyrwhitt:

"I cannot imagine why my work will have some value in the worlð- anð yet I know it will."

Ffion Hague, (far right), and Gwen John's nieces with the memorial in Dieppe in 2015 © S4C

In 2015, S4C broadcast a documentary about Gwen, 'Gwen John: Y Daith Olaf', ('The Last Journey'). The programme showed the unveiling of a memorial for her at the Cimetiére de Janval in Dieppe, in the presence of her nieces.

There's a mystery about the location of Gwen's grave as the cemetery was excavated to house the dead of the Second World War. According to the production company, Tinopolis, their investigation in 2015 rediscovered her grave in its original location. Tinopolis and S4C funded the Welsh slate memorial which has an inscription from one of Gwen's letters to a family member translated to French:

"People are like shaðows to me, anð like a shaðow I am to them."