

Biography

T

he artist I have chosen to do is Dame Laura Knight (previously Laura Johnson), an English Impressionist. She was born on the 4th August 1887 in Long Eaton, Derbyshire, the daughter of Charlotte and Charles Johnson. Unfortunately her father died shortly after her birth and her family lived in a financially difficult position.



Her mother, Charlotte Johnson, taught art and had to do private tuition to keep the family going, and Laura learned to draw and paint at an early age from her. When she was 12, in 1899, she was sent to France, with the intention that she would one day work in an artist's studio. However, at the age of 13 she returned to England and joined the Nottingham school of art; and was probably the youngest pupil ever to study there. While at school she met one of the most promising students, Harold Knight, and she decided that the best way for her to learn was by copying his style. They soon became great friends. After only one year there, Laura's mother was diagnosed with cancer. However, Laura won the Princess of Wales scholarship and an award of £20 pay for the next two years as she had won more awards than any other woman in Britain. Sadly, her mother died of cancer four years later.

With her sister, Eva, Laura moved to Staithes in 1900 and in 1903 she married Harold Knight, the same year in which she got her first painting hung in the Royal Academy. In 1905-1907 she and Harold spent short periods of time in Holland.

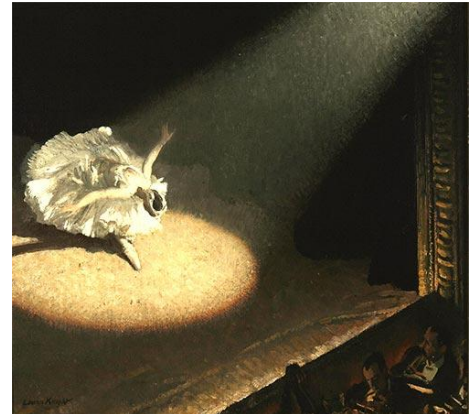
Near the end of 1907, Harold and Laura moved to Cornwall where they stayed till 1918. While she was there, her work developed and she painted outside a lot more, but she still had children in her work, like in this painting called '*Lamorna Birch and his Daughters*' (she was also great friends with Lamorna Birch himself).



Laura Knight loved the theatre and in 1918, when they moved to London, she started to paint the ballet, the theatre and the circus as well as country

scenes a lot more. Although she watched the Diaghilev Ballet Russes from 1910 – 1914, until the First World War, it was not until the 1920's that she got permission to work backstage.

While she worked there, she painted many famous ballerinas. Although I do not know who this person is, I know that her subjects included Kasarvina, Pavlova, Lopokova and many others. Working backstage was good for Laura's work because it forced her to do accurate drawings quickly, so she could finish them on time. In 1929 she became the first British female artist to be made a Dame.



During the Second World War, Laura and Harold mainly lived in a hotel near Malvern to avoid the bombing in London. Laura became interested in farming and liked to paint landscapes as well as her many commissions for the War Office Records, many of which were major tasks for a woman well into her sixties. Her most important task was to paint the Nuremburg Trials in 1946 which was a war crimes trial. The commissions were ordered by the War Artists Advisory Commission. A small number of artists had full time salaries for short periods while others had specific commissions. Laura's work tended to be in factories or RAF buildings because she was able to paint intricate detail, so she could do the machinery.

Laura was supposed to stay and paint the Nuremberg trials for five weeks, but she stayed for almost two months, and in her diary she admitted that it was so depressing that she had difficulty eating. In January 1946 she wrote to Harold from Nuremberg: 'Such an extraordinary event in my life, I am beginning to long for the time when I have done my work here and can be back with you in England.'

Once the war was over, Laura and Harold moved back to London where she resumed the theme of ballet, the circus and gypsies. In 1943, Laura was commissioned by Lord Iliffe to paint a large picture of Princess Elizabeth, who is now the Queen. She is depicted holding a pair of scissors having cut a length of ribbon commemorating the newly rebuilt city of Coventry. Behind her are the Mayor and dignitaries. Unfortunately the painting was a disappointment to Laura and some of the paintings' subjects. However, she didn't realise that she had been suffering from an illness for some time. When she lost the use of her arms and shoulders, Harold took her to a doctor in Malvern who

diagnosed a blood complaint. As soon as she could hold a brush she scraped off and repainted almost the entire painting. Lord Iliffe was very pleased with the result, and it now belongs to the Herbert art gallery in Coventry.

In 1961, Harold died. He had been suffering from arthritis and had not been strong for a while. Laura wrote a letter to a friend in which it said: 'I am managing in some measure to keep calm in the knowledge that an unbreakable bond that has existed throughout between Harold and me is still unbroken.' She carried on painting despite being in her eighties. The last exhibition of her work was held in her home town of Nottingham in 1970, in the Castle Museum. Sadly, she never lived to see it as she died the day before it opened at the age of 93.

Dame Laura Knight



By Anna Morgan

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Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring



This person is called Ruby Loftus. She worked in an RAF factory. It was painted in Newport, Wales in 1941. She is working a very difficult piece of machinery that took most people 7 or 8 years to learn to use, but Ruby managed it in 2 years. Laura observed many women working in factories like this one. I think it is quite a clever painting because the first thing you

notice when you look at it is Ruby, and then you follow her left arm to the piece of machinery she is working, which then draws your eye to the women working in the background. It is an oil on canvas painting.

From the women working in the background, and the sparks flying off her machinery, you can tell that it is a noisy scene, and has no other emotions besides concentration and hard work. Also, if you look carefully at the machine, you can see an extraordinary amount of detail, for instance, the wires and nails that are on the part that Ruby has her right hand on. She has also made the impression that these women had many things to do, and no time to spare.

You can also see the many different techniques she's used to show the different textures in the painting. She has used careful brushstrokes for the circular part of the machine and the way she's tried to make the light and shadow of Ruby's skin as smooth as possible, contrasting with less tidy strokes of her

overall. Also, the detail in the picture fades from the front to the back of the painting: Ruby and the machinery are very clear, showing screws and her hairnet ect, whereas the faces of the women in the back ground are blurred.

This painting was one of many she was asked to paint by the War Artists Advisory Commission. They said that 'she was not a quick worker but she was producing some exceedingly popular pictures at a fee which to an artist of her standing was no more than a token payment.' The painting '*Ruby Loftus screwing a breech ring*' was one of her finest.

A Ballet Dancer

Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find out who this ballerina is, but she was probably either one of Diaghilev's Ballet Russes, or one of an old ballet dancer called Cecchetti's pupils. Laura always loved the theatre and the circus but it was not until 1919 when she moved to London that she started to paint them. She mostly enjoyed drawing the dancers backstage and finishing the paintings at home. When she worked backstage, her drawing improved immensely because she was forced to work quickly, and with practice she improved.



This painting is called '*A Ballet Dancer*' and was painted in 1932. It uses a few different materials, but it is mainly watercolour with some charcoal. It is kept in Nottingham Castle Museum. It appears to be a fairly calm atmosphere, as if the performance had ended. The subject of the painting is not looking at the artist, which makes the viewer wonder what she is seeing that they cannot. She could be listening to an instruction or watching the other performers talking. She does not need to look at the shoe she is untying, as if she has done this many times before. The colours in the painting are fairly neutral, helping to set a peaceful atmosphere.

Light and shadow are effectively used in this painting: on the curtain, the dancer's skirt and on her skin. Although the subject is much paler than the curtain behind her, the colours do not contrast. Laura might have done a lot of work backstage before she did this ballet dancer, but it is unlikely that she had practice on this specific painting because the dancers were usually too busy to stand still and pose.

Conclusion

Dame Laura Knight led an extraordinary life for an artist. Not only did she become the first female artist in Britain to become a Dame, she also became an official war artist, she was one of the first women to become Royal Academicians and the style of her paintings changed so much during the course of her life; seascapes, ballet, the theatre, the circus, the Second World War, Gypsies, children and landscapes.

Once, a friend asked her why after the success of her two Newlyn paintings, *The Boys* and *Flying a Kite*, she had not stuck to painting children, adding, 'you'll never go far if you keep on changing your subject'. But it was in Laura's nature to always want something different. She never had the single-mindedness of some of her fellow artists whose work was appreciated the way it was, so they decided to keep it the same way. She did not see appreciation as an added bonus. She never tried to deny a childish love of showing off, and often painted for her audience. Perhaps this is less true of her paintings of Cornwall, but later in life she painted more for the satisfaction of having overcome a challenge.

However, it cannot be denied that she changed a lot from when she went to art school in Nottingham. She led a remarkable life and produced a huge variety of work that varied in tone, texture, feeling and subject. In the end, you must give her credit for endurance, courage, energy and skill in her personality. No other female artist of her generation and very few men achieved anything like she did and even now, there are not many who could match the skill, variety and interest of her extraordinary and almost totally unique life.



Two Girls on a Cliff



Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find out much about this painting. I know that it is the Cornish coast and was painted in 1917. I am not sure, but I think it is displayed in Sotheby's and it is an oil on canvas painting. I chose this painting to write about because it is so very different to the work she did in the rest of her life, and I think it is interesting how much her style changed

during the course of her life. She began life painting seascapes, moved on to ballet and the theatre which are much more about the figures in the painting and was also a war artist, which requires great detail of the equipment and also painted a few landscapes in her last years.

The arrangement of the picture is also interesting because the first thing the eye is drawn to is the rocks with the bright white foam of the water breaking on them gently fading, bringing the eye to the two girls sitting on the cliff. The sea is more of a calming background than anything else, although on closer inspection has quite a lot of detail on it e.g. the rocks in the distance in the top left-hand corner of the picture.

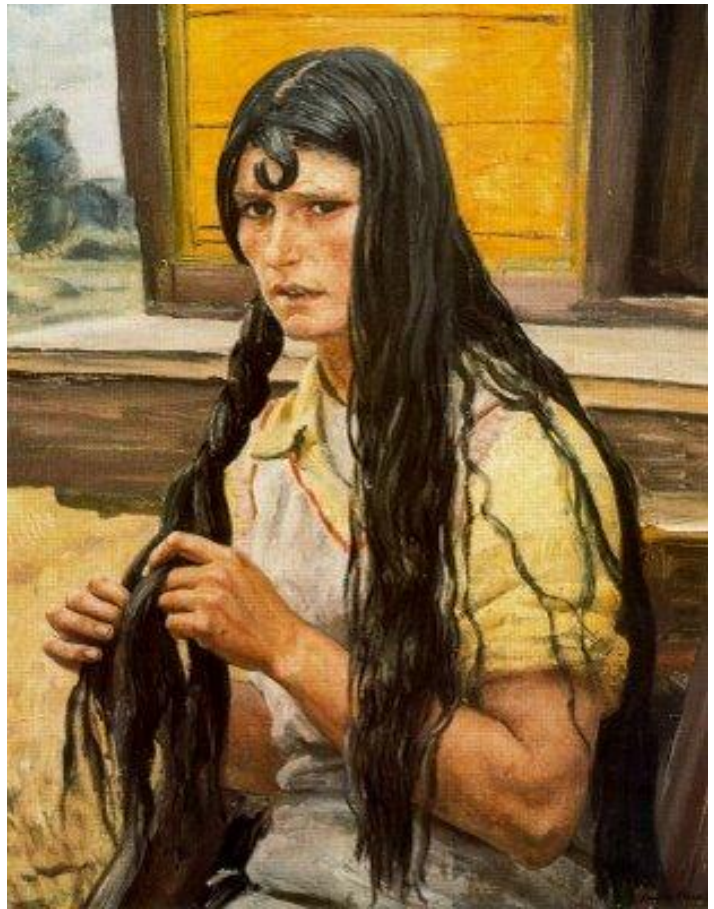
Texture is very important in this painting as the waves out to sea and the foam around the rocks and the grass on the cliff all require a different kind of technique. The picture is not as detailed as some of her later works, like Ruby Loftus Screwing a Breech Ring (see above).

It is fairly harmonious because apart from the breaking waves, there are no colours or images that stand out particularly clearly. However, this does not make it any less skilled. The posture of the two girls clearly suggests that they haven't got anything better to do and are enjoying a relaxing time. Also, the waves are particularly good, helping the viewer to imagine the sound of waves breaking, and the swaying grass to suggest high winds.

Gypsy Plaiting her Hair

This picture was painted in 1940, is privately owned and is oil on canvas. That is all I know about it, except that it was probably painted in Malvern. It depicts a gypsy woman sitting on her caravan plaiting her hair. She also looks strangely apprehensive for an unknown reason.

The detail is mainly focused on the figure, for example you can see the slightly lighter parts of her hair, and the tendons in her hand. It has plain background, and a contrast between the yellow paint on the caravan and the gypsy's dark hair. Light and shadow are not used much, which makes me think it was done partially from memory, with perhaps a few sketches as preparation work.



It has a slightly ominous feel to it because of the fearful expression on the gypsy's face, and the way she seems to be fiddling with her hair, rather than consciously plaiting or paying much attention to it, as if it is her way of showing nerves. It makes the viewer wonder what she can see that we can't, as she is not looking directly at the painter.

There are many pale and strong contrasts, like her pale yellow and white dress with the red lining and black hair standing out against them, and a contrast between light and dark in the yellow painting behind her head and, again, her hair. It is also a very skilled painting, as the viewer can see individual leaves in the tree in the background, and the strands of hair instead of a black mass.