ARTS

A detail from "The Deluge" (1920)

A woman who made an impression

Formal, lyrical, distinctive: an unduly neglected British artist

CLARE GRIFFITHS

WINIFRED KNIGHTS 1899–1947
Dulwich Picture Gallery, until September 18

Sacha Llewellyn

WINIFRED KNIGHTS
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The world of Winifred Knights is one of serpentine rivers, bare feet, harmonious colour, simple draperies, fields pimpled with haystacks; compositions that manage to be both formal and lyrical, heavily influenced by the art of the Italian Renaissance. Knights's repertory company of models turn up repeatedly in different guises, sometimes more than once in the same picture: her mother, sister, aunt, friends, lovers, and, above all, herself. Early on, it was often just Winifred on the sheet of paper: dressed up in fantasy fashion plates, inhabiting fairy worlds for story-book illustrations, looking back confidently in a watercolour self-portrait: a poised young woman, hair sleekly parted, as if she were sitting for Leonardo da Vinci. She continued to draw herself almost obsessively, putting in cameo appearances in almost all her paintings. As distinctive in her aesthetic dress and self-fashioning as in the art she went on to produce, she was a woman who made an impression. The final room of this retrospective at the Dulwich Picture Gallery includes various portraits of her by other artists: Colin Gill, who fell in love with her while they were students in Rome; Arnold Mason, to whom she was informally engaged; Thomas Monnington, whom she married.

Knights referred to her own paintings as "decorations". This was no self-deprecating term, born of false modesty. "Decorative painting" was a category, rather than a descriptive quality, taught in the early twentieth century as a specific discipline, with the aim of producing works, such as murals, for an architectural setting. It was a training that emphasized the importance of preparation: the process of accumulating sketches, working up designs and full-scale drawings, before ever beginning the painting itself. Knights continued with this rigorous practice of working through preliminary studies and full-scale cartoons, producing an archive of drawings that offers a valuable contribution to any appraisal of her career. She emerges as an artist with exceptional skill in draughtsmanship, the detailed observation in her pencil studies of draperies, poses, plants and places providing a notable counterpoint to the simpler treatments she pursued in paint.

The show at Dulwich includes the key paintings (all five of them) that map her trajectory as an artist, as well as a rich display of her student work, a handful of small painted panels, drawings, sketches and designs. These are works that are largely unfamiliar, by an artist whose name faded into relative obscurity, despite a blaze of prizes and acclaim. Early achievement proved no reliable predictor of lasting reputation. Knights was a star student at the Slade during and just after the First World War, and the first woman to win the prestigious Rome Scholarship in decorative painting; the Tate acquired her "Italian Landscape" (1921) while she was still in her early twenties.

Her student work was already accomplished: animated watercolours of fairs, markets and munition girls; some fine life drawings; a prizewinning – and mildly political – painting in tempera, featuring her Fabian aunt Millicent Murby (1919); a confident portrait (1920) of her father's boss, the sugar heiress Anna Fryer. But nothing in Knights's work to that point prefigures the palette, stylized manner, or unsettling drama of her most celebrated painting: "The Deluge" (1920). "The Deluge" was the set theme for that year's competition to win a scholarship in decorative art at the British School in Rome, but, with breath-taking originality, Knights made the subject entirely her own. An initial sketch shows that she had begun interpreting the topic along conventional lines: strong horizontals, a nursery-room ark, bright colours. It turned into something far more radical: a painting about peril, rather than salvation and the covenant. Barefoot figures strike poses of flight and alarm, like a tragic chorus or a tableau in an avant-garde ballet, while a sombre ark sails by, almost unnoticed, in the distance. The colours are military – khakis, gun greys and sober blues – lightened only by flashes of pale skin and accents of carmine red. Foreground figures echo the attitudes of Carduccio's monks, spooked by St Jerome's lion, while a lean dog bounds up the slope as if he's escaped from a painting by Uccello. The painting feels outside time: a kind of modern archaic. Critics at the time were flummoxed by it: "an example of anarchy in art, original, tragic and inspiring".

"The Deluge" was the key work in Knights's career, bringing her recognition, a degree of fame and the opportunity to travel to Italy, which was to have a profound effect on her life and art. *The Daily Sketch* gave a front page spot to news of her triumph, hailing the achievement of this "Streatham girl". Meanwhile her work immediately veered off into different styles and moods, and she never produced anything else remotely like it again. Even while brokering a revival of interest in Knights as an unduly neglected British artist, the exhibition tends to acknowledge "The Deluge" – painted at the age of twenty-one – as her one masterpiece. Remarkably, it was also done against the clock: the shortlisted artists had just eight weeks to complete their paintings, and Knights had even less time than that in practice, being confined to bed for nearly a fortnight with a throat infection during the competition period.

For her next major painting, Knights abandoned the dramatic design evident in "The Deluge" in favour of a re-imagining of fifteenth-century compositions: stage-set perspectives on interior and external locations, elegant groupings of figures (including both her incoming and outgoing fiancés and at least three appearances by the artist herself), and a light palette that the curator Sacha Llewellyn likens to "faded fresco". Always attentive to dress, Knight adds beautiful details in the gathers of garments, and the pocket of a jacket that doesn't quite lie flat. "The Marriage at Cana" (1923) – never fully finished – was intended to demonstrate the fruits of her studies in Rome. It is mesmerizingly strange. While most of the guests are frozen as witnesses to the miracle happening stage-right, it is difficult for the viewer not to be more distracted by fluorescent slices of watermelon dotting the tables in front of them.

Knights spent almost four years in Italy, but her experiences at the British School were far from being the most rewarding part of that time. Rome itself provided little inspiration, and she was drawn instead to the surrounding countryside, her enthusiasm for Italy most satisfied when she could leave the city entirely behind. Her residence coincided with Mussolini's rise to power, but Knights's instinct was to see Italy as a place of rural tradition. In "Italian Landscape", she shows the mighty meanders of the Tiber beyond a farmhouse and peasants resting from their work, a woman breastfeeding out in the field. The exquisite "Santissima Trinità" (1924–30) was inspired by the annual pilgrimage to a sanctuary in the hills above Vallepietra, east of Rome. The landscape is textured with extraordinary clarity, like something by John Brett, slopes dotted with vegetation rising up beyond the pale fields of the valley. But the mystery is in the foreground, where the pilgrims – all women – float in various states of repose, like figures of some legend that is never explained: the Pre-Raphaelites meet Neo-Romanticism.

Though she had ceased going to church in her mid-teens, Knights's subjects were usually biblical, or at least had some religious element. (It is notable that Stanley Spencer was one of the modern artists she most admired.) "Edge of Abruzzi" (1924–30) is unusual within the select group of her larger works for its absence of any such narrative: a serene landscape, begun in the bliss of early married life (though with three people in the rowing boat out on the mountain-fringed lake). By the time she finished the painting, its original setting was far behind her, and she and Monnington were back in London, sharing a house with her former tutor, Henry Tonks. She had also begun the last of the "decorations" that she would bring to completion: a troublesome commission from 1928 for a reredos in a refurbished chapel at Canterbury Cathedral. "Scenes from the Life of Saint Martin of Tours" (1928–33) is the fullest expression of her admiration for the art of the Italian Renaissance, yet lacks the poetic qualities of her other major works: a smoothly painted sequence of scenes from the life of the saint, marked by intense blue pigments, with explicit allusions to the frescoes of Piero della Francesca. Llewellyn catalogues the challenges which delayed and often threatened its completion: changes in personnel at the cathedral clouded the brief, Knights was instructed to revisit aspects of the composition, and the work ended up being placed in a different location from the one for which it was designed. At one point the architect Herbert Baker directed Knights to paint the snowdrops in his garden, having decided that these should be included in her design.

Even without such interference, the painstaking planning of her "decorations" did not encourage rapid productivity. During the Second World War she barely painted at all, while her husband Thomas Monnington was away designing camouflage and recording stirring images of the battle in the air. The experience of the First World War had been traumatic for Knights, who suffered a breakdown from witnessing an attack on a London munitions factory in 1917, prompting a break in her studies at the Slade and a period of recuperation on her cousin's farm in Worcestershire. Some of that emotional experience surely found expression in "The Deluge", which is often read as a war painting. But there is no evidence of her artistic response to the later conflict. In fact she had produced little since the birth of her son John in 1935. Offers of commissions came her way, including a set of tapestries for the Great Hall at Eltham Palace. (The Courtaulds were so confident in anticipation of these that they included Knights's initials on panelling commemorating the artists who had contributed to the redecoration.) No one could have anticipated that the reredos for Canterbury would be her last significant work. In 1947, at the age of only forty-eight, she died suddenly from a brain tumour.

Knights's five major paintings are brought together here for the first time: "The Marriage at Cana" returning from New Zealand for the occasion; "Santissima Trinità" and "Edge of Abruzzi" loaned from private collections. They are evidence of a substantial talent and a distinctive vision. Yet the exhibition is haunted by paintings that never happened. "Bathsheba" exists only as faint drawings on a small panel, one corner of which is worked up in oils as a delicious glimpse of the landscape beyond the palace. A watercolour sketch shows the adulterous wife Pompilia – Knights's initial choice of subject for her residence piece at the British School – standing naked out of doors while the artist lounges in front of her, staring on from beneath her trademark broad-brimmed hat. An envisaged painting of Jairus's daughter was abandoned despite much planning and several working drawings. A project to paint Paradise, located in the countryside around Anticoli, likewise came to nothing.

Saddest of all these abortive works is the ghost of "The Flight into Egypt". In 1937, Lord Balniel asked for a "great landscape" and presented Knights with a large canvas on which to work, hoping for something along the lines of the wonderful "Santissima Trinità". At the time of her death ten years later, there was still no painting, though several botanical studies for it survive, as well as a large drawing, marked up with a grid, laying out a detailed design for the background. Whatever progress she had made on the painting itself is now lost; in 1955 Monnington reused the canvas. Years before he had reassured his wife about her slow rate of production, reminding her that Leonardo himself was famous for the quality rather than the quantity of work he produced. Even so, this beautiful retrospective leaves one wishing for more.