

Artwork of the Month April 2020

Study for 'Nameless and Friendless' by Emily Mary Osborn (1828-1925)



Small Version of 'Nameless and Friendless'; the larger version in Tate Britain was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1857; the York version acquired 1997 as a study for the Tate version (but see note 6 below), with Art Fund support and a grant of £3000 from the Friends.

Emily Mary Osborn (1828-1925)

The origin of York Art Gallery's collection lies in the gift in 1882 of 126 nineteenth-century (that is, at the time modern) paintings by the eccentric collector John Burton, who gives his name to the Burton Gallery; the gift included such Victorian favourites as Edward Matthew Ward's 'Hogarth's Studio in 1739'. The Victorian period saw a dramatic

increase in the number of registered women fine artists, from fewer than 300 in the census of 1841 to 3,700 in 1901 (for male artists the numbers are 4000 and nearly 14,000). Here **Dorothy Nott**, a former Chair of the Friends whose PhD at the University of York was on the work of the distinguished battle painter Elizabeth Thompson, Lady Butler (who incidentally narrowly missed by two votes becoming the first elected female Associate Member of the Royal Academy) writes about a remarkable small painting by a woman artist of the period in the Gallery's collection.

In 1844, when Sarah Stickney Ellis published her manual *The Family Monitor and Domestic Guide*, she advised her women readers not to excel at any one activity. Instead, she argued for a tolerable standard in a wide range of accomplishments. Her reasons were twofold, first, to ensure at least a basic knowledge of a variety of topics so as to facilitate social intercourse and, secondly, to prevent women from posing a threat to their male counterparts. Art, she believed, had the advantage of being a quiet and unobtrusive pastime to be pursued as a hobby and not a profession. That was a privilege best left to men. Her views were shared by the art critic John Ruskin, who believed that education for women was to be directed towards making them wise “not for self-development” but rather for “self-renunciation”.ⁱ He saw the house as sacred and a shelter for the weary male soul against the outside world, promoting the doctrine of “separate spheres” which he claimed to be derived from nature. Men were the doers with their intellect for discovery, speculation and invention; women were designed to arrange “sweet ordering” within the domestic sphere.ⁱⁱ

Serious instruction in art for women was difficult to pursue in the nineteenth century, and it was not until 1893 that they were eventually allowed to draw from a (nearly) nude male model in a segregated life class.ⁱⁱⁱ According to Eliza Bridell-Fox, herself an artist, “no advantages whatever were offered in the Government schools to those female artists who desired to attain proficiency in any branch of art, except decorative art.”^{iv}

Nevertheless, women in the nineteenth century did paint and did so professionally, as evidenced by the societies and galleries created for them to compete, exhibit, and sell.^v More problematic was their struggle for recognition as professional artists in the wider art world and the ability to make a living from their work. This dilemma is nicely encapsulated in Emily Mary Osborn's 1857 painting *Nameless and Friendless*, a version of which is held in York Art Gallery's collection and

was until recently on view in Madsen 2.^{vi} As the art historians Linda Nochlin and Ann Sutherland Harris have observed, it is significant for being “one of the rare nineteenth century paintings to deal directly with the lot of the woman artist.”^{vii} Osborn’s richly complex work shows an aspiring and probably impecunious female artist standing before an elderly and sceptical art dealer as he scrutinizes her work. She is exposed, standing centre-stage, highlighted dramatically by the light falling on her face and hands. She is clearly not regarded as a woman of influence by the dealer, who pointedly fails to offer her a seat on the vacant chair beside his desk. The artist is young, and, as the absence of a ring would suggest, unmarried (or possibly a widow). Her clothes and umbrella verge on the shabby; her eyes are downcast as she waits patiently, almost penitentially, for the dealer’s pronouncement, though it is easy to imagine that, but for a pressing need to earn, she would willingly make a quick escape to avoid a disappointing verdict. Beside her is a young boy, possibly her brother, carrying a second canvas, which the dealer may or may not ask to see. It is altogether a humiliating experience, and one that a Victorian audience would understand, reading the painting like a novel.

But this is not the end of the story. To the left of the canvas sit two well-dressed gentlemen in top hats, ostensibly viewing some prints of a slightly salacious nature, but in fact eyeing up the young woman. Although she entered the shop as an artist, she is now being objectified; by the dealer as an object of pity and of little artistic value and by the two voyeurs as an object of desire. Her humiliation is complete, a victim of her class, and, more particularly, of her gender.

Osborn was not entirely unknown by 1857, having exhibited at the Royal Academy since 1851, but *Nameless and Friendless* was her first real success, both at the Academy and again at the International Exhibition in London in 1862. The *Art Journal* in 1864 called it “a work that attracted the notice of many a visitor by the pathetic story it told”.^{viii} When first shown, it was accompanied by the wording “The rich man’s wealth is his strong city: the destruction of the poor is their poverty.”^{ix} Osborn was known for her truthful representations of contemporary issues concerning women, children and poverty, using her art as a vehicle for highlighting social issues. This is not to deny that the work, even if this version is a study, is a work of quality. The painting is careful, the brushwork precise. Muted dark tones are chosen for the woman’s shapeless clothing set against a wall of contrasting paintings; the composition is compelling, holding the artist in the centre, profiling her

discomfort. Even without the social message, this is a powerful piece of work and a welcome addition to the Gallery's collection.

ⁱ John Ruskin, *Sesame and Lilies* (ed. D. E. Nord, with essays by E. Helsinger, S. Koven, and J. Marsh), New Haven, 2002: 78.

ⁱⁱ Ibid: 77

ⁱⁱⁱ That is "undraped, except about the loins" (L. Nochlin and A. S. Harris, *Women Artists: 1550-1950* exh. cat. Los Angeles County Museum of Art (Los Angeles and New York, 1976): 52. Bridell-Fox started her own school using "undraped" female models.

^{iv} *ibid*: 51.

^v Those worthy of especial note include: Laura and Anna Alma-Tadema, Helen Allingham, Sophie Anderson, Joanna Boyce-Wells, Lady Butler, Kate Bunce, Evelyn de Morgan, Elizabeth Forbes, Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, the four Hayllar sisters, Christiana Herringham, Louise Jopling, Anna Lea Merritt, Henrietta Rae, Rebecca Solomon, Maria Spartali-Stillman, Louisa Starr-Canzoni, Marianne Stokes, Annie Swynnerton (the first woman to be elected ARA), Henrietta Ward. Unfortunately these and other artists are less well known than they should be, because public galleries have seldom collected them, or consigned them to the store.

^{vi} A much larger version of *Nameless and Friendless* is in Tate Britain: www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/osborn-nameless-and-friendless-the-rich-mans-wealth-is-his-strong-city-etc-proverbs-x-15-t12936. The York version is usually described as a preliminary sketch for this, but evidence is lacking (the two men in the background are rather sketchier than in the Tate version, but otherwise the painting is precise). Rather it may be a smaller-scale near-replica of the RA 1857 exhibit, dating from around this year or perhaps later, conceivably made on commission. It is on a wood panel, which would be an unusual choice for a preliminary sketch. In the smaller version Osborn is struggling with the floor tiles on the bottom right, perhaps because the floor pattern in the Tate picture proved difficult to reproduce on a smaller scale. I am grateful to Richard Green for these suggestions. There is also a preliminary sketch for the painting in the Ashmolean Museum.

^{vii} L. Nochlin and A. S. Harris, 1976: 54

^{viii} *Art Journal*, 1864: 261.

^{ix} *Proverbs*, 10: 15