

*Peter Gibbard, formerly Chair of the Friends, writes about a little-known woman artist, an example of whose work is included in the exhibition Beyond Bloomsbury: Life, Love & Legacy held in York Art Gallery in 2022*

## **Artwork of the Month April 2022**

### **The Life and Work of Barbara Stanger Mackenzie Smith (1902-1996, from 1942 Barbara Morrison)**

This essay has benefitted from the generosity of the artist's sons, John Paul and Tom Morrison, who reside in Canada and Wales respectively. They have contributed photographs, artworks, and biographical details, which was most helpful. Other key sources were: Ancestry UK, British newspaper archives, and the libraries at Northwestern University, Illinois, and the University of Texas at Austin. The library sources relate to the collected papers of David 'Bunny' Garnett, with whom Barbara had a long friendship and correspondence, and John Rodker, her first husband.

Before I write about the life and times of Barbara Mackenzie Smith, I would like to comment on the painting by her in the exhibition at York Art Gallery, *Beyond Bloomsbury*. [\*The Birdcage\*](#) is one of two by the artist which were donated to the Contemporary Art Society in 1932. The other one is a watercolour entitled *Bunch of Flowers*, reproduced below. It is in the collection of the British Museum. Both paintings are excellent examples of the painstaking planning and thought-process that she adhered to throughout her long career. She was strong on planning, noting everything that she saw before her in careful detail, working hard on the composition, and known for her judicious, almost frugal use of colour and paint; her focus was to ensure that there was always light in her work.

Much of Barbara's output was for private commissions: typically still lifes with a domestic content like a room or exterior of a house, and landscapes. When she did participate in a commercial gallery exhibition (and I have identified 14 instances), she exhibited a single work which sold. Further, Barbara exhibited alongside those who were leading figures of the day, including Roger Fry, William Coldstream, Duncan Grant, and Vanessa Bell, who are all represented in the exhibition.

After too many years in the stores, *The Birdcage* came to public attention when Mark Hearld curated *The Lumber Room* exhibition (2015-17). That exhibition and this painting were very popular, and later the painting was voted one of the top ten in the collection from a curator's online poll of

visitors' opinions in 2020. To the best of my knowledge and after many Google searches, *The Birdcage* is the only work by this artist on display in a public collection today.

The consideration of a conservation funding request from a curator was always a highlight for me of participating in the Friends' Committee meetings. More often than not the artist was not well known, and the work of art had not been seen by the public in some years, perhaps decades. I do not recall that we were ever disappointed with the end result of the conservation work. An example in *Beyond Bloomsbury* is *Nude with Flowers* by Dona Salmon (illustrated in the 2021 FYAG Annual Report, p. 5).

I was looking for something challenging to do during the pandemic self-isolating intervals, so I decided to research the life and times of those women painters represented in the York Art Gallery collection for whom there is little published information. Of the 25 women painters I identified in the collection, seven were unknown in general terms by my measure, for four of whom I have compiled profiles to date. The most recent is the subject of this Artwork of the Month.

The two photographs of Barbara that I illustrate below were made available to me by her sons, John Paul and Tom. She is in her mid-to-late twenties, and in the group photo she is seated left of centre.

Barbara was born into a prosperous family of agricultural merchants in the village of North Witchford, near Ely in Cambridgeshire, on 7th July 1902, and so she was by Leonard Woolf's definition not 'old' Bloomsbury. Barbara attended the centuries-old Perse School in Cambridge, which during her time was enjoying something of an educational renaissance, thanks to the nationally acclaimed teaching methods introduced by the Headmaster Mr W. H. Rouse. Of particular note is the fact that Barbara was awarded the school prize for drawing in 1920!

She did not enrol at Cambridge University, but in later life she recalled her enthusiasm for its theatre productions of Greek tragedies and other theatrical events. Between leaving the Perse School and completing her studies at the Slade, Barbara had the opportunity to socialise with, or be introduced to, the 'younger' Bloomsbury set, which shaped her lifestyle. Frequent visits to Cambridge, she recalled, gave her the first opportunity to enter into debates about art and literature, to dance with a man, and also receive a marriage proposal or two, both of which she declined. At the Slade School of Art, one of her tutors was Henry Tonks whom she

described as an excellent teacher. There was also the opportunity to travel and study in France, where she met the artist and illustrator Pierre Eugene Clairin (1897-1980), a lifelong contact for critical appraisal of her art.

During this time she started to draw and paint for commissions and explore the different art movements, notably the post-impressionists and modernist painters. She also sought new experiences, for example with a fellow student from the Slade, Elspeth Little. Barbara gained the valued experience of theatre set painting for *The Queen of Cornwall* by Rutland Boughton, an operatic production which was held in Glastonbury in 1924.

For the next decade Barbara would become more high-profile in the London art scene as she took on more commissions, a few being portraits and many more landscapes and still life subjects. She was an occasional exhibitor at the commercial Leicester Galleries, the New Burlington Gallery, and the Royal Academy. Her work received positive reviews in the press, and sold well.

Similarly, she would over time establish artistic and social links with the older generation of the Bloomsbury Group such as Duncan Grant, Vanessa Bell, and David 'Bunny' Garnett, whose portrait by Vanessa is included in the exhibition. Barbara and David's correspondence extending over 40 years was of significant value to me. She also had numerous younger generation friends from the Slade associated with this group, notably Trekkie Parsons (lithographer and later Leonard Woolf's partner), Elspeth Little (founder of Footprint Fabrics), and Julian Bell. She recorded great experiences at the Gordon Square parties, and house weekends at Charleston, Monks House, Hams Spray, and Garsington, all of which are referenced elsewhere in the exhibition, and in Frances Spalding's excellent *The Bloomsbury Group*, now in its 4th edition, a concise and colourful guide.

While my focus here is the Bloomsbury Group, it is the case that Barbara's artistic and personal life took a change of direction from the early 1930s, as her relationship with John Rodker developed. She was to marry him in 1936, a son John Paul was born in 1937, but alas the marriage did not last. Rodker, one of the 'Whitechapel Boys' was a modernist poet, writer, translator (from the French), campaigning conscientious objector, and publisher. An appreciated creative talent then and now, John had a wide circle of influential intellectuals, artists, and Bohemian figures, who ranged from Ezra Pound to James Joyce, from Nancy Cunard and Sigmund Freud to Bloomsbury members and affiliates, including Wyndham Lewis, Henri Gaudier Brzeska, Roger Fry, Duncan Grant, and David Bomberg.

Rodker achieved several publishing firsts through his enterprises Ovid Press, the Casanova Society, the Pushkin Press, and the Imago Publishing Company.

Unfortunately, John's legal and financial history was marred by bankruptcy, and unfulfilled contracts with artists and writers, while there had been conflicts (or rivalries) with the Woolfs and with the Bells' publishing enterprises. Politically he was far to the left of any in the Bloomsbury set. So Barbara's marriage to John resulted almost immediately in her being socially ostracised by most of the group, especially the men, as she recalled later. The situation was worsened by the sudden death of her brother Angus and that of her parents, followed closely by John leaving her for another relationship and his second bankruptcy.

The portrait of John (circa 1931) illustrated below is by David Bomberg, courtesy of the Ben Uri Gallery and Museum, London.

Barbara's *Girl with Doll* was sold by the Leicester Galleries in 1938 to Sir Hugh Walpole, a major collector in his day and later a generous benefactor to the Tate and Keswick Museum. This painting has sold twice in the past five years, a rare appearance of her paintings on the market.

Barbara struggled financially, and with being a single parent, but continued to paint and exhibit until 1941. Her last commercial outing for the decade was held in Bedford (Vanessa Bell and Roger Fry also exhibited). Barbara's painting *The White House* was well reviewed in the press and sold!

In 1942 Barbara married Edward Morrison III, DFC, an American citizen who served in the RAF in WWII, joining as a gunner and rising to the rank of Wing Commander. After the war he practiced as a barrister in England. The drawing reproduced below is by Augustus John (1933), reproduced courtesy of Tom Morrison. She had a second son in 1950, Thomas Alexander, who appears in the foreground of the painting *10 Montpellier Row*, dated 1953. The setting is the garden at their home in Twickenham. (Tom kindly made this image available to us too.)

Barbara did return to exhibiting annually, using her married name Barbara Morrison, at the Royal Academy in 1951, 1952, 1959, and finally in 1966. Otherwise the impetus for her painting was afforded by private commissions: still lifes, country house interiors, and landscapes. They are in private collections in the USA, Canada, and the UK.

Barbara and Edward moved in the 1960s to the Nannau Estate in North Wales, and spent 16+ years restoring the main house and surrounding grounds, which they had purchased. The photograph of the house reproduced below is courtesy of Nannau Estate. Barbara and Edward continued to live locally, and are buried in a nearby cemetery. Edward died in 1995, and Barbara in December 1996.

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Photographs of Barbara, courtesy of John Paul and Tom Morrison

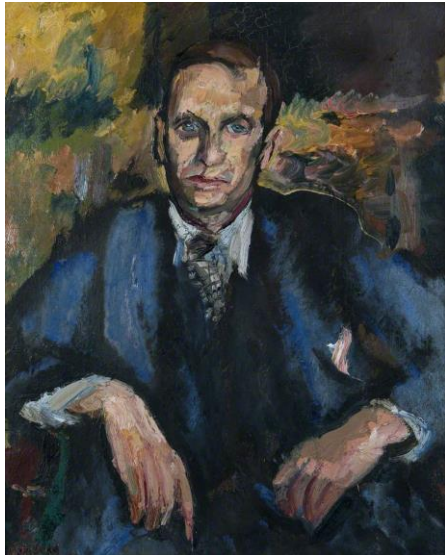


*Girl with Doll*  
Image courtesy of Lawrence  
Auctioneers, Crewkerne



*Snowdonia*  
Image courtesy of John Paul Morrison





David Bomberg, *Portrait of John Rodker*  
Image courtesy of Ben Uri Gallery and  
Museum, London



*Bunch of Flowers*  
Image courtesy of British Museum,  
London



*10 Montpellier Row*  
Image courtesy of Tom Morrison



Augustus John, drawing of E. A.  
Morrison III  
Image courtesy of Tom Morrison



*Nannau House*  
Image courtesy of Nannau Estate, Gwynedd