

Eliza Goodpasture, a student in the Department of History of Art at the University of York, writes about the Slade School of Fine Art in connection with the Bloomsbury exhibition (2022) at York Art Gallery.

The Slade and Bloomsbury

I am currently writing a PhD at the University of York, in which I study friendships between women artists at the turn of the twentieth century, between about 1870 and 1920. I investigate the ways in which the art world in London in this period constituted an extremely close-knit community. For women especially, friendships and professional relationships were central to the ways they made art, indeed enabled them to make art at all. I conceive of art-making as something more collaborative than as usually represented. The current exhibition at York Art Gallery, *Beyond Bloomsbury: Life, Love, and Legacy*, does an excellent job of demonstrating just how central friendship and social networks more broadly were to artists and writers working in London in the early twentieth century - and how far-reaching the impact of the core Bloomsbury artists was, and especially how much of a force they were in creating and participating in both formal and informal groups, societies, and other kinds of organisations, in order to foster collaboration and social networks amongst artists.

One key place in which friendships and networks were born in this period was the Slade School of Fine Art. I shall explore the ways in which the School was an important force in the development of so many of the artists in the exhibition and in the early twentieth century in Britain generally, then focus on one Slade graduate whose portrait is included in the exhibition: [Edna Clarke Hall](#).

I love Edna's work and her story, and I shall focus on this single work and on this artist, and explore her place in the development of modern art in England.

The exhibition includes a group of works by artists who were members of the Friday Club, which was founded by Vanessa Bell (born Vanessa Stephen) in 1905. She hoped that the club would be a place in which young artists could have stimulating conversations about their artistic practices and beliefs regarding the purposes of art. It also functioned as an exhibiting body that was more accessible than traditional exhibiting spaces such as the Royal Academy and even the newer New English Art Club, which by this time was quite well-established and well-regarded. Bell attended the Slade briefly in 1904, and many of the initial members she recruited to the Friday Club were Slade graduates, whom she either met while a student or was introduced to through Slade connections.

The Slade has come to be synonymous with British Modernism, as so many of its graduates in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries became seminal figures in developing modern art in this country. Even so, very little scholarship actually focuses on the Slade itself - it seems rather merely to crop up in the biographies of artist after artist, without much further explanation. But I am interested in what exactly it was about the Slade that set it apart from other art schools in this period, and made it such a driving force for avant-garde art. The Slade was established in 1871 as part of University College London, which was founded in 1826; it still exists today as UCL's art school. It offered equal educational opportunities to men and women students from the start - in 1878 UCL became the first university in England to confer full degrees on women. One small exception to that equality of the sexes at the Slade concerned the issue of whether women

could study the undraped nude; this was not allowed until Frederick Brown became the Director of the School in 1892. However, the Slade was still far ahead of the other major art schools in London in terms of gender equality, not least the Royal Academy. The Slade was initially run by Edward Poynter, who went on to become President of the Royal Academy, then by the Frenchman Alphonse Legros, and subsequently, in 1892, by Frederick Brown, who came from a teaching post at the Westminster School of Art. After Brown instigated the policy of allowing women to draw from the undraped nude, women students began to outnumber male students by three to one. There had always been large numbers of women at the Slade, but they flooded in after 1892. This ratio remained relatively consistent throughout the following decades, with brief influxes of extra male students after each World War.

The Slade filled a very particular niche in the art school market. Stephen Chaplin, who organised the Slade Archive in the 1990s and wrote up a Slade Archive Reader that has been extremely helpful for me in wading through a lot of institutional records, described the appeal of the Slade for women students thus:

The School, though expensive, provided a secure, University based education for young women, (compared with the private establishments), in a safe area, (compared with the earlier, Strand, site of the Government Female School), near to some London termini, willing to take beginners (unlike the RA [Royal Academy]), directed by a well-known Academician. What was offered could legitimately be seen as a general education (unlike all competitors). Though no entrance examination was put in place except for the Scholarship, the implied academic ethos and high fees precluded the lower classes from attending (unlike the government South Kensington and Branch Schools); and there

was no hint of Design or certification for the (lowly) teaching profession (again unlike South Kensington).¹

In addition to these various conveniences, the Slade focused specifically on very young adults - generally looking to admit students who were under nineteen, and ideally sixteen. Though there were also older students, this meant that the population of the school was comprised mostly of adolescents who shared a coming-of-age experience with one another, and were also less likely to prove a threat to each other's respectability.

The Slade was thus uniquely placed to become a nexus of educated middle-class young women. Amongst other things, this had the notable consequence that most students at the Slade, by virtue of their age, class, and/or gender, were not actively engaged in the sale of their art, though many, if not most, had the ambition to become professional artists. In his memoir of his time as an art student at both Westminster School of Art and the Slade in the 1890s, the artist Alfred Thornton noted that at Westminster 'the atmosphere was very different from that of the Slade, as most of the students had to make a living from their work.'² In other words, the class dynamic at the Slade meant that its students were less concerned with making works that would sell and more with following their own artistic impulses (and those taught to them by their teachers). The middle-class-ness of the Slade allowed for an environment in which students could experiment without concern for their immediate financial well-being. The importance of having financial security in order to take artistic risks is clearly demonstrated throughout the exhibition, and was fundamental to the Stephen siblings' ability to foster such a progressive artistic community.

¹ Stephen Chaplin, *Slade Archive Reader*, unpublished work, covering the years 1868 to 1975, UCL Records Office, 67-8.
<https://www.ucl.ac.uk/slade/sladearchive/researching-the-slade-archive>

² Alfred Thornton, *The Diary of an Art Student of the Nineties* (London, 1938), 16.

Along with this class dynamic, another key part of a Slade education was its conferral of the professional identity of 'artist' on its graduates, regardless of their commercial or professional success. The concept of 'professionalism' was in active development in this period, and is central to the way these students understood themselves and their identities.³ By professionalism, I mean the modern equation of profession with personal identity, the idea that your profession is intrinsically linked to your sense of self and to your individuality. In this period, Higher Education was becoming the tool with which individuals became professionals - a required rite of passage socially as well as a way of box-checking in the pursuit of a certain career. Alongside this, the conceptual importance of meritocracy was solidifying - it became more possible, and indeed necessary, for young people to feel that they had *earned* their professional identity.⁴ For Slade students, their education was a way of gaining the hard skills of being an artist as well as of obtaining the socially accepted credentials required to claim the *identity* of 'artist', both to others and to themselves. In this way, the Slade was a particularly formative experience for the students who attended - they entered its halls as teenagers and left as artists. This transformation in identity was clearly impactful on an emotional level as well as a professional one. For women at the Slade, this emotional impact was heightened by the fact that their experience of *becoming* artists via this formal process of education and professionalisation was not available to their mothers' generation. They were the first to have the chance to seek the same formal qualifications as their male peers in Britain. It is really notable that even those women who never made a living from their art continued to identify themselves as artists for the rest of their lives; the identity they had acquired at the Slade was, for them, hard-earned, and permanent.

³ See Harold Perkin, *The Rise of Professional Society: England since 1880*, 2nd ed. (London, 1989 and 2002) for more on the concept of professionalism at the turn of the century.

⁴ Perkin, xii.

A group of drawings in the exhibition give a good sense of the artistic aesthetic taught at the Slade. Student work is often lost or never preserved, both because it is seen as practice and because students often do not have the money or space to keep all their work. Seeing this group, some of which is student work and some made just after the artist left school, is a great opportunity to look closely at the way Slade students were taught to draw. Christine Kuhlenthal's [portrait of her husband John Nash](#) is sparsely drawn with no shading. She focuses on clean lines and rendering an accurate likeness. Her work was done in 1918, some years after she left the Slade around 1914. Derwent Lees's portrait of Essil Emslie, his peer at the Slade, shares this same focus on clean lines and lack of shading, and was made in 1905. And Edna Clarke Hall's self-portrait of 1889, the earliest of this group, shares these qualities as well. The spread of these works over about twenty years really elucidates the consistency of the teaching at the Slade, driven by teachers Henry Tonks and Frederick Brown, who both joined the faculty in 1892 and remained there for many years - Brown until 1918 and Tonks until 1930, with a break during the war. Tonks took over from Brown as the head of the Slade, with the title of Slade Professor, in 1918. Both men, especially Tonks, prized draughtsmanship over all else. Tonks was famous for many things, including regularly making his students (male and female) cry, but also for forbidding anyone to use an eraser or a tool for blending graphite - even fingers. Painting was not much taught at the Slade, because Tonks believed that you 'can't teach colour.' Obviously most Slade students went on to paint in their careers as artists, and did so while students at the Slade, including in student painting competitions, but the foundation of their education as artists was based in excellent drawing skills. The fact that these are all portraits is also a wonderful illustration of the Slade tradition of drawing portraits of friends

and fellow artists. One student in the 1890s, Mabel Culley, described day to day life at the Slade in her diary like this:

We drew from plaster casts from 10 to 4, with a short interval for lunch... At 4 we went to the Life Room for 'Short Poses,' quick studies of 5 or 10 minutes. Later on you got permission to draw in the Life Room a day at a time, and you might send in drawings of hands and feet and of a head for Professor Brown to see...So you were gradually promoted to full time in the Life Room.⁵

They clearly had very full days! Male and female students worked together on plaster casts, but they had their own life rooms and so drew nudes separately.

The 'star' of the Slade in the 1890s was Edna Clarke Hall, then Edna Waugh. Edna is hardly known at all now, but her story and work are both remarkable and indicative of the hard realities for many women artists in this era. I think she deserves far more recognition than she has received, and I was glad to see her represented in this exhibition. Edna began her studies at the Slade when she was only fourteen, and was considered a child prodigy by her family. She grew up in a middle-class family in St. Albans with no artistic connections. She did very well at the Slade. She became one of his favourite students, and was invited to tea at his house regularly. Tonks continued to support her and her work long after she had left the Slade. Edna was described as the 'star of her generation' by Augustus John, and Ida Nettleship said that she 'reigned' over the Slade. She won the student summer composition prize for her *Rape of the Sabines*, sharing it in an unusual situation with Maxwell Balfour. Edna's composition was done in watercolour, which was not traditionally treated as equal to oil in the summer competition, but in this case an exception was made for Edna's extraordinary (and sadly now lost) work, and the prize was

⁵ Cited in Michael Reynolds, 'The Story of an Art School 1871-1971, 1974, unpublished manuscript presented to UCL Library in 1975, 116.

shared between the two. She won a highly competitive scholarship prize, as well, making her the winner of two out of three of the Slade's annual student competitions, the third being the student figure-drawing prize.

Edna was part of a friendship group at the Slade that included some very well-known artists and some who have been completely forgotten. Her closest female friends were Gwen John, one of the few painters, male or female, who has consistently been called a British Modernist; Ursula Tyrwhitt, who was an acclaimed painter of flowers and a prolific collector of art by her friends, and who was also in the Friday Club; Gwen Salmond, who married artist Matthew Smith, and whose painting of Angelica Garnett is in the exhibition; and Ida Nettleship, who married Gwen John's brother Augustus, whose portrait of Lady Ottoline Morell is also in the show. While students at the Slade, these women regularly made portraits of one another and of themselves, and were fascinated by creating and recording their evolving sense of selfhood as they undertook the journey towards claiming the identity of artist. These artists, and so many like them, come into fullest view for us, now, looking back at them, in the context of their friendship groups. When so little of their work survives, and sometimes even key details about their life stories, they are hard to imagine or understand until we place them amongst their social and professional networks, and can grasp how they moved through this close-knit world of artists around the turn of the century, influencing others and being influenced by them.

The self-portrait in the exhibition was made in 1899, in Edna's last year as a student at the Slade, several years before the Friday Club was founded - so it would not have been exhibited there. It shows a really remarkable maturity for such a young woman. The direct gaze is really striking, and again it is a great example of the type of draughtsmanship that was taught

at the Slade. Edna's cross-hatched strokes were much preferred by Tonks, used in lieu of shading or blending of the graphite.

Edna's career was dramatically limited by her marriage, in 1898 when she was nineteen, to barrister William Clarke Hall, who was thirteen years her senior. She continued attending the Slade during her first year of marriage, in order to finish her scholarship, which is when she made this drawing. But after that, she and her husband moved to Upminster, Essex, which was at that time still very rural, though it was within commuting distance of London. Edna was very isolated there, and her husband, who had been obsessed with her since he met her when she was a child, seemed to find that, once the bloom was off the rose, there was little left to interest him. A fascination with innocence and girlhood led to many such marriages, in which a much older man took a shine to a teenage girl, then found that once they were married, the attractions of innocence and childishness were gone.

So Edna was alone in Upminster, without her friends from the Slade and often without her husband, who travelled frequently. She became obsessed with Emily Bronte's novel *Wuthering Heights*, and began to draw illustrations of it obsessively. In her autobiography, she wrote:

That's what happened to the first group of sketches: I drew them all one evening, I was quite alone, Willie was away. I could not stop. I did one after the other, scattering the sketches about like a maniac, drawing them on sugar paper. Everything I thought of I wanted to draw quickly, it was a kind of inspiration. That's what I often have done in my work. I left them there and forgot about them for a while but then I went back to them and worked at them again. This first group was the basis for all the rest I did, even the etchings which were done many years later...I lived the characters of Heathcliff and Catherine myself, I simply was them. It was something that had come to pass in

a deeply unconscious way. I just had to draw *Wuthering Heights*.⁶

These were the works she showed at the Friday Club, which began meeting in 1905, after Edna began what would become her life's work - pieces from this incredible torrent of drawings of *Wuthering Heights* (see some [examples in Tate](#)).

She in fact did literally live them in preparation for drawing them - she used herself as a model for both characters. She was very interested in finding accurate period clothing for Heathcliff and Cathy to wear in her drawings. She found help from her friend Mark Gertler, another Slade student and member of the Friday Club, whose father was a furrier, and whose self-portrait is also in the exhibition. He and Edna searched East London together to find a set of vintage, mid-nineteenth century outfits for Edna to wear to model Cathy and Heathcliff - or, as she put it, to *live* them.

Edna's *Wuthering Heights* works are really remarkable, and are both happily and sadly now scattered around the country in various museums and private collections - happily, because they are well-preserved, but sadly, because they are rarely, if ever, shown together, which is when their real power is visible. They blur the line between portrait and illustration, because of the way Edna used herself as a model and the powerful connection she described feeling with the two characters. There is a performative element to these works, as though Edna is embodying Cathy and Heathcliff, rather than just illustrating or modelling for them. They are extremely idiosyncratic and quite unique. Edna stopped exhibiting much

⁶ Edna Clarke Hall, *The Heritage of Ages* (unpublished manuscript, undated, Tate Archive), 48.

after her marriage, and she stopped making larger scale works and oil paintings. But these works continued to pour out of her.

Edna's membership of the Friday Club, which offered a friendly and informal space in which to share what she was working on and stay in touch with other artists working in London, was a really wonderful exception to her otherwise sparse involvement in the London art world after her marriage. The Friday Club blended the experience of friends spending time together with an exhibition platform and serious help and critique. As intended, it modelled the social experience of attending the Slade, and it is no surprise that Edna and many of her peers were glad to be part of the group. There was no real 'Friday Club style,' per se - instead, the exhibitions staged by the club functioned as a fluctuating and live cross section of British Modernism. This inclusivity of styles and artistic practices was key to fostering creativity and acceptance amongst members. In Edna's case, it resulted in a space in which she could exhibit some of her early *Wuthering Heights* drawings, which might have been too unconventional or unfinished for other venues. Despite her participation in the Friday Club, Edna's career never really took off.

She wrote in her autobiography of the years after this period:

I would sometimes feel very lonely and long for the old Slade days when we were all drawing together; these happy times seemed gone forever. Unlike Augustus John and some others who by that time had already become famous, I had somehow retired from public view and, naturally, the contacts with my fellow students had diminished through the years. This however did not in any way affect my feeling as an artist...⁷

⁷ Clarke Hall, *Heritage of the Ages*, 60.

We really get a sense of Edna's sadness at having fallen away from public life, but also of her firm and ongoing conviction in her identity as an artist. As we have seen, the identity of 'artist' conferred by the Slade and by ongoing artistic practice, regardless of public success, was strongly held on to by Slade graduates, even when they, like Edna, were not living up to their dreams of a successful artistic career.

Edna's experience of having her career significantly impacted by her marriage was common amongst female graduates of the Slade. Almost all of Edna's close friends at the Slade shared her fate of seeing their art practices either entirely cease or become relegated to a hobby. Many years after they had all left the Slade, Augustus John reflected on his time there and wrote:

in talent as well as in looks the girls were supreme. But these advantages for the most part came to nought under the burdens of domesticity which loomed ahead for most of them and which, even if acceptable, could be for some almost too heavy to bear...⁸

It is somewhat annoying to hear this from Augustus John, who was a famously difficult husband to his wife, Ida, who died after giving birth to their fifth child, but is a very true description of the way life went for most of these women. The exception was his sister Gwen John, who never married and who instead pursued a bohemian life in Paris. Vanessa Bell's experience was another kind of exception - in her case, her husband and larger family network were key enablers and supporters of her career. Many women whose names we still know today share similar circumstances to Bell, because having a supportive family, especially one with other artists, had such a critical impact on women's potential professional success. It is very

⁸ Augustus John, 'Lady Smith,' 1 February 1958, the *Times*, London.

important to continue to include women like Edna in the art history of this period, because she was such a presence in her time. Her great success at the Slade and her close relationships with various far more illustrious artists, not to mention her fascinating *Wuthering Heights* drawings, make her not only very interesting but also highly relevant. If we merely study the people who have been made famous by a century of art historians, or were able to be successful only within the limitations of their time, we miss so much of the crowded, chaotic, and diverse reality of the London art world in this moment in history. And as I have mentioned, there was a massive population of well-educated women art graduates - the Slade produced them at a rate of three to one compared to men, and yet so many of them seem to vanish into thin air after leaving the Slade. By leaving them out of our art history, we leave out a really substantial number of people who contributed to the ethos of the art world in this period, and a significant part of the story of the art world itself - how people became artists, what challenges they faced, and how the structures of society enabled some to flourish and others to decline.

The friendship networks that were created and fostered at the Slade served a similar purpose to supportive family structures like Vanessa Bell's. The Friday Club was intended to continue this ethos of community and collaborative ways of working. In concentrating on Edna Clarke Hall, I have tried to focus on the ways in which she was so connected to, and influenced by, her peers at the Slade, the Friday Club, and elsewhere. In the exhibition we can see many of the ways in which she was connected to her friends and professional peers. It reminds us that all these people knew each other - even those who did not entirely get on, like Wyndham Lewis, who parted ways with the Omega Workshop to pursue Vorticism, or Ethel Sands, who was rejected from membership of the Omega Workshops because of what

Bell called the 'fatal prettiness' of her work. All these artists functioned as part of a larger community, and it does them a disservice to forget the fundamental ways in which the art they produced was influenced by the people around them.

This generation of artists, who began their careers in the final moments of the nineteenth century, was distinct from those that preceded them in London for many reasons, but a key one was the development of formal institutions like the Slade that structured the social networks which are so crucial for success as an artist. Studying artists of the mid-nineteenth century, it often feels that everyone was related, and they really were - especially artists who were women. It was so much easier to become an artist if your family was full of them, given that there was an almost complete lack of educational institutions that accepted women in Britain. Wealthy women were able to travel abroad, mostly to Paris, to access co-educational academies, but this option was available only to those whose skills were already developed and who were in the know. Friendships and networks were key to making this possible, but they grew out of existing networks of kinship and social connections. Members of the generation I have been discussing, who came of age around the turn of the century, still lived in a world heavily governed by class and other forms of privilege, but they were able to form artistic identities and relationships with their peers through a formal, more meritocratic set of organisations and societies. Artists like Edna - or Mark Gertler, who was Jewish and came from a working-class background - were still not able to prosper as easily as those with wealthy and artistic backgrounds, but they had legitimate avenues into the art world that their parents' generation did not have. This increasing accessibility of the art world was key to the flourishing of modern art in Britain.

© Eliza Goodpasture, June 2022