

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Nellie Joshua
(London 1877 – 1960)

Two students in the Life Room of the Heatherley School of Fine Art

Signed lower left: *N. Joshua*
Oil on canvas
60.3 x 49.5 cm. (23 x 19 in.)

Provenance:

Anissa El Helou, London, by 1987;
By whom sold, Christie's London, 19 May 1999, lot 517;
Private Collection;
Lawrences Auctioneers, Crewkerne, 12 October 2022, lot 446.

Literature:

J. Beckett and D. Cherry (eds), *The Edwardian Era*, London 1987, no. 56, p. 40.
M. Galinou and J. Hayes, *London in Paint*, London 1996, p. 375.
S. Llewellyn and P. Liss (eds), *Portrait of an Artist*, London 2021, no. 2, p. 12.

Exhibited:

The Edwardian Era, London, Barbican Art Gallery, November 1987 – February 1988.
Portrait of an Artist, Newcastle, Laing Art Gallery, 11 September 2021 – 26 February 2022.



Combining carefully observed detail with a dose of humour, Nellie Joshua's turn of the century painting depicts two art students enjoying a moment of quiet repose in the Life Room of the Heatherley School of Fine Art, known as Heatherleys. As a snapshot of the first art school in Britain to admit women on equal terms with men, Joshua's painting is fundamental to the study of female artistic practice in Britain during the late Victorian period. One of only a very small handful of late 19th-century painterly depictions of female students in an academy setting, it is also a rare and significant work within an international context.

In Britain, as indeed in Europe as a whole, art education and professional recognition for women remained separate and unequal to that of their male peers. The Royal Academy only counted two females amongst its founding members and the Royal Academy Schools did not admit women until the early 1860s. Even then the female students were only allowed to draw draped models rather than the nude form, long considered a cornerstone of artistic education. Throughout the 19th century, prevailing attitudes towards women artists remained at best patronising, though often veered towards hostility. In 1875, the pre-eminent critic of the day, John Ruskin, felt able to write of Elizabeth Thompson that 'I never approached a picture with more iniquitous prejudice against it, than I did Miss Thompson's; partly because I have always said that no woman could paint'.¹ Shut out of the major art schools and often looked down upon in the press, it was against these great odds that women had to struggle in order to pursue their artistic careers.

In this context, Heatherleys' decision to open its doors to students of both sexes on precisely the same terms upon its foundation in 1845 was revolutionary and extremely important. It was the first arts institution in Britain, and probably Europe, to admit women to the life class. The Slade in London and the Académie Julian in Paris (fig. 1) have rightly been considered pioneers in this regard but, even so, Heatherleys precedes them both by well over two decades in giving women access to the life class.²



Fig. 1, Marie Bashkertseff, *In the Studio*, 1881, oil on canvas, 188 x 154 cm, Dnoproperovsk Museum, Ukraine

¹ J. Ruskin, *Notes on some of the Principal Works exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1875*, London 1875, p. 57.

² Both were founded in 1868.

An independent institution, the school was named after Thomas Heatherley, who took over as principal in 1860 from its founder James Mathews Leigh. Heatherley ran the school for the next thirty years from its premises at 79 Newman Street in Fitzrovia, London. He was notorious for never taking a holiday, preferring to stay at the school at all times, hence the ironic title of Samuel Butler's *Mr Heatherley's Holiday* (fig. 2), which depicts the school's head fixing a skeleton, a teaching prop that was regularly damaged by students who dressed it up in costumes or danced with it. Thanks to Heatherley's dedication and work ethic, and the school's forward-thinking regard to the equality of the sexes, Heatherleys was a success, giving a start to many women artists who would go on to enjoy prominent careers. These include Emily Mary Osbourne, Kate Greenaway, Joanna Boyce, Elizabeth Thompson and Laura Herford, the latter being the first woman admitted to the Royal Academy Schools in 1860. Other alumni during the 19th century include Edward Burne-Jones, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, John Everett Millais and Frederick Leighton, giving some indication of the quality of teaching on offer.



Fig. 2, Samuel Butler, *Mr Heatherley's Holiday: An Incident in Studio Life*, 1874, oil on canvas, 92 x 71 cm, Tate

When Joshua painted the school's studio at 79 Newman Street, John Compton was the principal, and Heatherleys was still considered a leading independent art institution. Joshua depicts two students in painting smocks sitting together and looking at a sketch book. They appear to the viewer through a curtained aperture, sitting against the back wall of the Life Room, underneath a row of jugs and breastplates. These props were used by the models during their sittings. Just to their left one can see a bust, possibly of cardinal given the zucchetto he wears. On the other side of the opening and framing the composition are two large-scale and prominent plaster casts. This separate but connected space is the Antique Room. The female cast is Bertel Thorvaldsen's *Venus with the Apple* of 1813 and the male figure is the *Discophoros*, a celebrated statue by the 5th century BC Greek sculptor Polykleitos.

Joshua has presumably based her work on a contemporary photograph in the school's archives which matches this composition (fig. 3). Joshua has however expanded the pictorial space at the left, right and upper margins, suggesting that she may have set up her easel at this spot, or at least made some preparatory studies here. She has also made some subtle but important changes. Between the legs of the *Discophoros*' Joshua has placed a drape, a sheathed sword, a red mandolin and a metallic platter. She has also given the plinth an opening, containing a type of ceramic-ware.



Fig. 3, Antique and Life Rooms of Heatherleys, 79 Newman Street, c. 1900

Two further important additions to the image are the '*PLEASE DO NOT TOUCH*' sign by the *Discophoros* and the palette next to the nearest of the two students. The sign, placed teasingly behind the naked and muscled antique figure, adds a light and comic element to the painting, very much in keeping with Butler's humorous *Mr Heatherley's Holiday*. As for the palette, this clearly emphasises that the two young women are painters. Beyond that, it may also indicate that we are looking at a self-portrait. Though we don't have any known contemporary images of Joshua, it is entirely plausible that she is one of the figures in the photograph, and therefore the painting. In this case, the other artist could be Joshua's younger sister Joan, a miniature painter who was likewise a pupil at Heatherleys around the turn of the century.

A second related photograph (fig. 4) shows a group of students during a life class. Here the photographer captures the image from the platform where the model sits. This photograph must be of a similar date to Joshua's painting, given the correspondence of items on the back wall, as well as the bust, Thorvaldsen's Venus and the stack of easels. Joshua would surely have known this group of students and she may even be one of them. Comparing the photograph with Joshua's painting, it's plausible that one of the two dark-haired women standing on the right is the brunette figure nearest the viewer and the woman on the front row turning her head is the second figure.



Fig. 4, Life Class at Heatherleys, 79 Newman Street, c. 1900

Joshua's painting is the only known painterly depiction of female students in Britain in an Academy setting from the late 19th century. Even on a European or international level these types of depictions are extremely rare. Of the Académie Julian in Paris, the most celebrated female art school at the time, we know of only two depictions: Marie Bashkertseff's well-known painting (fig. 1) and Lucie Attinger's *Mon Atelier*, recently sold by Elliott Fine Art to the North Carolina Museum of Art. On an international level, Alice Barber Stephens' depiction of a women's life class at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts is worth citing. In a British context, Joshua's work can be best compared to Walter Paget's 1881 illustration of a group of female students in the Antique Room of the Slade (fig. 5)



Fig. 5, Walter Paget, *The Slade School of Fine Art*, engraving, 1881, Private Collection



Fig. 6, Alice Barber Stephens, *The Women's Life Class*, oil on cardboard, c. 1879, 31 x 36 cm, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts

Born in Hampstead to an affluent family, Joshua's father was an Australian stockbroker. After training at Heatherleys in the late 1890, Joshua went on to enjoy a short but successful career, exhibiting at the Royal Academy, the Royal Institute of Oil Painters and the Society of Women Artists between 1902 and 1911. Joshua, working from her studio in St John's Wood,

was best known for her folkloric scenes exploring the Victorian and Edwardian fascination with fairies, nymphs and the supernatural (fig. 7), as well as her genre works. Several of her paintings were reproduced as popular prints. Joshua's marriage in 1913 seems to have curtailed her career and when her husband, Bernard Henry Daniel Horkheimer, changed his surname by deed poll in 1919, she became Mrs Nellie Hawke.



Fig. 7, Nellie Joshua,
Under the Sea, oil on
canvas, 58 x 58 cm,
Martin Beisly Fine Art