

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

English School, c. 1895

Portrait of an artist holding her brushes

Indistinctly signed, lower right

Watercolour on paper

52.5 x 40 cm. (21 x 15 ¾ in.)

Provenance:

Private Collection, UK, until 2024.



Dextrously holding her brushes in her right hand, this young painter looks out at the viewer with assurance, confident in her artistic abilities. Indeed, wearing an artist's smock, held up by beautiful golden ribbons, she is presented as a professional painter.

As a woman artist in late 19th-century Britain, our sitter would have had to contend with the prevailing societal attitudes that were often dismissive, if not outright hostile towards female artists. 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

However, by the end of the century, women were beginning to gain access to the same level of instruction as their male contemporaries, largely thanks to the founding of the Slade School of Art in 1871. From its inception, the Slade offered female students education on equal terms with men, playing a pivotal role in the professionalisation of women artists during this period. Women thrived at the Slade, making up two-thirds of its student body in the 1890s. These young women, like our sitter, were different to their Victorian predecessors; they were modern, independent and self-assured.

Given this context, it is quite plausible that the sitter here is a Slade-trained artist. Watercolour was an essential part of the Slade curriculum and many of its female graduates excelled in this form, including Gwen John, who studied there from 1895 to 1898. Other contemporaries including Ursula Tyrwhitt and Ida Nettleship, the latter bearing more than a passing resemblance with our sitter (fig. 1 and 2).

Though the signature on the watercolour remains largely illegible, future research may reveal both the author of the present work, as well as its sitter.



Fig. 1, Augustus John, *Ida Nettleship, Gwen John and Ursula Tyrwhitt*, c. 1897, 30 x 23 cm, Private Collection



Fig. 2, Augustus John, *Ida Nettleship*, c. 1901, 38 x 28 cm, Walker Art Gallery

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