

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

The Convalescent by Gwen John



Title:	The Convalescent
Maker:	Gwen John (1876-1939)
Medium:	Oil on Canvas
Date:	1923-4
Dimension:	h. 40.9 x w. 33 cm
Museum No:	PD.24-1951
Gallery:	Not currently on display

The Artist

Gwen John was born in Haverfordwest in 1876, the second child of four. Her younger brother, Augustus John, was also a painter and well-known figure in Bohemian circles in 1920s London. It is only since her death that her reputation as an artist has grown enough to rival that of her brother's. Both Augustus and Gwen trained at the Slade School of Art where Gwen met a number of talented young female artists. In 1898 she travelled to Paris where she was taught by James Abbott McNeill Whistler. She is best known for her paintings of women in simple interiors. Her early sitters included her younger sister Winifred and some of her student friends. While living in London between 1899 and 1903 she produced several fine self-portraits. In 1903 she began a walking trip with Dorothy (Dorelia) McNeill (shown in *The Blue Pool* by Augustus John, Museum No. PD14-1976, Gallery 1) which had Rome as its target with both women paying their way by way of painting. They only got as far as Toulouse and Gwen John never returned to live in Britain after that date.

In 1904 she settled in Paris, supporting herself as an artist's model for British and American women artists and also for Auguste Rodin. She and Rodin became lovers, and although his attention turned elsewhere in his later years, he remained a continual financial support and more importantly a supporter of her drawing and painting until his death in 1917. In 1911 Gwen moved from Paris to nearby Meudon where she eventually built a chalet studio. She converted to Roman Catholicism in 1917 and her work after that date included sketches and watercolours of nuns from a nearby convent, as well as local people attending Mass. She always carried a sketchbook around with her to record everyday scenes of local life, and it is from this period of her life that her paintings of *The Convalescent* were completed. From 1910 to 1924 Gwen's principal patron was an American lawyer called John Quinn, who simply bought anything that she was prepared to part with. This enabled Gwen to concentrate on her work and maintain her rather isolated lifestyle. In her later years she became frail and produced little more than sketches, and finally died in Dieppe at the age of 63.

The Convalescent Theme

This painting is one of a series of ten very similar paintings painted from approximately 1917 to 1924, one of which was titled *The Convalescent*. They feature a young woman in a dark blue dress seated in a wicker chair, looking intently at the letter or book she is holding tightly and closely in her clasped hands. Beside her is a teapot and cup and saucer, or in the case of one of the series a bowl. Nothing is known of the model, although the same young woman appears in about fifty of Gwen John's later paintings. The convalescent theme is very characteristic of Gwen's method of exploring her subject by producing sets of paintings on the same theme. Other themes are her series of portraits of Dorelia McNeill, done in Toulouse in the winter of 1903-4, her self-portraits and lastly her portraits of the Dominican Sisters of the Presentation at Meudon, and of the orphans in their care.

Gwen John's Working Methods

The artist preferred to work on a small scale, which was also a necessity given the conditions in which she worked. The rooms she lived in were not spacious, and her only easel was a small portable one she had brought from England.

Her work falls into three distinct phases:

1. Early years and student days at the Slade;
2. The years in Paris, when she mainly concentrated on drawing;
3. Her later life at Meudon.

Initially her painting technique involved building up layers of thin fluid paint. But in her later works in oil she used a more direct approach, using thick paint applied quickly and confidently, and thereby avoiding touching the canvas more than once in the same spot. This gives the

surface of her work a textural uniformity. In her last paintings she preferred watercolour and gouache to oil. In her drawing she graduated from detailed pencil drawings to broader definitions in charcoal.

Gwen John is also remembered for her muted colouring which, although distinct, was based on Whistler's teaching. He stressed the importance of using closely related colours and tonal values to achieve subtlety and harmony. He dictated that colours had to be set out on the palette according to strict rules, to be mixed and graded to form a '*systematic transition from light to dark*'. It is also thought that the Impressionist Monet was an influence in her use of colour and tone, and the effect that light has upon them. This can be seen through comparison with his 1890's series paintings of *Haystacks*, *Rouen Cathedral* and *Poplars*.