

Arts

This year’s Edinburgh Art Festival is leading with an exhibition of the work of Gwen John (1876-1939). The show – at the National Galleries of Scotland: Modern Two – is the largest ever devoted to the Welsh artist, big enough for the curators to indulge in her tendency for repetition. There are at least four near-identical paintings of the unknown sitter in her masterpiece *The Convalescent*, for example, and countless notepad sketches of children and nuns in church.

A fellow congregant remembers seeing her every day in her wide-brimmed hat with sketchbook in hand, constantly drawing rear views from the back of the church until she left without having knelt for a moment in prayer.

When she died, poor and ill-fed having led an ascetic lifestyle, she left nearly a thousand drawings and sketchbooks to her nephew, Edwin, from whom they were acquired by the Museum of Wales, Amgueddfa Cymru, when he died in 1976. They have never been seen in such quantity before now – a real draw for her growing number of admirers who are fascinated by her elusive personality and captivating style.

Last year, a major exhibition at Cardiff was all about building Gwen John’s identity, making it separate from her better-known brother, Augustus, and delving into her archives to reveal a more forceful, artistically driven character than her paintings of passive, seated women would have us imagine.

Many commentators have pointed to Gwen John’s own self-assessment in a 1910 letter to fellow painter Ursula Tyrwhitt: “I cannot imagine why my vision will have some value in the world – and yet I know it will.” Or Augustus’s prediction that, one day, he would be best known as her brother.

But what of the market for Gwen John’s work? Pallant House in Chichester was the first to consider this back in 2021. The gallery’s director Simon Martin makes a point of selecting artists who will attract sponsorship from the art trade, and that show’s lead sponsor was the art dealer Offer Waterman.

The show, which eventually took place in 2023 (the first since a Tate show 20 years earlier), lifted confidence in sales of Gwen John’s work, a process which gathered pace as word got out about museum shows planned for Cardiff, Edinburgh, Yale and Washington.

Between 2021 and today, the number of Johns at auction nearly doubled over the previous seven years. Multiple estimate prices and records became more frequent.

In the run-up to the Edinburgh



Colin Gleadell Art Market Focus



Gwen John is finally eclipsing her brother – 87 years after her death

show, which has been three years in the making, prices for her works on paper have increased noticeably. In October 2022, a portrait drawing of fellow Slade student Chloë Boughton-Leigh estimated at £3,000 sold for £58,500 at Sworders in Stansted – a record for a drawing by John. A drawing in the Edinburgh exhibition, *Portrait of a Reclining Woman*, circa 1910, thought to be of Chloë’s sister Maude, which had sold in 2002 for £14,340, came back in 2023 with a £15,000 estimate and sold for £56,700. The buyer was London dealer Stephen Ongpin, who has lent it to the Edinburgh exhibition.

Whichever subject she dwelt on repeatedly, the best examples hit new highs – whether they be cats (*Black Cat on Blue and Pink* fetched a triple estimate of £32,760 at

The dealer who helped launch Grayson Perry

Stansted auctioneers Sworders are selling over 250 works from the private collection of James Birch, the art dealer who took Francis Bacon to Moscow in 1988 then, two years later, Gilbert & George to Moscow and China. He also gave Grayson Perry his first solo shows.

Birch opened his first gallery in the King’s Road in 1983. Headlining the sale is a series of early works by Perry. “My favourite piece from the

collection has to be *Saint Diana (Let Them Eat S---)* from his first exhibition in 1984 [estimate £40,000],” says Birch. “He hasn’t really made anything like that since.” The miniature was included in the 2020 exhibition *Grayson Perry: The Pre-Therapy Years* at the Holburne Museum in Bath that turned the spotlight on the artist’s “forgotten” early career.

Other elements of the collection relate to the landmark Francis Bacon show Birch organised in Moscow during perestroika. “I initially wanted to show the Neo-Naturists in Russia,” recalls Birch. “But after

visiting, it became clear that wasn’t going to happen. Instead, I went to various artists’ studios and asked which painter’s work they would like to see from England? All replied: ‘Francis Bacon’. So when Francis came to an opening at my new gallery in Soho, I asked if he would like to have a show in Russia. After he agreed, I rang him the next day to check. He said, ‘Yep, let’s do it.’ And that’s how it happened.”

The collection includes letters and telegrams from the artist discussing aspects of the exhibition. When Bacon died, Birch received the lithograph *Three*



Untitled painting by Reuben Mednikoff in the Sworders sale

Studies for a Self-Portrait (estimate £1,000) as a gift from the artist’s companion John Edwards.

Most of the pictures in the sale were bought directly from artists Birch has promoted or were received as personal gifts; artists like Christine and Jennifer Binnie of the Neo-Naturist Group, and the surrealists Conroy Maddox (1912-2005) and Reuben Mednikoff (1906-1972), whose untitled 1941 painting featured on the cover of the catalogue of the De La Warr Pavilion’s 2018 exhibition *A Tale of Mother’s Bones; the Birth of Psychorealism*.



CHRISTIE’S; INCAMERASTOCK/ALAMY; BETTMANN

Christie’s in 2024), nuns or children in church (*A Girl with Two Nuns in Church* flew over its £3,000 estimate to sell for £8,820 at Chiswick Auctions last year).

For those who assert that she is superior to Augustus (painstakingly meticulous in her oil paintings, whereas he was slapdash in his later years), his drawings have sold for as much as £362,000, so there’s a long way to go. The oil paintings, however, are a different matter. Augustus’s top painting at auction made £214,200. But he was prolific; Gwen only made 158 oil paintings, and most are in museums. Artnet lists only 35 oils at auction since 1988, and in the past 10 years, only six, one of which, *Girl in a Blue Dress* (from the *Convalescent* series), rose above its £120,000 estimate to a record £403,200 in 2024. At the latter sale, in Christie’s, I was standing with the underbidder, art adviser Conor Mullan, bidding for a client, who commented that the museum shows, and particularly those coming up in America, could drive her prices closer to one million.

Finally, Gwen John is stepping out of her brother’s shadow.

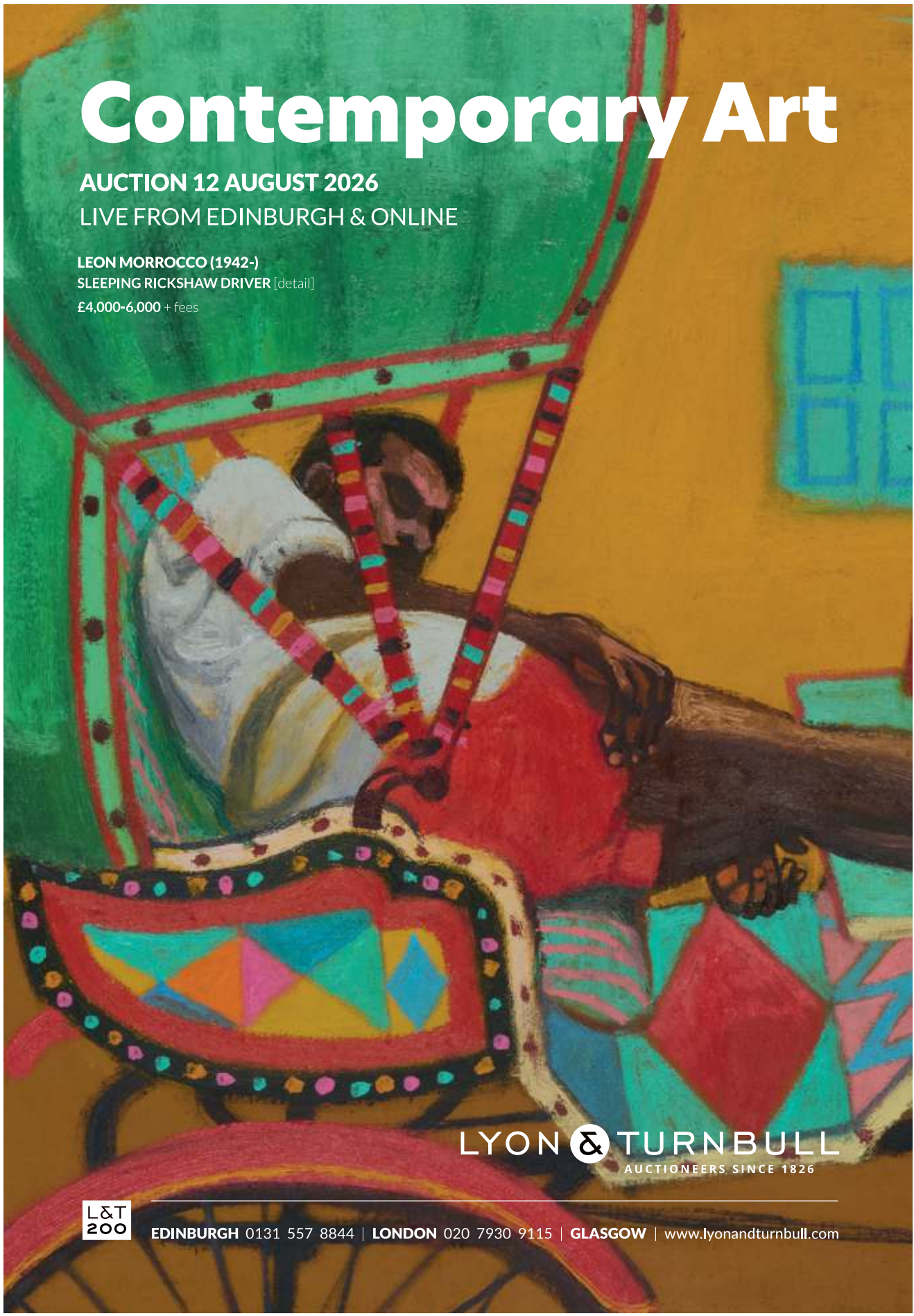
Appreciating art: self-portrait by Gwen John (c.1902), left; the artist’s *Girl in a Blue Dress* (c.1914-1915), far left; her brother Augustus, below left

Augustus John predicted that, one day, he would be best known as her brother

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