Annie Swynnerton—a Victorian artist rediscovered but misinterpreted

An exhibition at the Manchester Art Gallery

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Until the end of this year, the Manchester Art Gallery exhibition Painting Light and Hope is showing 36 paintings of forgotten Victorian artist Annie Louisa Swynnerton (1844-1933), a native of the city.

Painting Light and Hope is the first retrospective of Swynnerton's work since before her death. Of the 39 paintings listed as in public collections, nearly half are held by Manchester Art Gallery and six are in London's Tate. Single works can be found in a number of UK city collections and abroad in New York, Paris and Melbourne. Many more paintings are believed to be in private ownership, unknown or lost.

As the exhibition title suggests, Swynnerton was born into a time of struggle and also great expectations—a new era was opening up that promised an end to inequality and injustice encapsulated in her allegorical *Sense of Sight* (1895).

However, the full significance of the social upheavals she lived through and the complexities and contradictions of her own life are distorted by the exhibition's narrow feminist narrative.

Annie was born in 1844 in the working class district of Hulme in Manchester, the first of seven daughters to Ann and Francis Robinson, an attorney's clerk.

Manchester was the motor of the Industrial Revolution and a city where fortunes could be made and lost. Francis Robinson suffered the latter fate. By the 1860s, he had risen to become a co-partner in a law firm, which numbered the novelist Charles Dickens amongst its clients. The family moved to an eight-bedroom villa with two servants in a gated country estate, where the girls' artistic talents were encouraged.

In 1869, calamity struck—Francis was declared bankrupt and the family home and contents were auctioned off. Two years later, Annie and her three sisters are recorded as living in two rooms in a terraced house back near Hulme, forced to support themselves.

Annie, whether because she was determined to be a professional artist or to develop the skills needed as a governess—one of the few ways women could maintain some sort of independence—attended the Manchester School of Art. There she won the top national scholarship and met her lifelong friend, Isabel Dacre.

In 1875, Annie, Isabel and others were finally allowed, after much petitioning, to join the Manchester Academy of Fine Arts, the main forum in which artists exhibited their work and from which women were excluded. However, the women remained subordinate, classified as "Lady Exhibitioners"—barred from holding office or attending life drawing classes so vital for artistic training.

The same attitude prevailed, nearly 50 years later in 1922, when Annie became the first woman to be elected to the Royal Academy, but only as an Associate member and being of an age (78) that disqualified her from office.

It is no wonder, that, as she looked back on her life, Annie declared, "I have had to struggle so hard."

In the face of such prejudice, Annie and Isabel left for the more liberal art establishments in Rome and Paris to study, whilst pursuing greater freedom for women artists including founding the Manchester Society of Women Painters in 1880.

Annie's sympathy with the working class and those who campaigned to do something about their situation is evidenced by the titles of some of her paintings, including The Factory Girl's Tryst (1880), The Vagrant (1900s) and The Olive Gatherers (1889).

One of the first paintings in the exhibition is *Reverend William Gaskell* (1879), the social reformer and husband of the novelist and social critic Elizabeth Gaskell (1810-1865), whose daughters socialised with Annie. We are drawn towards Gaskell's face, which Annie imbues with the feeling that this person has led a good and useful life.

More intimate is *Susan Isabel Dacre (A Mon Amie)* (1880)—a wonderfully tender and penetrating portrait that contrasts Isabel's wistful face, full of light, with a totally black background, reminiscent of the chiaroscuro technique of Italian High Renaissance artists such as Caravaggio.

It is impossible, though, to pin Annie down to any particular movement or style in art. What is quite thrilling about the exhibition is that you can discover a talented artist experimenting with different styles, but also developing her own vision. All the works have in common an honesty and an optimism that reflects the age.

Some pieces show Annie's engagement with the pre-Raphaelite movement, well known for its realistic style combined with mythological themes, such as the painting of nudes *Cupid and Psyche* (1890). The leading pre-Raphaelite artist Edward Burne-Jones declared of Annie, "I think most highly of her work—strong, powerful and beautiful in colour."

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With the support and friendship of Burne-Jones and other influential artists, Annie gained access to wealthy patrons and became well-known for her evocative portraits of their children, as in *Geoffrey and Christopher Herringham* (1889).

At the same time, Annie brings nobility and beauty to her portraits of ordinary workers and peasants, as in *An Italian Mother and Child* (1886). In this painting, her earlier more subdued palette has given way to bolder colours and looser brushstrokes—the effect of working outdoors in the warmth and sun of Italy where she mostly lived after marrying the sculptor Joseph Swynnerton in 1883.

Annie's landscapes—"I was so entranced with the beauty of nature" she later wrote—became decidedly impressionistic and filled with light, as in the painting *Capri* (c. 1900s), which is a study of the "motion of water in the sunlight" and captures a backdrop of purple rocks lit up with a silver sheen. Houses huddled by the harbour in the island find their reflection caught in the water, more green than blue, all suggested by horizontal brushwork.

In the last room of the exhibition, the emphasis is on Annie's involvement in the votes for women campaign—she signed the Declaration in Favour of Women's Suffrage in 1889 and knew and painted the portraits of leading suffragists.

The curators link Annie to this year's centenary of women (over the age of 30) receiving the vote in Britain in 1918, which invariably omits that working class men were also disenfranchised and that behind these concessions were fears of the consequences of the Russian Revolution.

In pursuit of a feminist narrative, the catalogue is peppered with remarks such as that Annie "depicted realistic, unidealised female forms using layered and textured paint in her concern to portray real women's bodies."

Are her nudes realistic?

Oceanid, painted before 1908, is astonishingly sensuous. One shares the sensation of water running down the naked form of a sea nymph, and hears the waves lapping gently against her. Movement, translucency, light and bold colour envelop the robust figure enjoying a sea bathe.

Is the painting more honest because Swynnerton is female and a feminist? The nymph in fact conforms to the usual time-honoured portrayal of the ideal, perfect form. This, however, in no way diminishes the painting, which is a celebration of youth and beauty at one with nature.

We learn more from this slanted assessment about the politics of the Manchester Art Gallery curators than we do of Swynnerton's work.

Imposing the new Puritanism of the #MeToo movement on Swynnerton, curators Katie Herrington and Rebecca Milner write that the robustly formed nude merging with the distant mountain peaks in Montagna Mia (c.1923) is "a sensual image but the disappearance of her lower torso into the hanging mist denies any realisation of male sexual desire."

Since when has male sexual desire become a crime to be denied or discouraged?

Earlier this year, Manchester Art Gallery carried out an act of despicable of censorship, in the name supposedly of bringing the "male gaze" into question, by removing from the walls of its much-loved Victorian display of art John William Waterhouse's Hylas and the Nymphs. The picture was quickly returned to the gallery walls after a public outcry.

The most insightful assessment of the Annie Swynnertons of the Victorian world was made by the painter's contemporary, Eleanor Marx, the daughter of the co-founder of scientific socialism, Karl Marx. She described such middle-class layers as "earnest and thoughtful, who see that women are in a parlous state, and are anxious that something should be done to better their condition. These are the excellent and hard-working folk who agitate for that perfectly just aim, woman suffrage; for the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Act, a monstrosity begotten of male cowardice and brutality; for the higher education of women; for the opening to them of universities, the learned professions, and all callings, from that of teacher to that of bagman.

"In all this work—good as far as it goes—three things are especially notable. First, those concerned in it are of the well-to-do classes, as a rule scarcely any of the women taking a prominent part in these various movements belong to the working class. …"

"The second point is that all these ideas of our *advanced* women are based either on property, or on sentimental or professional questions. Not one of them gets down through these to the bedrock of the economic basis, not only of each of these three, but of society itself. …"

The third point, Eleanor Marx insists, is that without "larger social change women will never be free. … [N]o solution of the difficulties and problems that present themselves is really possible in the present condition of society. All that is done, heralded with no matter what flourish of trumpets, is palliative, not remedial. Both the oppressed classes, women and the immediate producers, must understand that their emancipation will come from themselves. Women will find allies in the better sort of men, as the labourers are finding allies among the philosophers, artists, and poets. But the one has nothing to hope from man as a whole, and the other has nothing to hope from the middle class as a whole."

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