

WILLIAM ORPEN

Intimate Sketches

Drawings and Illustrated letters to Mrs Evelyn and Gardenia St George
by Sir William Orpen, RA, RHA (1878-1931)

HARRY MOORE-GWYN

MOORE-GWYN FINE ART

Exhibition as part of stand C6, Art Antiques London (11th-18th June 2015)

Albert Memorial West Lawn, Kensington Gardens, London SW7 (opposite the Royal Albert Hall)

The Great Affair - William Orpen and Evelyn St George

Writing of her relationship with the great Anglo-Irish painter William Orpen, Bruce Arnold has described Evelyn St George as “undoubtedly the most important person in (his) life”. Evelyn was the daughter of the wealthy American businessman and founder of the Bank of America, George Fisher Baker. In 1891, against her father’s wishes, she married Herbert St George, an Irish land agent from County Kilkenny. It was there in 1905 in the lonely world of Edwardian Dublin that Evelyn met Orpen, and by 1908 they had embarked on a passionate love affair. Evelyn was not only Orpen’s lover; she was also his muse, his greatest admirer and most constructively outspoken critic of his work. She instilled in the young artist a great personal confidence that inspired him to create some of his very greatest works from that date, many of which were stylish swagger portraits of her and her daughter Gardenia, including *Portrait of Gardenia St George with Riding Crop* of 1909. At their best these works rivalled those by John Singer Sargent and firmly established Orpen as one of the most important painters of the Edwardian era. These annual commissions also gave the couple a legitimate reason to spend prolonged periods of time together during their forbidden affair. Eventually Orpen’s relationship with Evelyn was to result in a child of their own, Vivien, born in 1912, before the relationship came to its inevitable end in 1915. As well as the great portraits of her family, Orpen and Evelyn’s relationship was immortalised in a large quantity of letters. Many of these survive in the collection of the National Gallery of Ireland and thirteen of the fourteen works in this catalogue can also be counted amongst them. Orpen regularly illustrated his letters, finding that his thoughts, feelings and daily anecdotes could be most clearly expressed in pictorial form. This collection lays bare many of his concerns, including rivalry with other artists, his small stature and his concern to placate Evelyn’s daughter Gardenia (nicknamed Popcorn). Such sketches are central to our understanding of Orpen as an artist and a man, and in their natural spontaneity reveal as much of his flashes of genius as his larger better-known works.

Provenance: A gift from the St George Family to the family of the previous owners (all works in the present catalogue except cat.13)

Select Bibliography: Sotheby's, London, *The Irish Sale*, London, 16 May 2002 (lots 80-119 and notes); Whyte's, Dublin, *Important Irish Art*, 30 April 2007, lots 91 ff; Bruce Arnold, *Orpen: Mirror to an Age*, Jonathan Cape Ltd, 1981

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By Appointment only outside of exhibitions

Catalogue

All works in this catalogue are by
Sir William Orpen, RA, RHA (1878-1931)



cat.1

Portrait study of Mrs St George in a Hat
Pen and black ink, 16.5 by 21 cm (6 ½ by 8 ¼ ins)



cat.2

A New Year's Greeting, 1909

Inscribed: *with all good wishes for it*

On headed writing paper for 8 Bolton Gardens, SW

Pen and black ink, 25 by 20 cm (9 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 8 ins)

cat.3

Meeting the Duchess of Wellington

Executed on the final page of a letter to Mrs Evelyn St George

On headed writing paper for 8 Bolton Gardens, SW

Pen and black ink, 25 by 20 cm (9 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 8 ins)

cat.4

The artist arriving at his studio in the snow

Signed and executed on headed writing paper for 8 Bolton

Gardens, SW within a note to Mrs Evelyn St George

Pen and black ink, 25 by 20 cm (9 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 8 ins)

The letter either side of this wintry pen and ink sketch refers to a portrait of Herbert Asquith that Orpen had been working on in around 1909-1910. Asquith had become Prime Minister in 1908 and the prolonged period of the painting of the portrait, including the statesman's consistent and perhaps inevitable habit of missing his sittings is referred to in a number of Orpen's letters from the period.

S. SOUTH BOLTON GARDENS.

S.W.

downstairs before being introduced - she turned
out to be the Duchess of Wellington - but she
only talked in a vague sort of way of
having interests done - she Duchess asked
for a photograph of Poppys portrait which
made my heart go out at once to her
she was really a terrible old bird with
a smile that meant Hell: *your very sincere*
William Orpen.



S. SOUTH BOLTON GARDENS.

S.W.

all criticism of Poppys pictures are favourable
no news of Laquith I have only had 1/2 an hour
so far at the painting itself -



This is an exact portrait of myself as I arrived
at the studio this morning - I repeat the length
of the letter - you must be bored still if you
have got as far as this *your very sincere*
William Orpen.



I hope to be better this morning and that my down cast never did

cat.5

An Accident: Flying off a bike

With an inscription for Mrs Evelyn St George

Pen and black ink, 16.5 by 20.5 cm

cat.6

I Meet My Fate

Inscribed with title

On headed writing paper for 13 Royal Hospital
Road, Chelsea

Pen and brush with brown/black ink, 20 by 16.5 cm
(8 by 6 ½ ins)

This powerful drawing shows Orpen bowing before a strangely mismatched couple. The ambiguous title remains a mystery, Whyte's Auctioneers suggesting that the drawing may in some way signify the end of his affair with Evelyn St George (see note in Whyte's, *Important Irish Art*, 30 April, 2007, lot 97). The woman in this drawing may therefore depict his long-suffering wife Grace (to whom he feels bound to return).





cat.7

Orpen drinking with Wertheimer after his portrait sitting

Inscribed: *When the Sitting Stops at 21, Norfolk Street*
Pen and black ink, 20.5 by 16.5 cm (8 by 6 ½ ins)

The left hand sitter in the present work has been identified as Charles Wertheimer (1842-1911), an art dealer who became Orpen's most significant patron in around 1904. Wertheimer commissioned a number of family portraits from Orpen, including one at this home (21 Norfolk Street, Park Lane) where he is depicted in front of paintings by Gainsborough and Lawrence. This was to be Orpen's first exhibit at the Royal Academy. Here the prosperous-looking and wordly-wise Wertheimer is depicted putting the world to rights with the younger artist (as the title suggests) after the end of one of his sittings for Orpen's portrait.

cat.8

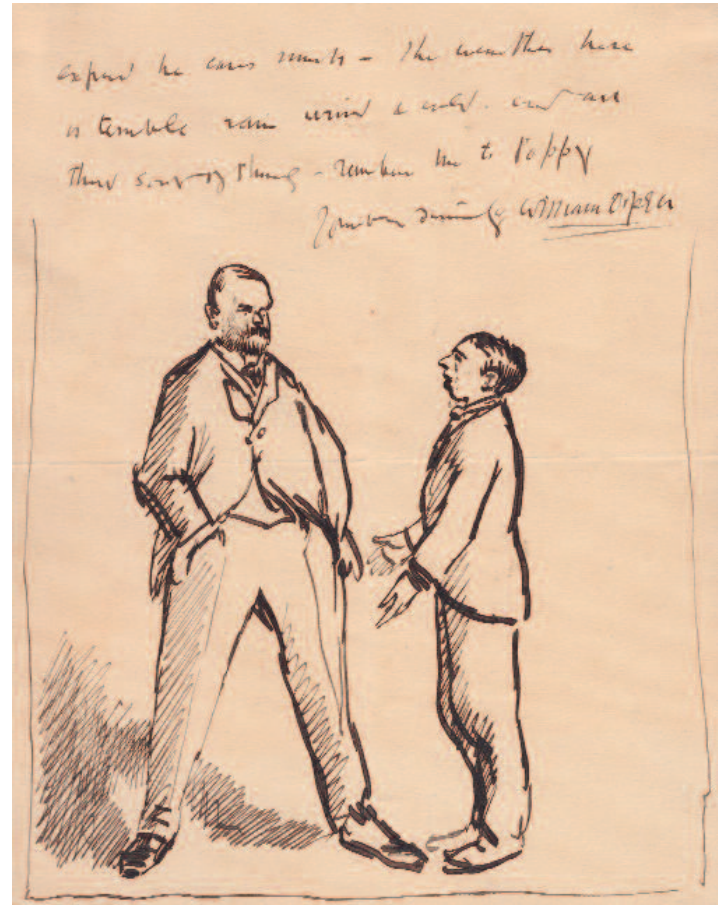
Orpen pleading with John Singer Sargent

Signed: *William Orpen* and dated (on letter on reverse)

25 June 1907

Pen and black ink, 22.5 by 17.5 cm (8 $\frac{3}{4}$ by 7 ins)

This characterful portrait sketch depicts the great American portrait painter John Singer Sargent who had been an avid promoter of Orpen's work in the 1900s. The drawing is executed at the end of a letter to Evelyn concerning a commission that Sargent was involved in. The suggestion of rivalry between the two artists is perhaps ironic. In the drawing the imposing and powerful figure of Sargent dwarfs the smaller one of Orpen perhaps signifying the huge admiration that the latter held for an artist who had established himself as the pre-eminent portrait painter of his day.





cat.9

The artist and a friend in a London pub

Inscribed: *We are drawn in correct proportion to each other...*

On corrected headed writing paper for 8 (5)

Bolton Gardens South, SW

Pen and black ink, 22.5 by 18 cm (9 by 7 ins)

cat.10

The Hand that Rocks the Cradle

Inscribed with title

Pencil on lined paper, 32.5 by 20 cm (12 ¾ by 8 ins)

This mysterious drawing depicts Mrs Evelyn St George.

cat.11

The Skeleton Man

Inscribed with dedication for Gardenia St George

On headed writing paper for 8 South Bolton Gardens

Pen and black ink, 25 by 20 cm (9 ¾ by 8 ins)

A witty insight into how Orpen viewed his plight as an artist.





cat.12.

Hard at Work in the artist's studio

Inscribed with title: *Hard At Work* and with speech bubble from the dog's mouth: *I Don't Think*
Pen and sepia ink, 22 by 20 cm (9 by 8 ins)

cat.13

At the art exhibition

With a similar study verso

Pencil, 12 by 8 3/4 ins (30 by 22 cm)

Provenance: the estate of Maurice Bradshaw (secretary of the Goupil Gallery)

This charming double-sided drawing can be dated to c. 1902-04 and reflects Orpen's interest in the observational quality he saw in Dutch genre painting. It appears to relate in particular to the work *The Valuers* from 1902 which shows an overblown group of art experts assessing the value of a painting in a well-appointed commercial gallery.

cat.14

From somewhere above the fireplace

Inscribed with dedication to Mrs St George
Pen and black ink, 25 by 20 cm (10 by 8 ins)

A witty and imaginative composition drawn for Gardenia and imagining how the family drawing room would look if sketched by the artist whilst suspended in the air above the fireplace.