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The Friends of Dame Laura Knight Society, Malvern & Colwall Branch

28th September 2019:

Talk by James Russell 'Artist Couples of Newlyn and Lamorna'

This event was part of Autumn in Malvern Festival 2019.



Evie Knight, our society Chair, introduced our guest speaker James Russell.

James Russell gave us an illustrated talk on 'Artist Couples of Newlyn and Lamorna'.

Based on a major exhibition at the Royal West of England Academy, Bristol, last year, this talk asked what happens when two artists decide to set up home together. Exploring the life and work of Laura and Harold Knight, Dod and Ernest Procter and other important Newlyn artists.

James Russell is an independent art historian and curator, best known for exhibitions at Dulwich Picture Gallery devoted to Eric Ravilious (2015) and Edward Bawden (2018). He has written more than a dozen books, one of which was a Sunday Times Book of the Year in 2016.



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Mr Russell opened his presentation stating how he wished to explore and provide an insight into how two accomplished artists in a marriage might have changed or influenced each other's work. His first example was that of Stanhope and Elizabeth Forbes, whom, after working together in Europe returned to England then eventually to Lamorna (having been influenced in Brittany by the strong clear light) to set up a school for artists. They were promoting a tradition in Europe of "Plein Air" ie "painting an outdoor scene in the outdoors", made more accessible by the new development of having paint in portable tin tubes.

Mr Russell explained that whilst Stanhope produced some memorable works (Fish Selling on a Cornish Beach) his style didn't really evolve; rather it became static, which eventually leads to his decline in popularity. Elizabeth's work, on the other hand, grew in both style and stature, though there remained some debate about whether Stanhope prevented her from continuing with her etching or that the equipment was too complicated to set up in the small village.

It was mooted that both Stanhope and Harold Knight were greatly influenced by Vermeer, both in style and composition as Mr Russell progressed from the Forbes' to Harold and Laura Knight. He drew parallels between Harold and Stanhope in that both were internationally recognised and successful, yet equally their style did not evolve or significantly change. Certainly true in comparison to Laura, who embraced the artistic and intellectual stimulation of Lamorna, now an established artists' colony. This Mr Russell emphasised by comparing two paintings each of the same subject: Ethel Bartlett. Harold's was softer in focus showing a relaxed (or "yielding") quality of expression, whilst Laura's portrait projected a thoughtful and intelligent character in a somewhat pensive pose.

We then moved on to Ernest and Dod Procter and an initial pattern was beginning to form. Ernest, though accomplished was thought by critics to "be behind his time" employing a "decorative or primitive" style and consequently achieved a limited success. However, Dod was soon to evolve her own individual and sculptural style (though Mr Russell hinted at some possible influence from Picasso), culminating in perhaps her most well-known picture 'Morning', described by Mr Russell as being "sculptured, with a muted pallet to accentuate the form". This was to prove highly successful for her and later go on to influence other artists within the colony. However, she later abandoned this style for a softer impressionistic image, possibly Mr Russell reflected, due to the early death of Ernest.

Mr Russell then gave brief mention to Harold and Gertrude Harvey whom, whilst the careers of both Laura and Dod were progressing, were developing their own talents. Through modelling for Harold and Laura Knight, Gertrude soon became an accomplished painter in her own right, eventually exhibiting at the Royal Academy. Harold's work began as "classical", (though accused by some critics of being "solidified") in style, changing to a more sculptural form, again perhaps partly influenced by Picasso.

The presentation ended with a further reflection on some of Laura Knight's war commission paintings highlighting the illustrative nature she had adopted in order to better relate and raise awareness to the work undertaken by the home-front.

Heather Whatley, Vice-Chair, thanked James on behalf of the society for a colourful and thought provoking talk.

- Michael Johnson, Society Archivist