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

2nd November 2019 at Elmslie House:

## **Talk by Dr Pamela Gerrish Nunn, entitled 'The Children of Laura Knight'**

### **Dr Pamela Gerrish Nunn: Background**

Pamela Gerrish Nunn began her career as an art historian in her native country of England, teaching in Bristol from 1976 and publishing in the field of 19th-century women artists from 1978. She moved to New Zealand in 1989 to teach at the University of Canterbury (Christchurch), where she worked for 20 years. After the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, she moved north to the Wellington area, where she works as a freelance lecturer, curator and researcher. She has researched and published on individual female artists in 19th and 20th century western art on whom, in many cases, she is the sole or leading expert.



Heather Whatley  
- Vice Chair

Heather Whatley gave a warm welcome to our speaker, Dr Pamela Gerrish Nunn, freelance lecturer, curator and researcher, currently on a tour of the UK from her base in Wellington, NZ.

Pamela told us that early in Laura Knight's career children featured often in her compositions – perhaps because it was a theme expected of female artists at the beginning of the 20th C but Pamela explained that expectations of the time did not constrain Laura in her portrayal of children.

To begin with Laura's compositions were fairly simple and often based in a domestic setting but as her confidence grew as an artist, Laura captured children in action in more complex landscape settings and used the gaze of the child to connect with the viewer.



Dr Pamela Gerrish Nunn

On this page, is a selection of pictures from the talk:



An early example 'The Baby', undated. Domestic setting, probably in Staithes.



The Beach 1908. This painting is filled with life, movement and light in an



Flying a Kite 1910



Lamorna Birch and his Daughters 1913 and 1934

outdoor setting in Newlyn on the Cornish coast.



By The Sea 1920



Evie Knight thanked Pamela for a most engaging talk. It was beautifully illustrated - some of the paintings were new to the society and others featured some of Laura's best work. In exploring the role of children in LK's early paintings, Pamela neatly incorporated the work of other artists which may have influenced her (although Laura flatly refused to admit it!) and also the influence of location and setting. The hall at Elmslie was at full capacity – lovely to see such a good turnout from our members – and we all enjoyed Anna's delicious homemade cakes and a good cup of tea.

Many thanks to Anna at Elmslie House (an added bonus was the exhibition of work by local artists still hanging in the hall from Autumn in Malvern Festival) and to everyone who helped to make the event a great success.

For a report of the evening's talk, please click [here](#).

Women artists were expected to paint pictures of children, and this was considered a suitable subject. DLK however sought opportunities which this subject matter offered. She painted a number of paintings at the outset of her career in which children took centre-stage.

DLK was always interested in everyday realism and she expanded her subject of the world of children to include the family. During her stay at Staithes this becomes very evident as she depicts women doing their everyday tasks as wife/mother/ housekeeper etc. She seems at this point to be happy to be associated with this theme, but not to be stereotyped by it.

Her time in Laren in the Netherlands was a time of consolidation and of taking note of the work of other painters – although her alleged ignorance of, for example, the Night Watch and the work of French women painters is interesting for a painter who set out to learn and develop her style.

From 1907 she began to extend her compositions and these began to seem more ‘beefed up’; less quietly domestic. Her stay in Cornwall includes more portraits and compositions showing the influence on her of impressionism. She develops the idea of the child’s consciousness – her work features children looking very directly at the viewer, and in the portrait of the Lamorna Birch family, both children are painted occupying their own individual worlds.

Children continue to be an important part of her work pre and post war. Their compositional contact point with the viewer continues to be important and they are often used to ‘anchor’ a part of the composition – Sennen Cove and By the Sea.

Her portraits develop in the 30s and 40s and she can be seen to be painting the ‘modern child’.

She seems not to be aware, artistically, of the Madonna and Child iconography. This is intriguing and of a piece with the enigmatic elements of her autobiography where she relates comments about her work, but does not elaborate on what she was aware of in other artists or their influence on her.



- Diana Stockford