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## Winifred Margaret Knights and the Rediscovery of the Trecento in the Long Nineteenth Century\*

*This article analyzes the artwork of Winifred Margaret Knights, the first woman to win a fine art scholarship to the British School at Rome, in order to understand her contributions to British Modernism as being deeply rooted in the broader historical and specifically trecento Italian traditions.*

### Introduction

While largely forgotten until the present day, Winifred Margaret Knights (1899-1947) was one of Great Britain's most profound women artists during the years surrounding the First World War. Knights's contributions to the complex nature of British Modernism were deeply rooted in the broader historical and specifically trecento Italian traditions. This article closely analyzes Knights's major painting *The Marriage at Cana*, completed during her studies at the British School at Rome, to understand her fascination with the Early Italian Renaissance and her rediscovery of the Trecento and Quattrocento. In her artwork, she addressed the question posed by Laurence Binyon in his 1913 book *The Art of Botticelli: An Essay in Pictorial Criticism*, namely, «what the art of a Florentine of the Quattrocento means for us today»<sup>1</sup>.

The identification of Knights with Early Italian Renaissance artists was part of a larger conversation during these years in endeavoring to understand what it meant to be a modern British artist. Alexandra Harris in her seminal work *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper*, recently wrote regarding this return to tradition,

A whole concerted project of national self-discovery was underway. Artists who had previously felt compelled to disguise themselves as avant-garde Frenchmen were now to be found on English beaches sheltering their watercolors from the drizzle<sup>2</sup>.

Knights is part of this deliberate return to tradition in England during and after the First World War, one of the richest and most vibrant periods of the visual arts in Britain, which Harris describes as a «modern English Renaissance»<sup>3</sup>. Knights's son, John Monnington, provided insight into the interaction between the past and the present in his mother's work, relating that she wanted to make «a profound mark in Modernism» and that her goal was «to make the fourteenth century relevant to modern life»<sup>4</sup>.

As a British artist living in Rome in the 1920s, Knights's artwork communicated the fascinating tension of modern British art, as looking both to the past and the present during the years of rapid change around the First World War. In *The Vertigo Years: Europe, 1900-1914*, Phillip Blom aptly described this sense of tension, so evident in Knights's artwork:

In the real world, the fragmentary, episodic nature of existence went hand in hand with the rush and inconstancy of fashion and the imperious demands of industrial developments, sweeping away with an iron broom everything that was not up-to-the-minute. Despite rising life expectancy and increased choice, life had never felt more transient, more fragile. To many of those who felt this fragility, those struggling for respectability, the past suddenly seemed like a promised land of stability and belonging<sup>5</sup>.

Nor was Knights the first modern British artist to look to the Trecento during these years. Only a few years before Knights studied at the Slade School of Fine Art at University College London from 1915 to 1920 (immediately before her studies at the British School at Rome), Stanley Spencer (1891-1959) was the most outspoken and committed member of the «Slade Neo-Primitives» who advocated for absorbing the art of the Trecento and Quattrocento masters<sup>6</sup>. Indeed, Spencer's brother powerfully described the effect of the Italian Trecento artists on his brother as like receiving the stigmata<sup>7</sup>. Knights's contemporaries, including artists, art critics, and patrons, were acutely aware of the artistic heritage of the Slade Neo-Primitives. Knights was also aware of the important heritage of Augustus John (1878-1961) at the Slade, writing humorously to a friend in 1915 of her hopes of meeting him soon<sup>8</sup>. A student at the Slade in the 1920s recalled the great influence of Spencer and John, writing that their reputation and influence was «dominant [...] while I was there» and that «their genius, for such as it was con-

sidered, filled the studios and walked the corridors and affected our work, ghosts very much alive!»<sup>9</sup>

The heritage of Roger Fry (1866-1934) at the Slade was also influential on Knights. Fry was fundamental in introducing students to Renaissance works of art during his Slade lectures<sup>10</sup>. As Caroline Elam has discussed, Fry was drawn to the masters of the Early Italian Renaissance, including Giotto di Bondone (1267-1337), Masaccio (1401-1428), Paolo Uccello (1397-1475), Piero della Francesca, and Andrea Mantegna (1431-1506)<sup>11</sup>. He identified a strong continuity between the Early Italian Renaissance masters and the Post-Impressionists, stating in a lecture given at the Grafton Galleries at the end of the first Post-Impressionist Exhibition (1911), that Paul Cézanne (1839-1906) was «singularly near to that of certain primitive Italian artists, such as Piero della Francesca»<sup>12</sup>. Fry later reprinted his famous articles on Giotto in «Vision and Design», writing regarding the artist,

It is difficult to avoid the temptation to say of Giotto that he was the greatest artist that ever lived, a phrase which has been used of too many masters to retain its full emphasis. But at least he was the most prodigious phenomenon in the known history of art.<sup>13</sup>

Knights's artwork completed at the Slade reveals her early interest in the artists of the Early Italian Renaissance. Her large painting *Mill at Roydon*, completed in 1919, won the Summer Composition Prize at the Slade that year, the most prestigious prize at the school. In this tempera painting, she adopted the burnt umbers and soft tans of the Early Italian Renaissance masters. The use of tempera by Knights reflects a revival of this medium in British art after the First World War, as artists desired to return to the spirit of the Early Italian Renaissance. In 1920, she became the first woman to win the British School at Rome fine art scholarship with her painting *The Deluge*<sup>14</sup>. In this painting, Knights followed the lead of Spencer in visualizing biblical events in contemporary locations, a tradition begun by the Early Italian Renaissance artists that Knights and Spencer loved; she thus gave her painting the importance and context of a long and noteworthy heritage. Knights's scholarship at the British School at Rome was from 1920 to 1923; she lived and worked in Rome for two additional years after marrying fellow Rome Scholar Thomas Monnington (1902-1976) in 1924.

## Knights' Painting *The Marriage at Cana* and the Rediscovery of the *Trecento*

*The Marriage at Cana* (1922-1923, oil on canvas, 184x200cm, Wellington Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa <http://collections.tepapa.govt.nz/Object/39515>) is the principal painting produced by Knights during her time at the British School at Rome, and is her *pièce de résistance*. The British School at Rome was initiated by Henry Pelham (1846-1907), Professor of Ancient History at the University of Oxford. It was founded in 1901 for the study of Italian art, architecture, and archaeology and provided the first permanent institution in Italy for visiting classical scholars from Oxford, Cambridge, and London universities<sup>15</sup>. The School followed in a long history of British artists working in Rome since the eighteenth century<sup>16</sup>. A year before the School's opening, a writer of an article, *Art Matters in London*, in «The Art Interchange» in 1900, questioned the proposed founding of the School, writing doubtfully:

The proposal to establish a British School at Rome after the model of that which has done such excellent work at Athens, has found favor with students of art and archaeology. Italy, however, stands in her relation to art on a very different footing from Greece; for Italy, although the nursing mother of all the arts, was the cradle-land of none - except, in a sense, that of painting. The Italian Renaissance was marked in other arts by a revival of the study of the antique; and it is because Italy is the storehouse of so many treasures of antiquity - brought thither as the spoils of conquest or the industry of centuries of collectors - that there is ample scope for the work which the British School at Rome might undertake<sup>17</sup>.

Following the International Exhibition in 1911 and the offer from the city of Rome to permanently lease the site of the British Pavilion by Edwin Lutyens (1869-1944) for a building, the School broadened its aims. It established scholarships in Architecture, Sculpture, and Painting in 1912, and Engraving in 1920, in the hope that Rome Scholars would form a body of artists for public commissions in Great Britain<sup>18</sup>. During the early years of the School, the leadership of Thomas Ashby (1874-1931), Director from 1906 to 1925, and of Eugénie Strong (1860-1943), Assistant Director from 1909 to 1925, provided an ambitious vision for the School to embrace a broad disciplinary, chronological, and geographical range<sup>19</sup>.

However, doubts were voiced (which Knights was later to address in her letters home) as to the suitability of Rome for young British artists. An article in «The Burl-

ington Magazine» in 1912 written by Lionel Cust (1859-1929), co-editor from 1909 to 1919 (also surveyor of the King's pictures from 1901 to 1927 and previously the director of the National Portrait Gallery from 1895 to 1909), particularly warned young British art students about being corrupted by the modern art influences in Rome. While Cust remained deliberately vague, not naming any modern artists specifically, one could confidently suggest that he had in mind Italian artists associated with Futurism, especially Umberto Boccioni (1882-1916), Carlo Carrà (1881-1966), Luigi Russolo (1885-1947), Giacomo Balla (1871-1958), and Gino Severini (1883-1966), who published their *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto* only two years earlier. In his article, Cust questioned:

Is [...] modern Rome [...] a suitable art-center for the environment and mental development of a young British student? [...] The spirit of modernity is very active [in Rome] in the Fine Arts. [...] Neither the ruins of ancient Rome, nor the monuments of the middle ages or the Renaissance, are looked upon nowadays as the inevitable models on which to base a student's education. [...] The youthful student, fresh from the tutelary care of Sir Edward Poynter, Sir Aston Webb, or Sir Thomas Brock, may do well to confine his walks to the glades of the Borghese or the Pincio for fear of tarnishing the polish of his academical education<sup>20</sup>.

However, Clare Willson has pointed out that this fear that the “spirit of modernity” in Rome would corrupt young art students was overcome and that the Renaissance-influenced style and content of Rome Scholar paintings were highly preferred for commissions in the 1920s during the revival of mural painting in England. She has demonstrated that the Rome Scholar murals show the «long-lasting preference in Britain for historical iconography in mural painting [...] in which past events or legends were imbued with modern significance»<sup>21</sup>.

While preparing to work on *The Marriage at Cana* at the British School at Rome, in her letters written home Knights revealed that her artistic interests were with the artists of the Early, rather than the High or Late Italian Renaissance. In a letter in 1920, Knights wrote regarding visiting the convent of the Benedictine Nuns of the church of Santa Cecilia in the Trastevere Quarter of her appreciation of the frescoes and mosaics by Pietro Cavallini (1259 - ca 1330)<sup>22</sup>.

In another letter, she expressed definitively her love of the Early Italian Renaissance artists who came before Raphael (1483-1520), writing of her preference for the fresco paintings in the Niccoline Chapel by Fra Angelico (ca 1440 - 1455)

and of her dislike of Raphael's frescoes and tapestries in the Vatican<sup>23</sup>. While in Rome, Knights kept up-to-date with exhibitions in London, and expressed her strong preference for British artists working in a style informed by the Trecento and Quattrocento, writing in 1921 of her preference for the paintings at the Royal Academy by Henry Lamb (1883 - 1960) and by Stanley Spencer<sup>24</sup>. Many of Knights's colleagues at the British School at Rome echoed her love of the Trecento and Quattrocento; for example, Evelyn Gibbs (1905-1991) represents another fascinating woman Rome Scholar whose work reveals a debt to the Early Italian Renaissance<sup>25</sup>. A postcard written by Gibbs communicates a striking resemblance to letters written by Knights, namely an enthusiasm for the artists of the Trecento and Quattrocento, especially Giotto's followers and Fra Angelico, as well as Luca Signorelli (ca 1450-1523), whose style is markedly different from his two predecessors, Gibbs writing:

I am here [in Orvieto] amongst the most wonderful mountains. [...] The cathedral must be one of the most wonderful in Italy and is full of frescoes by Signorelli and some by Fra Angelico and School of Giotto. I have never seen anything so rich and beautiful as the interior and yet so simple<sup>26</sup>.

\*\*\*\*

In *The Marriage at Cana*, Knights depicted the miracle of water turned into wine, as told in the Gospel of John. Christ stands prominently at the center right, and is surrounded by the wedding guests and his disciples. The Virgin Mary stands to the left of Christ. She has just told the servants, «Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it» (John 2:5). One of the servants bends down to either fill the jars with water or to draw out some of the miraculous wine to take to the master of the banquet; the master is the male figure at the far end of the table who is standing up and leaning forward to examine the miraculous event more closely.

In creating her painting, Knights looked to earlier depictions of the subject, and was especially inspired by Giotto's *The Marriage Feast at Cana* in the Arena Chapel (ca 1305) in Padua. In particular, Knights emulated Giotto's column-like drapery, clear placement of the solid figures, and emphasis on the quiet solemnity of the moment, rather than depicting a Baroque image of boisterous rejoicing. In both Giotto's painting in the Arena Chapel and in Knights's painting, Christ wears an orange-tan robe. Like Giotto, Knights depicted the Virgin Mary wearing

a blue cloak and an orange-tan dress beneath. Knights also suggested a witty play on the rather portly gentleman sipping wine in Giotto's painting with the woman in her own composition who is seen bending over from behind, with both of these figures wearing orange-red robes. Knights presented many of the figures in profile and depicted their motionless bodies like columns; all of the figures wear long draped dresses, simple jackets, vests, and trousers, creating a modern, yet timeless atmosphere.

Throughout her painting, Knights used exceedingly fine brushstrokes that are hardly visible, imitating Giotto's trecento technique, such as he used in the Arena Chapel. She used a muted palette of colors, except for the vibrant pink of the watermelon. Knights intentionally emulated the grit of Giotto's frescoes (an effect of his use of *buon fresco* technique) by painting with thin and almost translucent brushstrokes. These brushstrokes enable the broad weave of the canvas to be observed by the viewer and emphasize the surface of her painting, giving it a flat, fresco-like appearance. The thin paint also enables the viewer to observe Knights's careful underdrawing of the faces rendered in graphite pencil. Indeed, one of the main ways in which Knights emulated Giotto's iconic fresco *The Marriage Feast at Cana* is by giving her painting a deliberately unfinished appearance, making it appear aged and like a crumbling fresco<sup>27</sup>. By doing so, she brought about a tension between the surface of the canvas and the illusion of solid form, which is also accomplished through her continued insistence on accurate perspective, as discussed below.

Knights doubtlessly would have been familiar with Giotto's frescoes in the Arena Chapel as fundamental sources in art history. She had stated her great love for Masaccio and Giotto in a letter in September 1920 before leaving for Rome<sup>28</sup>. This letter indicates that Knights's love of the Early Italian Renaissance began during her studies at the Slade rather than at the British School at Rome. Her delight and excitement in viewing in person artworks by Giotto is communicated in her many letters written home from Italy. She wrote to her mother from Florence on 11 March 1921, regarding seeing works by Giotto in Assisi, and described in detail a recent extended trip to Ronciglione, Cappadocia, Soriano, San Casciano dei Bagni, Viterbo, Orvieto, Perugia, Assisi, and Florence, describing the museums in Florence as being full of beautiful artwork and helpful to her studies<sup>29</sup>.

Knights's letters about this trip to Florence demonstrate how she preferred the Early Italian Renaissance masterpieces of that city to the Ancient, Late Renais-



sance, and Baroque opulence of Rome. Knights wrote animatedly of her interest in the Early Italian Renaissance in another letter to her mother five days later during this same trip, especially of the Magi Chapel in the Palazzo Medici Riccardi by Benozzo Gozzoli (ca 1421 - 1497), the sculptures in the Palazzo del Bargello by Donatello (ca 1386 - 1466), and the paintings and frescoes in San Marco by Fra Angelico. In contrast, she expressed her distaste for the Medici tombs by Michelangelo (1475 - 1564), describing them as lacking warmth and naturalness<sup>30</sup>. She also mentioned that one of her favorite memories of her trip to Florence was Sandro Botticelli's (1445-1510) *Primavera* and drawings by Leonardo da Vinci (1452 - 1519)<sup>31</sup>.

One of the most important ways Knights went about «[making] the fourteenth century relevant to modern life» in both the painting that she submitted for the Rome Prize (*The Deluge*) and in her major work completed during the Rome Scholarship (*The Marriage at Cana*) was in her approach to depicting spatial depth and body mass. In both of these paintings, Knights emulated Giotto's revolutionary new focus during the Trecento on the human figure and its relationship with a well-defined space and a real environment. Like many of Giotto's frescoes, Knights composed *The Marriage at Cana* so that it appears as though the scene is taking place on a stage directly in front of the viewer. The main human drama takes place in the foreground in a relatively shallow space separated from the viewer by a narrow stream. Like Giotto, Knights deliberately placed one of the figures (the woman bending over the wine jars) with her back to the viewer, as are two of the mourners in Giotto's famous *Lamentation* in the Arena Chapel, thus drawing the viewer into the composition and emphasizing the foreground while reinforcing the sense of stagecraft.

Knights took Giotto's naturalistic approach to representation based on observation as the foundation of her artistic process. As her career progressed, Knights moved beyond Giotto's intuitive use of perspective, preferring the *Quattrocento's* scientific rigor of perspective (due in large part to the pioneering work of Giotto), and with Piero della Francesca (1416-1492) and the *Quattrocento* becoming central to her art. Knights took an almost obsessive concern with the science of perspective in her later paintings, looking to the Early Italian Renaissance to bring a sense of stability and permanence to the uncertainty of life in England and Italy. Her concern with perspective can be strongly contrasted with the vertiginous experiments of her contemporaries, such as John Piper (1903-1992), as described by Harris:

Piper argued [...] there is no longer a right way up, a foreground and a distance. Gravity does not exert its homeward pull. There are no axes around which to organize things and the visible world is let loose to fill in the field of vision<sup>32</sup>.

In distinct contrast to Piper, Knights worked tirelessly to record her view from one position with a stable horizon line, and clung to the rules of perspective to keep her precarious world in order.

Knights also referenced important Quattrocento sources in her painting *The Marriage at Cana*, thus demonstrating that her interest in the Early Italian Renaissance included both the Trecento and the Quattrocento. For example, the open doorway that leads into a room in the background of *The Marriage at Cana* is similar to the open doorway in the background architecture in Fra Angelico's *Annunciation* in the church of San Marco in Florence; Knights mentioned visiting this church in her letter to her mother on 16 March 1921<sup>33</sup>. In addition, the organization of *The Marriage at Cana* has a strong resonance with that of Masaccio's *The Tribute Money* (1425, Florence, Santa Maria del Carmine, Brancacci Chapel), which Knights likely saw during her trip to Florence in 1921. As noted above, she had earlier expressed her love of the art of Masaccio in her letter in September 1920 before leaving for Rome<sup>34</sup>. Both Masaccio and Knights divided their compositions between an architectural structure on the right and a naturalistic setting on the left. Also, they both depicted Christ standing and gesturing within a circular grouping of figures who all wear robes with column-like drapery. The forest setting of Knights's painting also bears a striking resemblance with that of Uccello's *The Hunt* (ca 1470, Oxford, Ashmolean Museum). Both artists focused on the slender, straight trunks of the trees, and the overarching umbrella-like canopy of the branches and leaves. Knights could have seen this work before she left for Italy as it has been in the collections of the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford since 1850<sup>35</sup>.

In addition, in *The Marriage at Cana* Knights referred frequently to the Quattrocento artwork of Piero della Francesca; Knights and Piero created extraordinary paintings of timeless architecture and figures in an idealized setting. In particular, Knights could have seen Piero's *The Baptism of Christ* (ca 1450s, tempera on wood), which the National Gallery in London purchased in 1861<sup>36</sup>. Professor Henry Tonks (1862-1937) had the students at the Slade School of Fine Art copy works of art in the National Gallery<sup>37</sup>, and it is likely that it was during her time at the Slade that Knights became familiar with Piero's iconic work. In *The Marriage at Cana*, Knights emulated Piero's clarity of composition and depiction of the cool, filtered, and luminous light and the calm reflective surface of the water. Both artists juxtaposed the foreground figures with inanimate objects (such as Piero's tree and Knights's

wine jugs) and create a sense of rhythm through contrasting solids and voids. In addition, the serene central figure of the Virgin in Knights's *The Marriage at Cana* emulates Piero's concern for monumental statuesque form with minimal focused gestures. Like Piero, Knights created an intensity of emotion appropriate to the spiritual subject, unifying symbolic iconography and careful description of the natural surroundings. Like Piero, she was a perfectionist. Both artists frequently used pricked cartoons, even for the smallest parts of a composition, and created multiple preparatory sketches to achieve precise lines of perspective<sup>38</sup>.

Finally, Knights referenced several important Quattrocento iconographic sources for one of her painting's most novel aspects: the watermelon. In *The Marriage at Cana*, the figures seated at the main table are eating slices of pink watermelon. As a member of the gourd family, the watermelon becomes a new symbol of resurrection in Knights's iconography. The gourd has been used as an important symbol of resurrection and salvation in Western art, and particularly in art of the Early Italian Renaissance (such as in Carlo Crivelli's [ca 1430-1495] *Madonna della Candeletta*, 1490, Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera), because of its prominence in the biblical story of Jonah<sup>39</sup>. In addition to watermelon, in Knights's painting the figures at the back left are dining on pomegranates. Pomegranates also have a long history of symbolism in Western art. Artists have used them to symbolize Christ's Passion and the fullness of Christ's suffering<sup>40</sup>, such as in Botticelli's *Madonna of the Pomegranate* (ca 1487, Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence), which Knights could have seen during her trip to Florence in 1921<sup>41</sup>. Knights also could have seen *The Virgin and Child with a Pomegranate* by the workshop of Botticelli (ca 1445-1510) earlier at the National Gallery in London, where it was acquired in 1912<sup>42</sup>. As noted earlier, Botticelli was one of Knights's favorite artists, and indeed in *The Marriage at Cana*, Knights's self-portrait as the seated woman at the main table wearing a pink dress bears a close resemblance to Botticelli's *Madonna*. Significantly, Knights linked the symbolism of resurrection found in the watermelon, pomegranates, and miraculous wine foreshadowing the Eucharist to another particularly important element of religious symbolism in her painting: the necklace of coral beads she wears in the self-portrait as the seated woman at the main table wearing a pink dress. Knights purchased a coral necklace in Rome in 1921, and described it as beautiful<sup>43</sup>. Notably in Early Italian Renaissance art, artists have depicted the infant Christ wearing a necklace of coral beads while seated on Mary's lap: for example, in Giorgio Schiavone's (ca 1436-1504) *The San Niccolò Altarpiece: The Virgin and Child Enthroned* (ca 1456-1461, London, National Gallery), which Knights could have seen earlier, and Piero della Francesca's *Brera Madonna* (1472,

Milan, Pinacoteca di Brera)<sup>44</sup>. The red coral beads symbolize Christ's death and his shed blood, and thus redemption. All of these iconographic references together witness to the rich symbolism of Knights's painting, and to her careful observation of symbolism in artwork of the Early Italian Renaissance.

## Conclusion

Overall, Knights's time in Italy solidified her commitment to working in a style deeply informed by the Trecento. Her rediscovery of the Trecento continued throughout her career. For example, it can be seen in her altarpiece for Canterbury Cathedral, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Martin of Tours*, inspired by Simone Martini's (ca 1285-1344) frescoes in the church of San Francesco, Assisi, which Knights had seen in 1921. The British artist D. Y. Cameron (1865-1945) advised the Cathedral to award this commission to Knights because of her «noble primitive outlook so consistent with work for a Christian shrine»<sup>45</sup>. It was indeed to the Italian «primitives» of the Trecento and Quattrocento that Knights looked for this altarpiece. Knights's contemporaries recognized her rediscovery of these two centuries: for example, a favorable newspaper review published in «The Times» on 11 April 1927 addressed a later painting by Knights that was on exhibition in London, identifying her inspiration, along with that of Stanley Spencer, as coming from the Early Italian Renaissance artists of Florence:

Though it would be too much to say that pre-Raphaelitism is the last word in English painting, it seems evident from this exhibition that the earlier rather than the later Italians provide the convention which best suits the native pictorial instincts of the majority: flat designing - or, at most, the realization rather than the composition of relief - love of detail, decorative colour, interest of line, and the conveyance of information about Nature. It might almost be said, indeed, that when the English Rome scholar goes to Rome he does as the Florentines did. Most of the more accomplished paintings in this exhibition [...] by [...] Mr. Stanley Spencer [...] and [...] Miss Winifred Knights [...] - are pre-Raphaelite in a sense of the word that the actual practice of the famous «Brotherhood» rather obscured<sup>46</sup>.

In this review, the author identified Knights's Trecento artistic heritage as going deeper than the Pre-Raphaelites, and indeed being more Pre-Raphaelite than the Pre-Raphaelites. Knights's kinship with the Pre-Raphaelites during the years surrounding the First World War is important to recognize; the Pre-Raphaelites, especially Edward Burne-Jones, (1833-1898) also deeply admired the artists of the

Trecento and Quattrocento, including Giotto, Piero della Francesca, and Botticelli. Knights would have doubtlessly been familiar with Burne-Jones's works (and indeed the paintings of the other Pre-Raphaelites), as they retained a critical influence in the British art world in the early years of the 1900s<sup>47</sup>.

In closing, Knights's interest in what she perceived to be an abandoned past was not a retreat from contemporary events but was instead a specific form of close engagement with the world around her. It is significant that Knights, like many of her contemporaries, looked to the earlier years of the Italian Renaissance rather than the High or Late Italian Renaissance. By doing so, Knights joined with Laurence Binyon in longing for a new art, as expressed in his 1913 book *Botticelli*, with Binyon lamenting that in English art from an earlier age

The spirituality which might have clothed itself in the gracious forms and hues of art and found in beauty its natural mode of speech, withdrew as to a naked prison-house. [...] Art is the natural language of imagination; but Puritanism murdered imagination. [...] In our own country the long reign of Puritanism left art without the sustenance of those ideas which had most power and vitality in the best minds of the nation. While literature responded to those ideas [...] painting and sculpture remained inert<sup>48</sup>.

Knights agreed with Binyon that the art of the Trecento and Quattrocento demonstrates «this power of spirituality»<sup>49</sup>. At the same time, like Binyon, Knights believed that contemporary English art needed to change and develop in order to be expressive of modern experience, and that it is possible to work within a tradition of experience and technique while simultaneously addressing and making the new. Knights's distinctive, complex turn in British Modernism brilliantly reconciles what Alexandra Harris has termed the «divided allegiances» of these «Janus-faced» years<sup>50</sup>. Knights simultaneously looked forwards to the artwork of her British contemporaries, particularly Stanley Spencer, and backwards to the foundational artists of the Trecento and Quattrocento, thus reconciling modernity and tradition.

- 1 L. BINYON, *The Art of Botticelli*, London 1913, p. 7.
- 2 A. HARRIS, *Romantic Moderns: English Writers, Artists and the Imagination from Virginia Woolf to John Piper*, London 2012, pp. 10-11.
- 3 *Ibid.*
- 4 John Monnington, in discussion with the author, 17 June 2011.
- 5 P. BLOM, *The Vertigo Years*, New York 2010, pp. 296-297.
- 6 C. JACOBI, *Narrative Painting in The History of British Art 1870-Now*, ed. C. Stephens, New Haven 2008, pp. 30-31.
- 7 C. GREEN, *Art Made Modern: Roger Fry's Vision of Art*, London 1999, p. 87.
- 8 Letter #116, Winifred Knights Letters, Winifred Knights Curatorial File, University College London Art Collections, London, England.
- 9 S. CHAPLIN, *Slade Archive Reader*, University College London Special Collections, reference number MS ADD 400, p. 202.
- 10 See C. ELAM, *Roger Fry's Journey from the Primitives to the Post-Impressionists*, Edinburgh 2008, pp. 18-20, and EAD., *Roger Fry and the Re-Evaluation of Piero della Francesca*, New York 2004, pp. 18, 22, 38.
- 11 ELAM, *Roger Fry's Journey*, p. 14. See also ELAM, *Roger Fry and the Re-Evaluation*, p. 11.
- 12 R. FRY, *Post Impressionism*, «Fortnightly Review», XCV, 1911, pp. 856-867, in *Post-Impressionists in England: The Critical Reception*, ed. J.B. Bullen, London 1988, p. 177.
- 13 R. FRY, *Vision and Design*, New York 1981, (ed. or. 1920), p. 122.
- 14 For her application for the Rome Prize, Knights also submitted multiple drawings, including one after a sculpture by Donatello, as described in a letter by Knights that is cited in this essay. The location of this drawing by Knights is unknown.
- 15 For an excellent concise history of the School, see T. WISEMAN, *A Short History of the British School at Rome*, London 1990.
- 16 *The British School at Rome: One Hundred Years*, ED. A. Wallace-Hadrill, London 2001, pp. 12-18.
- 17 G. WILLETS, *Art Matters in London*, «The Art Interchange», I, 1900, p. 4.
- 18 H. PETTER, *Lutyens in Italy: The Building of the British School at Rome*, London 1992, p. 10.
- 19 WALLACE-HADRILL, *The British School at Rome*, p. 33.
- 20 L. CUST, *The British School at Rome*, «The Burlington Magazine», XXI/111, 1912, pp. 147-148.
- 21 C. WILLSDON, *Mural Painting in Britain 1840-1940: Image and Meaning*, New York 2000, pp. 19, 130-142, 203-204. Also see M. HAY and J. RIDING, *Art in Parliament, The Permanent Collection of the House of Commons*, Norwich 1996.
- 22 Letter to her Aunt Millicent, November 1920. Winifred Knights Correspondence, Slade Archive, University College London Library Services, Special Collections.
- 23 Letter to her mother, 5 May 1921. Winifred Knights Correspondence, Slade Archive, University College London Library Services, Special Collections.
- 24 Winifred Knights Correspondence, Slade Archive, University College London Library Services, Special Collections.
- 25 P. LUCAS, *Evelyn Gibbs: Artist and Traveler*, Nottingham 2001, pp. 33-48, and A. STRICKLAND,

*Ethel Gabain, Evelyn Gibbs and Evelyn Dunbar: Three Approaches to Professional Art Practice in Interwar Britain, in Women's Contributions to Visual Culture, 1918-1939*, ed. K. E. Brown, Burlington 2008, p. 143.

- 26 LUCAS, *Evelyn Gibbs*, p. 42.
- 27 At this point in time, Giotto's Arena Chapel frescoes were in great need of conservation. After a long period of neglect, the city of Padua purchased the Arena Chapel in 1880. A committee had been established in 1867 for the conservation of the Chapel, and from 1869 to 1871 the restorer Guglielmo Botti carried out a restoration of the paintings. This restoration was finished in 1886. The next restoration did not occur until after the Second World War. Pollution and multiple visitors led to a deterioration of the frescoes. There has not been an environmental control until recently. For more information, see *The restoration of Giotto's Wall Paintings in the Scrovegni Chapel of Padua according to the principles of Cesare Brandi's Theory* by Francesca Capanna, Italian Central Institute for Restoration (ICR) <[http://193.175.110.9/hornemann/german/epubl\\_txt/Capanna\\_Brandi\\_Seminar.pdf](http://193.175.110.9/hornemann/german/epubl_txt/Capanna_Brandi_Seminar.pdf)>.
- 28 Winifred Knights Correspondence, Slade Archive, University College London Library Services, Special Collections.
- 29 *Ibid.*
- 30 *Ibid.*
- 31 *Ibid.*
- 32 HARRIS, *Romantic Moderns*, pp. 25-26.
- 33 *Art at Te Papa*, ed. W. McAloon, Wellington 2009, p. 7.
- 34 Winifred Knights Correspondence, Slade Archive, University College London Library Services, Special Collections.
- 35 C. HARRISON et al., *The Ashmolean Museum: Complete Illustrated Catalogue of Paintings*. Oxford 2004, pp. 227-228.
- 36 H. BLACKBURN, *Illustrated Catalogue to the National Gallery: Foreign schools*, London 1878, p. 63.
- 37 CHAPLIN, *Slade Archive Reader*, p. 193.
- 38 While a full-scale cartoon for *The Marriage at Cana* has not survived, the majority of the many self-portrait drawings that Knights created in preparation for this painting have pinholes in their corners, indicating that they were either attached to the cartoon for transfer, or directly to the final canvas for transfer.
- 39 The gourd is also present in Michelangelo's fresco *Jonah* in the Sistine Chapel. M. D'ANCONA, *The Garden of the Renaissance: Botanical Symbolism in Italian Painting*, Florence 1977, p. 156. For a full analysis of the gourd in the art of the Italian Renaissance, see *ibid.*, pp. 156-159.
- 40 *Ibid.*, p. 316. For a full analysis of the pomegranate in the art of the Italian Renaissance, see *ibid.*, pp. 312-318.
- 41 The painting was acquired by the Uffizi in 1780. S. LEGOUIX SLOMAN, *Botticelli*, London 2004, p. 97.
- 42 *Ibid.*, p. 48.
- 43 Letter to her mother, 10 August 1921. Winifred Knights Correspondence, Slade Archive, University College London Library Services, Special Collections.

- 44 Napoleon took the *Brera Madonna* from Urbino and brought it to Milan where it is housed in the Pinacoteca di Brera.
- 45 Milner Memorial Chapel Archival Record, Canterbury Cathedral Archives, Canterbury Cathedral, Cathedral House, Canterbury, England.
- 46 *Art Exhibition: The Imperial Gallery*, «The Times», 11 April 1927.
- 47 See F. MACCARTHY, *The Last Pre-Raphaelite: Edward Burne-Jones and the Victorian Imagination*, Cambridge 2012, pp. 501-518.
- 48 BINYON, *The Art of Botticelli*, pp. 15-16.
- 49 *Ibid.*, p. 14.
- 50 HARRIS, *Romantic Moderns*, p. 44.





Fig. 1: WINIFRED MARGARET KNIGHTS, *The Marriage at Cana*, 1922-1923, oil on canvas, 1840 x 2000 mm, Museum of New Zealand.



Fig. 2: WINIFRED MARGARET KNIGHTS, *Scenes from the Life of Saint Martin of Tours*, 1928-1934, oil on canvas, 765 x 1895 mm, Milner Memorial Chapel, Canterbury Cathedral.