



## Walker, Ethel (1861-1951)

by Joyce M. Youmans

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Dame Ethel Walker produced her major paintings late in life, from the time she was in her fifties until her death at the age of ninety.

Well-known during her lifetime and named a Dame of the British Empire in 1943, Walker is no longer considered a major artist. Although many of her paintings belong to the collections of British galleries, today they are rarely exhibited and scholars seldom mention them.

Walker's works may have fallen out of favor because of her identification with the Impressionist movement, in which she never achieved eminence.

Walker was born in Edinburgh on June 9, 1861. Her Yorkshire father, Arthur Walker, was from a family of iron-founders, and her mother, Isabella Robertson, was Scottish. Walker received her secondary school education in Bronesbury, London, where her drawing master, Hector Caffieri, encouraged her to develop her artistic talent.

After secondary school, Walker attended the Ridley School of Art. Nevertheless, she did not exhibit any special interest in art until she formed a close friendship with Clara Christian in the 1880s. The two women attended the Putney School of Art and then lived, studied, and worked together as fellow artists.

Walker also attended the Westminster School of Art, where Frederick Brown was a teacher. Around 1893, she followed him to the Slade School of Art for further study.

Walker produced a large body of work in different genres; she painted portraits, flowers, seascapes, landscapes, and mythical subjects. Walker's influences include Impressionism and Greek and Renaissance art. To these, the artist added her lifelong pleasure in color, light, paint, and the female form.

Walker is perhaps best known for her portraits of women in which she captures her sitters' individual temperaments and expressions. Indeed, she was less concerned with reproducing the sitters' exact likenesses than in catching their strong personalities and psychological states. Her obvious, tactile brushstrokes obscure unnecessary detail, thereby allowing Walker to emphasize the compositional aspects that seize the mood of the moment.

In *The Mauve Dress* (ca 1930), for example, the sitter's long, full dress seems to weigh her down with its heavy brushstrokes. The woman rests her right elbow on a piece of furniture while leaning her head on her right hand. Her left arm rests heavy and lifeless across her lap. The dress seems to sap the life out of the sitter, who has a dreamy, pensive expression on her face.

Perhaps the sitter's--and by extension, Walker's--disdain for heavy, cumbersome female clothing in this painting can be traced to the artist's vocal hatred of cosmetics. She often rebuked women, even strangers, in public for using make-up. Her models removed their lipstick and nail polish before entering her studio,

for fear of inciting her temper.

Walker painted a series of works that seem to be based on generic mythological themes. These paintings, pigmented with radiant color, depict groups of unclad females who appear to be performing nature-based rituals. Walker loosely bases her female figures on archetypal classical and Renaissance human forms.

Over twenty-five female figures fill the relatively small 16 x 25½-inch canvas titled *Invocation* (date unknown). A group of scantily clad and nude women stand and kneel around three dancers who are draped with sheer cloth. A quadruped, probably a goat, stands in the center of the canvas, partially concealed by one of the dancers. Birds flutter overhead.

The painting's elegant, sinuous line gives the viewer the impression that the scene is filled with harmony and grace. The activity depicted in *Invocation* is joyful in a quiet, restrained way.

All of Dame Ethel Walker's paintings share one characteristic: they vibrate with the rhythm of the human spirit that, according to the artist, animates visible reality. Walker makes this belief palpable to the viewer through her use of animated brushstrokes, strong compositions, and bright colors.

### **Bibliography**

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