



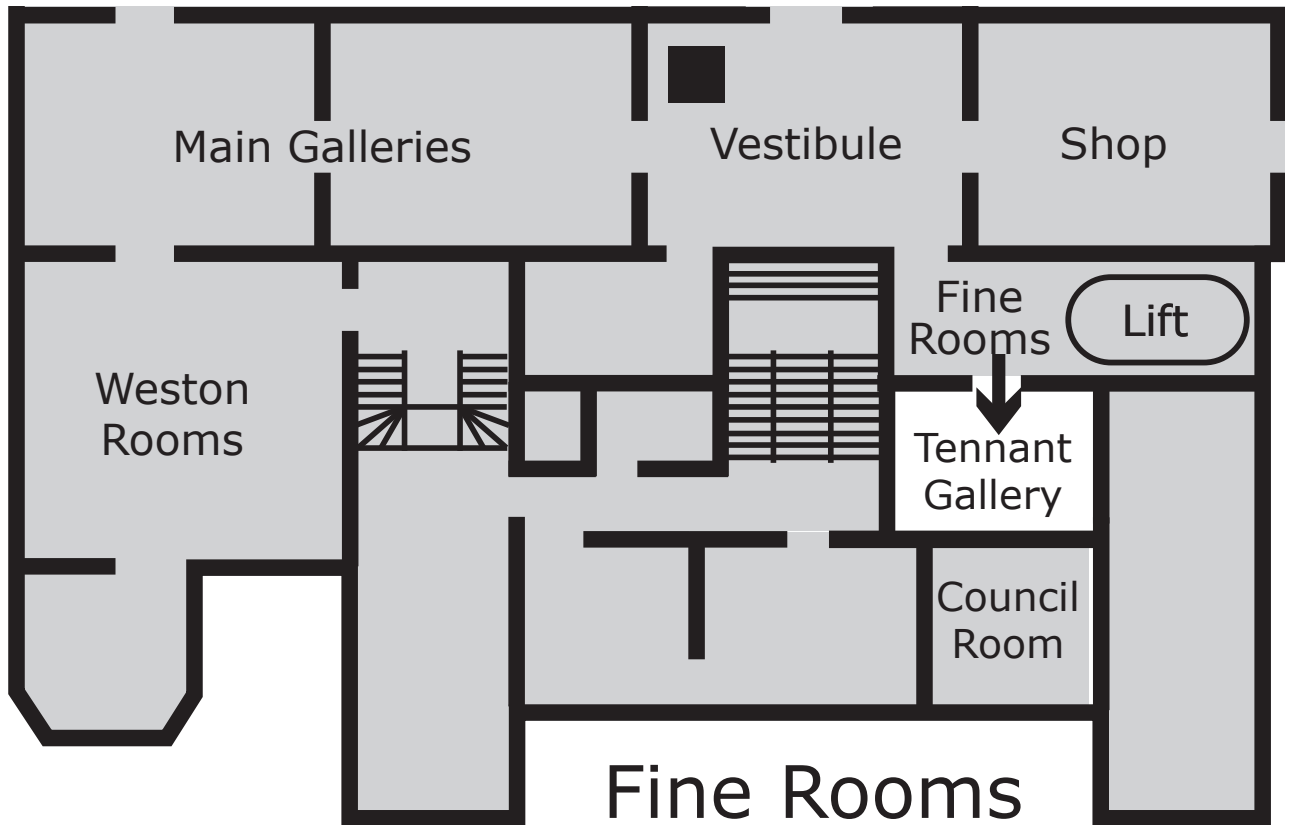
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# **Laura Knight RA**

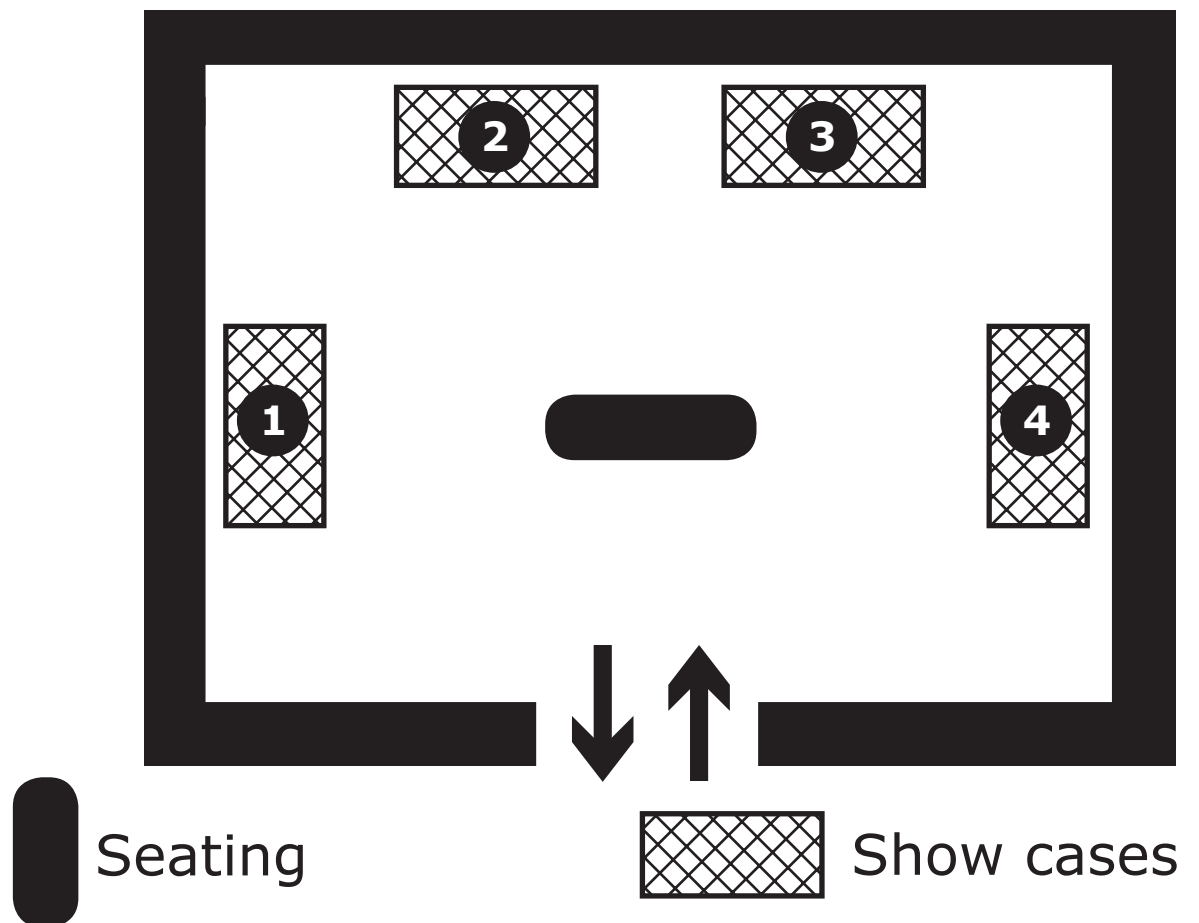
## **A Working Life**

Tennant Gallery

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# **Laura Knight RA**

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Tennant Gallery

2 September 2019 – 2 February 2020

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Display Case 4

# **Laura Knight RA and the Royal Academy of Arts**

In 1936 Laura Knight was the first woman to be elected by her peers as a full member of the Royal Academy. Before that, in 1927, she had become the second ever female Associate member, following Annie Swynnerton.

The original founder members of the RA included two women, Angelica Kauffman and Mary Moser but they were selected by the King rather than elected by fellow artists.

Knight took every opportunity to promote herself and her art.

Determined to make an impact, she exhibited large works in the Summer Exhibition and she publicised her work through two autobiographies.

'Oil Paint and Grease Paint' was published in February 1936, the same month as her election and became an immediate bestseller. Knight's second autobiography, 'The Magic of a Line', appeared in 1965, the year of her exhibition at the Royal Academy, the institution's first one-woman show.

However, she had to wait until 1967 to receive her first invitation to the RA Annual Dinner.

## **Laura Knight RA: A Working Life**

Laura Knight RA was one of the most famous and popular British artists in the first half of the 20th century.

This display from the RA's Collection of paintings, drawings and sketchbooks explores three distinct themes from her long working life – the countryside, the nude and scenes from the theatre, ballet and circus.

Laura Knight was born in 1877. From the age of thirteen she attended Nottingham School of Art, where she was a talented student and won many prizes.

In 1899 she joined the colony of artists in the fishing village of Staithes in Yorkshire, where “I found myself...The life and place were what I had yearned for – the freedom, the austerity, the savagery, the wildness. I loved it passionately, overwhelmingly.”

In 1907–1908 Knight joined the artists’ colony in Newlyn in Cornwall where her work lightened and she began to master painting the nude figure. At the end of the First World War Knight moved to London and concentrated on painting the ballet and the circus.

She became an Official War Artist at the outbreak of the Second World War and her painting of Ruby Loftus operating a complex industrial machine was voted Picture of the Year in the RA 1943 Summer Exhibition.

In her later years, Knight spent increasing amounts of time at Malvern in Worcestershire, where she discovered a new peacefulness in the landscape of the Malvern Hills.



Knight died in 1970 at the age of 92, a few years after the photograph above of her (left) with her great friend Dod Procter RA was taken at the Summer Exhibition Members' Varnishing Day in 1967.





Dame Laura Knight RA with her painting 'Lamorna Birch and His Daughters' at the Summer Exhibition Members' Varnishing Day in 1934.

All works in this display were given by Dame Laura Knight's executors in 1972, unless otherwise stated.



**List of works: clockwise in order of hang**

# **The Pool**

c 1959

After the Second World War Knight lived at the Colwall Park Hotel, near Malvern. There was a swimming pool at the bottom of the garden and she recalled that she “often spent whole mornings saving the lives of many bumble bees who were drowning”.

Oil on canvas

# Ice-skater with Outstretched Arms

c 1945

This is a study for a painting of the Blackpool Ice Drome, exhibited at the RA in 1945 and now in a private collection. The skater wears a distinctive dress with short puffed sleeves and a full skirt, which Knight has drawn with rapid strokes to indicate the movement of the skater.

Chalk on paper

# **Ice-skater Performing to Applauding Audience**

c 1945

Knight captures the many shadows created by spotlights as a skater in the arabesque position skates across the rink towards the audience.

The Blackpool Ice Drome opened in 1937 as the first purpose-built ice-skating rink in the world.

Black crayon and black chalk with pencil on paper

# **Ballet Dancers on Stage, Viewed from the Wings**

1920s

Knight was particularly fond of backstage views or looking onto the stage from the wings. She continued to draw behind the scenes at the ballet throughout the 1920s and 1930s.

Crayon on paper

# **Ballet Dancer in Frontal Arabesque**

Probably 1920s

This rapidly executed sketch depicts a ballet dancer executing an arabesque position.

Her arms are moving swiftly to the right in a circular movement.

This drawing is typical of the stripped-down linear style Knight adopted when drawing dancers in movement. From 1919 she drew backstage at performances of the Ballets Russes in London.

Crayon on paper



# **Performers in a Dressing Room (unfinished)**

Probably 1930s

Knight usually drew dancers and performers because trying to paint them “left not long enough even to fill a brush”.

In this instance she attempted an oil sketch but left it unfinished.

Oil on canvas

# **Ballet Dancer Tying Her Shoe**

Probably 1930s

Sketching a dancer at rest gave Knight more time to capture the detail of the figure and her full-skirted tutu which spreads out behind her.

She carefully shaded this drawing, unlike her more rapid sketches.

Pencil on paper

# Léonide Massine

c 1919

This sketch depicts Léonide Massine performing in the Spanish-themed ballet the Three-Cornered Hat which premiered at the Alhambra Theatre in London in 1919.

The music was by the Spanish composer Manuel de Falla and the sets were designed by Pablo Picasso.

The choreography was influenced by Massine's knowledge of flamenco dancing. The circular shape around his feet is probably a toreador's whip.

Crayon on paper

# **Ballet Dancer and Dresser**

Probably 1920s

Knight liked the contrast between the “artificial brilliance” of the dancers’ costumes and the plain clothes of their dressers. In this lively sketch Knight depicts a ballet dancer being assisted with her costume.

The edges of the skirt have broader strokes of black crayon, possibly to describe feathering on the tutu.

Crayon on paper

# Display case 1

## **Press Notices**

Probably 1920s

This sketchbook has several dressing-room scenes, possibly from the theatre rather than the ballet. The male figure standing on the left avidly reads the 'Press Notices'.

Pen and brown ink on paper

## **Circus Horses**

Late 1929–1930

This sketchbook is filled with many studies made when Knight toured the South Coast with the circuses of Bertram Mills and the Great Carmo in 1929.

Black crayon on paper

# **Interior of a Theatre**

c 1919

This sketchbook seems to have been used by Knight in 1919 when she was first invited to observe the Diaghilev company, who were performing at the Coliseum theatre in London.

Pencil on paper

# **Circus Performers, Study for 'The Trick Act'**

c 1930

Knight drew on the end boards of her sketchbook to make detailed studies of different performers and circus horses that relate to a painting called 'The Trick Act', now in the Touchstones Rochdale collection.

Pen and black ink with wash over pencil on paper on board



# **Chinese Acrobats**

c 1934

Pen and blue ink on card

# **Chinese Acrobat**

c 1932

Knight used these two studies of Chinese acrobats as the basis of a design for a large ceramic plate featuring three acrobats that formed part of the Circus dinner service that she designed for Clarice Cliff in 1934.

Pen and ink on card

# **Boxer in the Ring at Blackfriars**

c 1937

Knight became interested in boxing when she sketched soldiers practising at Witley Camp in Surrey during the First World War.

This interest continued into the 30s when she made this sketch at The Ring, a boxing stadium on Blackfriars Road, London.

Pen and ink on card

# **Harold Knight RA**

1874–1961

## **Portrait of Laura Knight**

1891

Knight met her husband-to-be, Harold Knight when she was a young student at Nottingham School of Art.

He was only 17 when he painted this portrait. His admiration for the work of the Dutch painter Vermeer is evident in the play of light across the figure and the restrained range of tones of the dress, background and the strawberry blonde hair.

Oil on canvas

Given by the executors of Laura Knight RA in 1970

# Dawn

1932–1933

One of the figures is the dancer Barbara Bonner, whom Knight described as “vital and sparkling”.

The title ‘Dawn’ gives the women symbolic significance as representing the hope each new day brings.

In Knight’s autobiography she recalled that she was excluded from studying the naked model at art school and it was only in her 30s in Cornwall that she made the decision to hire models from London to make up for this handicap.

This painting publicly proclaims her mastery of the nude.

Oil on canvas

Diploma Work given by Laura Knight RA in 1936 following election as a Royal Academician

# Portrait of Joan Rhodes

1955

Joan Rhodes (1920–2010) was a renowned strong woman billed as 'The Mighty Mannequin' or 'The Strong Lady of Variety'. In her act she bent steel bars and ripped up copies of the 1,000-page London telephone directory.

Knight explained that she had “never enjoyed painting anything more” and that Rhodes “had no bulgy muscles. Her slim bodily form was perfection; as for her head, it was superbly sculptural.”

Oil on canvas

Given by John Cash, the nephew of Joan Rhodes, in 2011



## Display case 2

# **Trapeze Artists**

c 1925

Knight sketched these trapeze artists at the Bertram Mills circus at Olympia in London.

The acrobats stand out strongly against the dark hatching in blue ink that delineates the distinctive curved iron roof-girders.

Pen and brush with blue ink on card

# **Sketches from the Bolshoi Ballet**

Probably 1956

This rapidly executed sketch of a single figure in motion possibly depicts Galina Ulanova, who danced the title role in Prokofiev's ballet 'Romeo and Juliet' at Covent Garden in 1956.

Knight was invited to work backstage during rehearsals and performances of the production.

Pen and black ink on paper

# **Ella Naper in the Apple Orchard at Trewoolfe**

c 1916

This study in soft pencil captures the effect of dappled sunlight falling across Ella Naper, an artist and friend of Knight who also modelled for her occasionally.

Pencil on paper

# **Circus Bareback Rider**

1927–1931

This rapid study captures an acrobat riding on a circus horse as it canters around the ring. The horse has areas of careful shading but the figure is more swiftly drawn and the woman's right arm is shown in two different positions.

Black crayon on paper

# **Two Sketches of Figures in and around a Pool**

c 1959

These biro sketches are from a small notebook filled with studies of figures relaxing around the outdoor swimming pool at the Colwall Park Hotel near Malvern. The darker areas and shadows are depicted by frenetic zig-zag shading.

Black biro on paper

# **Study for 'The Arabesque on Skates'**

c 1950

This detailed study probably depicts the Norwegian skating star Sonja Henie, who is the main figure in a finished watercolour of the same title.

Pen and ink over pencil on paper

## Display case 3

# **Three Standing Nudes**

Late 1920s

This sketch of three figures apparently getting dressed relates to several etchings Knight made of the Three Graces in the 1920s.

Pen and black ink over chalk on paper

# **Standing Nude with Her Arms Behind Her Head**

Mid-1950s

Knight used black chalk to outline the figure, red ochre for highlights on the body and a heavily applied red chalk for the shadow.

Red and black chalk on paper

# **Ballet Dancer Viewed from Behind**

Probably 1920s

Knight recalled in her autobiography 'The Magic of a Line' that when drawing ballet dancers it was impossible to get every detail down: "At such moments the eye and pencil need to be [as] one to dot down a line or two – for the rest, memory must serve."

Pen and ink over pencil on paper

# **Ballerina Dancer Dressing**

Mid-1920s

Knight drew and shaded the upper torso in some detail while only lightly sketching the head and lower part of the body. She made herself unobtrusive when drawing backstage and was given permission to work in the ballet dancers' dressing rooms.

Black chalk on paper

# **View Across a Moorland Landscape**

c 1911

Knight uses deep blue washes to depict many pools of water in the moorland, which is probably Bodmin Moor in Cornwall. Knight often visited the area with friends and in 1913 camped there for a month.

Watercolour and pencil on paper

# **Mousehole Harbour, Cornwall**

Mid-1920s or early 1930s

Knight shows the distinctive harbour walls at Mousehole – on the left the drying fishing nets are indicated by strong vertical lines. When she moved to London after the end of the First World War she kept a studio in Cornwall.

Crayon on paper



# **Two Land Girls with Plough Horses in a Field**

c 1939–1940

Knight recalled that in the exceptionally cold winter of 1939–1940 she “spent many weeks working on a painting in a cherry orchard” and that the farmer “built up six stooks of straw to protect me from the bitter cold”.

Land Girls worked in agriculture as part of the Women’s Land Army during the First and Second World Wars.

Watercolour on wove paper

# **Barbary Lambs**

c 1936

In her autobiography 'The Magic of a Line', Knight wrote, "Like many other people, I have always had a particular fancy for lambs; I simply adore them and cannot take my eyes off them!"

Pencil and pen and ink on paper

# **Ploughed Field with Distant Buildings**

c 1939/1940

This sketch is one of the many studies of ploughed fields that Knight made while working outdoors during the bitterly cold winter at the start of the Second World War. She recalled there was endless "slush and mud" but she persevered and subsequently painted several pictures of this subject which were exhibited at the RA Summer Exhibition.

Pencil on paper

# **Trees Beside a River**

Late 1930s or early 1940s

The willow tree with seating around its trunk suggests a parkland landscape. In the late 1930s Knight sketched in Richmond Park and Regent's Park and this sketch probably dates from that period.

Chalk on paper

## **Richmond Park (unfinished)**

Late 1930s

Knight depicts gnarled oaks and lopped trees, which are seen throughout Richmond Park as it was originally an ancient oak forest. In 1938 London Transport commissioned her to produce a colour lithograph poster advertising how to travel to Richmond Park by bus.

Oil on canvas

## Display case 4

### **Seeding Potatoes**

Probably 1940s

Knight appreciated the beauty of the countryside but was realistic about the hard work involved in farming. She sketched these women working in the fields carrying heavy buckets of seed potatoes.

Pencil on paper

### **Mousehole Harbour, Cornwall, with Figures**

Mid-1920s or early 1930s

Knight sketched the women working in the fields beside the coastal path near a cottage she stayed in just above Mousehole looking down on the harbour.

Crayon on paper

# **Landscape Study of the Malvern Hills**

1960

In this sketch Knight includes birds fluttering in a patchwork of fields leading up to the hills in the distance. She knew the hills and valleys around Malvern well – she visited the area from the 1930s and settled there during the Second World War.

Chalk and pen and ink on paper

## **A Gypsy Encampment**

Late 1930s

While sketching at Epsom races Knight made friends with several Romany gypsies. They invited her to visit their encampment on the common at Iver in Buckinghamshire, where she made many drawings and paintings.

Pencil on wove paper

# **Design for a Poster for the 1937 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition**

1936–1937

Shortly after becoming the first woman to be elected a Royal Academician, Knight served on the Hanging Committee of the 1937 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition and designed the exhibition poster.

She features the Antique Venus de Milo and refers to other early civilizations with the inclusion of a figure of the Buddha and an Egyptian head.

Lithograph touched with black ink and gouache

Commissioned by the Royal Academy

# Publication

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## Free exhibition talks

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Thursday 5 December 2019

Thursday 30 January 2020

2–2.30pm

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