

A TALE OF TWO SISTERS



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Fig. 1: (right) Gwendoline (1882–1951) and (left) Margaret (1884–1963) Davies, ca. 1908. Courtesy National Museum of Wales.



the Davies Collection of French Art from National Museum Wales

by **Bryony Dawkes**

Between 1908 and 1924, two sisters amassed the bulk of one of the earliest and most extensive collections of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century French paintings in Britain, at a time when such art was routinely ignored by individuals and institutions alike. The Gwendoline and Margaret Davies collection, bequeathed in 1951 and 1963 respectively to the National Museum Wales, contains major examples of work by, amongst others, Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), Claude Monet (1840–1926), Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), Édouard Manet (1832–1883), Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), and Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890).

Gwendoline (1882–1951) and Margaret (1884–1963) Davies (Fig. 1) were the granddaughters of David Davies, a sawyer who amassed a fortune in the shipping and mining industries. In 1907, when Gwendoline came into her inheritance (Margaret would follow in 1909), the sisters were said to be the wealthiest unmarried women in Britain. As was often the pattern in industrial families, the sisters chose to use their inheritance for cultural and philanthropic purposes. Yet the Davies sisters were set apart





from most similarly-monied individuals by the milieu into which they were born. Their upbringing as strict Calvinistic Methodists in rural Wales instilled in them a dislike of ostentation, a belief in effectual will, and ultimately, a deep sense of social responsibility. These factors would come to inform the unique character of their art collection.

While there was no real family history of art collecting,¹ the sisters' education was rigorously geared toward such pursuits. Their London school focused on cultural rather than academic study, and they traveled extensively under the tutelage of their governess, Jane Blaker, visiting galleries and taking copious notes on their experiences.

The sisters began to make regular art purchases from 1908, which roughly coincided with the dates of their inheritance. They had a number of advisers, including the artist and dealer Hugh Blaker (1873–1936), (brother of their governess, Jane), and David Croal Thompson (1855–1930), also a dealer. While it was long assumed that these men were largely responsible for the nature of the Davies collection, recent research suggests that Gwendoline and Margaret retained a far more active role in the process.

Fig. 2: Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), *The Rainbow*, ca. 1835. Watercolor and bodycolor on wove paper, 9 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 11 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches. Courtesy National Museum of Wales.

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Fig. 3: Claude Monet (1840–1926), *The Palazzo Dario*, 1908. Oil on canvas, 36 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 28 $\frac{3}{4}$ inches. Signed bottom left: “Claude Monet 1908.” Courtesy National Museum of Wales.

Their early purchases were of the fashionable, safe variety, reflected by the relatively high prices paid (particularly when compared with the modest sums for which they would soon acquire their Impressionist collection). They bought discrete, domestic-scale works by the most collectable “modern” names, for example, paintings by Jean-Baptiste-Camille Corot (1796–1875) produced exclusively for the popular market. The years between 1908 and 1911 are characterized by the acquisition of French Realism, including a significant group of works by Jean Francois Millet (1814–1875), also the work of J. M. W. Turner (1775–1851) (Fig. 2), and fashionable genre scenes by such artists as

Jean-Louis Ernest Meissonier (1815–1891) and Charles Bague (ca.1826–1883).

The sisters' journals reveal their preference for Old Master paintings. Yet they initially made very few attempts to secure any such works.² It is possible they thought them somewhat ostentatious for the domestic setting, and saw no need to create the illusion of historical and cultural capital that others in possession of "new" money might have felt. A more prosaic factor may also have informed their decision making: While the sisters were wealthy in relative terms, their income was nothing compared to the fortunes of American collectors such as J. Pierpont Morgan and Henry Frick ("squillionaires," as Bernard Berenson and Boston collector Isabella Stewart Gardner described them). Quite simply, high quality Old Master works were, if not beyond their means, then beyond what they were willing to pay for them.

Cost and availability undoubtedly influenced their decision to investigate the work of the Impressionists, yet it is not clear why, in 1912, the course of their collecting changed so dramatically. We know that Hugh Blaker, as a champion of contemporary French art would have had a hand in the decision, and we know also that they would have seen examples on their various trips to Paris. Yet in her diary of 1909 (detailing the sisters' trip to Italy and France), Margaret notes how many of the paintings they viewed in Paris were "too Impressionist" for her taste. It is possible that the sisters' love of the city of Venice provided a "way in" to this more challenging style of painting. In this same diary she also observes of the Venetian canals how the "...water quite calm seems to be made up of several different colors. Here it is blue, then again green, further on it seems a shade of mauve and all around glistens patches of sunlight in silver streaks..." Such observations resonate strongly with Monet's representation of the city, which he painted many times on his one and only visit in 1908 (Fig. 3), just months before the sisters arrived there in April 1909. It is perhaps no coincidence that their first purchases



Fig. 4: Pierre-Auguste Renoir (1841–1919), *La Parisienne*, 1874. Oil on canvas, 64 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 42 $\frac{5}{8}$ inches. Signed bottom left: "A Renoir 1874." Courtesy National Museum of Wales.

of Impressionist art made in October 1912 were scenes of Venice by Monet. Gwendoline bought two depictions of the Palladian church of San Giorgio Maggiore, and Margaret, an image of the Grand Canal, which she sold in 1960 to facilitate other acquisitions.³

Gwendoline also bought an 1895 view of the Molo in Venice by the "pre-Impressionist" Eugène Boudin (1824–1898). In this same group, she also acquired their first work by Manet—a loose oil sketch of the Parisian church of Saint Pierre de Montrouge—which dates from 1870 and is thought to be the artist's first Impressionist painting.

Between 1912 and 1923, the sisters amassed the bulk of their Impressionist and Post Impressionist collections, including six



further works by Monet, two more by Manet, and three by Renoir, including *La Parisienne* (Fig. 4) They bought work by Pissarro, two Edgar Degas (1834–1917) bronzes, and acquired the first Van Gogh to enter a British collection (Fig. 5).

The First World War played a part in the development of the sisters' collection. Their initial response to the war effort was to finance the safe passage of artists from occupied Belgium to mid-Wales, as a humanitarian act, but also with the hope of establishing a vibrant artists' community in the area.⁴ As the conflict dragged on, however, both sisters felt moved to volunteer for work in a soldiers' canteen at Troyes, northern France; Gwendoline in 1916, followed by Margaret in 1917.

It was tedious and distressing work, which would have a permanent affect on Gwendoline's health. Yet on one of numerous trips to the Red Cross in nearby Paris, she took advantage of the freedoms the war afforded women by making solo trips to the Bernheim-Jeune Gallery. Here she acquired two works by Cézanne—*Provençal Landscape*, which dates from the late 1880s, and *The François Zola Dam* of 1877–1878 (Fig. 6), which was to be, perhaps, her most significant purchase. The paintings were shipped directly to Bath, England, where they became the first

works by Cézanne to go on display in a public gallery in Britain. *The François Zola Dam* became the subject of controversy in the early 1920s, demonstrating the extent to which the sisters had developed as collectors. Cézanne's reputation was by this time well established

Fig. 5: Vincent Van Gogh (1853–1890), *Rain-Auvers*, 1890. Oil on canvas, 19¾ x 39½ inches. Courtesy National Museum of Wales.



on the Continent, yet United Kingdom institutions still viewed his merits with suspicion, so, when in 1922, Gwendoline offered the painting on long-term loan to both the

Fig. 6: Paul Cézanne (1839–1906), *The François Zola Dam*, ca. 1877–1878. Oil on canvas, 21¾ x 29¼ inches. Courtesy National Museum of Wales.



National Gallery and the Tate Gallery, both refused. This prompted something of an outcry, the most vocal dissenter being the artist and critic Roger Fry.

In 1920, Gwendoline added a third Cézanne to the group, *Still Life with Teapot*. Although the sisters never engaged with the more radical aspects of modernism, it seems that Cézanne enabled them to make the conceptual link with figures from the contemporary avant-garde, and they thus acquired

Fig. 7: Honoré Daumier (1808–1879), *The Night Walkers*, ca. 1842–1847. Oil on board, 11 $\frac{3}{8}$ x 7 $\frac{7}{8}$ inches. Courtesy National Museum of Wales.

numerous landscapes by leading fauve Maurice de Vlaminck (1876–1958) from the period when the artist was heavily influenced by Cézanne. Interestingly, while they acquired work by numerous fauves, including Andre Dérain (1880–1954) and Albert Marquet (1875–1947), there is only one work in the

collection that dates from the short period of fauvism between 1905 and 1907, *La Ciotat*, by Othon Friesz (1879–1949). This image, however, was not acquired until 1948, suggesting the strident palette was rather too avant-garde for the sisters' early taste.

They continued to collect French Realism, Gwendoline acquiring one of the most extensive collections of work by Honoré Daumier (1808–1879) outside of Paris (Fig. 7). They also bought works by Auguste Rodin (1840–1917), including a full-sized bronze version of *The Kiss*, and a group of works by the symbolist painter Eugène Carrière (1849–1906), whose hazy, intimate mother and child depictions clearly appealed to Gwendoline. In an attempt to foster the development of contemporary art in Wales, Gwendoline also championed the work of the Welsh-born painter Augustus John (1878–1961).⁵

The sisters are often described as unlikely pioneer collectors. Much is made of their relative isolation in rural mid-Wales, yet there they were free from the rigors of fashionable taste and able to pursue their carefully researched preferences. They did not court artists or gallery owners, instead they relied on a trusted circle of advisers, and while they made frequent trips to London and Paris, they also regularly had works sent to their home for consideration. Much is also made of the fact that neither married. We have no way of knowing whether this was the result of personal choice or simply lack of opportunity, but we can be certain that their single status enabled both sisters to fully engage in the kinds of cultural and philanthropic activity that would have been curtailed by family life.

The psychology of collecting—a hot topic in recent times—is of particular interest in regard to Gwendoline and Margaret, as their collection of Impressionist and Post Impressionist art is intensely reflective of their *habitus*. While few artists go unrepresented, their collection contains practically nothing of the painting of modern life that came to define Impressionism (*La Parisienne* being a rare exception). Instead, it is made up almost entirely of landscape and

seascape, and the small body of figure-based works has a timeless quality that belies any overt modernity. Although the sisters' choices can be attributed to the restrictions of their religion (which forbade drinking and dancing, for example), the reasons were certainly greater than this. For Gwendoline, in particular, the purpose of art was not to confront or jar, but to inspire, and she believed strongly in the moral and didactic capabilities of art in the most basic terms—something far more in line with nineteenth-century thought than the genteel radicalism suggested by her own collection.

By the early 1920s, Gwendoline felt increasingly uncomfortable buying art works when faced with the poverty and chaos wrought by the World War of 1914–1918. Her philanthropic pursuits were thus diverted almost exclusively to social causes and the development of the sisters' home at Gregynog Hall into a conference center and venue for the Gregynog Festival of Music and Poetry.⁶

She made her final art purchase in March 1926, *View in Windsor Great Park*, by Richard Wilson (1714–1782)—a profound contrast to the body of modern French painting that would define her as a collector. Margaret also ceased collecting at this time, but began again tentatively in 1934, acquiring work by British artists such as Walter Sickert (1860–1942) and Vanessa Bell (1879–1961). After Gwendoline's death in 1951, Margaret collected British art as a priority—at this time, the National Museum Wales was establishing a fledgling body of modern British work, and it is most likely that Margaret, knowing that her collection would follow her sister's there, was buying under the advice of the then assistant Keeper of Art, John Ingamells. In 1960, however, just a few years before her death, she returned to French art, acquiring works by Alfred Sisley (1839–1899)



Fig. 8: Pierre Bonnard (1867–1947), *Sunlight at Vernon*, ca. 1920. Oil on canvas, 18½ x 24½ inches. Signed bottom right: “Bonnard.” © ADAGP, Paris and DACS, London.

and Pierre Bonnard (Fig. 8), the quiet intimacy of both paintings slotting seamlessly into the spirit of the sisters' earlier collection.

A journalist attending the fourth Gregynog Festival of Music and Poetry in 1936 described the event as “Art for love's sake.” This phrase could just as easily describe the art collection of Gwendoline and Margaret Davies. The sisters simply collected what they loved. In doing so, they created a lasting and meaningful cultural legacy for the people of Wales and beyond.

Turner to Cézanne: Masterworks from the Davis Collection is on view at the Columbia Museum of Art in South Carolina through June 7, 2009. It features fifty-three works of art never before seen together in the United States; the Columbia Museum is the first of five venues. The exhibition is organized by the American Federation of Arts and National

Museum Wales. An exhibition catalogue is available from Hudson Hills Press. For more information visit www.columbiamuseum.org or call 803.799.2810. @

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1. Although the sisters' grandparents were painted by the Pre-Raphaelite Ford Madox Brown (1821–1893) and their stepmother, Elizabeth, acquired a few pieces in the early 1900s.
2. It was only after 1920 that they acquired a small number of Old Master paintings (of varying quality), including pieces from the workshops of El Greco and Botticelli.
3. This painting now resides in the collection of the Fine Arts Museum, San Francisco.
4. This never established itself, for more information see Fairclough et al, ed., *Art in Exile: Flanders, Wales and the First World War* (Ghent / Heino / Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, 2002).
5. Although interestingly, neither sister collected any work by John's sister, Gwen (1876–1939), who has since acquired the greater reputation.
6. The Gregynog Festival had its heyday in the 1930s and attracted some of the most significant musical figures of the period.