

## Joan Eardley at The Glasgow School of Art

In Autumn 2021, 100 years after her birth and 81 years since she first enrolled as a student in January 1940, Glasgow School of Art, so central to the artist's artistic development, identity and reputation, will once again celebrate one of our most famous graduates as part of the *Eardley100* Centenary celebrations. Curated by a team of academics, curators and archivists at the School, *Early Eardley: Joan Eardley in the 1940s* will focus on Eardley's little-known early works, including a number of drawings and ephemera not previously been exhibited.

The works planned for this exhibition are drawn from the School's archives and special collections and are primarily drawings made while Eardley was a student in the 1940s. The exhibition will be far from the first time the artist's alma mater has displayed her drawings and paintings - Eardley's first solo exhibition was held in the School's famous Mackintosh Building on her return from Italy and France in 1949. The exhibition, featuring drawings made while undertaking a Royal Scottish Academy and Glasgow School of Art Travelling Scholarship between 1948-49, helped to cement the artist's reputation as a young graduate to watch. In a review in *The Glasgow Herald*, a critic observed that her work was "notable among the immediate post-graduate generation [...] for the strength and selective quality in her drawings." Some of these drawings – of peasants, landscape, architecture - will be shown again in the 2021 exhibition, along with the scholarship report she was required to submit to the then Director, artist Douglas Percy Bliss and other correspondence.

Since her death in 1963 Eardley's work has been included in a number of exhibitions at GSA, including the 1995 exhibition *The Continuing Tradition: 75 Years of Painting at GSA* and the 2001 exhibition *Art Booms with the Guns*, which focussed on the 'war years' generation of

staff and students and included a number of very early drawings by the artist, such as the 1938 pencil and watercolour work *Fair at Blackheath*, one of her earliest known works. Works by Eardley's close-knit circle of friends and peers were also exhibited including paintings by Margot Sandeman, Cordelia Oliver and Bet Low. In 2012, three works were loaned to Glasgow School of Art for inclusion in another historical survey show, *Studio 58: Women Artists in Glasgow since World War 2*, which sought to highlight the work of mid-late twentieth century women alumni.

The show this year will not focus on Eardley's most famous works, perhaps too often limited to the 'street kids and seascapes' dichotomy in terms of dominant narratives of the artist's development. In contrast, the Glasgow School of Art exhibition will introduce audiences to the artist as a young woman, still learning, experimenting and developing as a painter. The drawings demonstrate Eardley's emerging talent and the range and breadth of her interests. The works we will show reveal a far wider range of themes, places and subjects than those commonly associated with the artist's oeuvre. They also serve to highlight the role of education and training in her artistic development. In her firm commitment to the practice of drawing, for example, the influence of her much-admired tutor, Hugh Adam Crawford, can be seen. Other influences, such as her friendship with the Polish émigré Josef Hermann, can be seen in the artist's growing interest in urban realism. The Glasgow School of Art easel (1) that Eardley, as a student, took to Hermann's studio, returned fifty years later by his widow, will also be on show.

The Eardley works in Glasgow School of Art Archives and Collections give a particular insight into the artist's approach to drawing and sketching. Materials used include pen, ink, chalks,

watercolour and blue biro. The latter was often used for quicker sketches which appear to work out composition, light and shade. Categories of work in the archive include life drawings made while she was a student, some early scenes from Glasgow's famous Barras market, studies from the Glasgow School of Art, Royal Scottish Academy and Carnegie Travelling Scholarship in Italy and France (1948-49), and a small group of sketches from Lincolnshire, made during a period spent in the county to undertake a mural commission at a school in 1946.

There is strong evidence of Eardley's interest in the rural as well as the city in these early works – perhaps unsurprising, given that she was born at Bayling Hill Farm, in Warnham, Sussex. A small series of drawings of farm wagons are in the collection, ranging from Lincolnshire to Italy. Whether at rest or on the move, in works such as *Mule with Cart* (1948-49) (2) Eardley shows an interest in and ability to capture aspects of rural labour and its mechanics. *Italian Farmhouse* (1948-48) (3) is beautifully constructed, with a plough in the foreground, leading the eye through trees to the white farmhouse, its front door ajar, a detail set at the golden ratio point in the composition. Eardley subtly works up swathes of colour from the brown paper ground, to add black line details of roof tiles, vine leaves and the patterns of the distant groups of trees on the surrounding hillside.

The Glasgow School of Art collection also shows a number of studies of interiors and exteriors of Italian churches made during her travelling scholarship. There are two drawings of the same study *Church interior, Basilica di San Marco, Venice*, (1948-49) (4) of three figures at worship. The early, quicker sketch, begins to plot the nuanced differences between the angles of the heads of the three figures. The front worshipper, with his head raised, appears more in communion with above, while the man in the middle seat stares at

his hands and the figure at the back stares stoically ahead. This is further developed in the second work, a chalk and pastel study on brown paper (5). Eardley works up the church interior surrounding the figures, choosing to link them to their surroundings by three bold columns that echo their number.

A number of the sketches are working drawings. As part of the schema of *An Italian Hilltown* (1948-49), Eardley writes colour notes on this black chalk sketch as an aide memoire. A far spire is 'pink', shutters are 'dark green' against a 'brown' building. Drawings are often immediate and look to be on paper that was to hand, such as *Bridge in Venice* (1948-49), drawn on lined paper suggestive of a letter pad. The exhibition in 2021/22 will also exhibit the report she wrote on her scholarship for the School's then Director, the artist Douglas Percy Bliss (1900-1984).

Of her Glasgow works in the collection, there are two studies of the Barras stalls entitled *Covered Market*, both dated c. 1945-49. The first is black ink on paper (6) showing distinctive bold lines and mark-making that are recognisably Eardley's dynamic style, capturing a line of stalls with few customers at the start or end of a market day. Her ability to capture age through posture is evident in this work. There is a real weight denoted in the coat of the stooped figure in the foreground as they clutch the edges of the coat to make it meet. This composition is then further worked up into colour in the second chalk and pastel study of *Covered Market* (7) with a predominant yellow in this study being taken through the awnings of the stalls and replacing the cobbles of the passage, set against contrasting colder blue tones of the stall's interiors. It is worthwhile noting that in the ink study there is perhaps an early indication of Eardley's fascination with signage, seen in later works such as *Sweet Shop, Rotten Row* (c.1960-61), described by Edwin Morgan in his 1962 poem *To Joan*

*Eardley*, as 'Pale yellow letters / humbly struggling across/ The once brilliant red/ of a broken shop-face / C O N F E C T I O'. In *Covered Market*, the sign on the end of one of the market carts reads 'Bush's Nurseryman. Roots. Cut Flowers.'

The life drawings by Eardley in the School's collection represent the rigour of drawing instruction at art school. Figures twist, with Eardley following with a second observational detail of a foreshortened arm on the same page, to better understand form (*Life Drawing*, 1940-45) (8) This academic understanding of the figure as an exercise, of how skin and clothes cover skeletal structure, underpins her ability to capture the figure quickly and authentically in her own chosen subject works.

The Glasgow School of Art is integral to Joan Eardley's story. Her close-knit network of friends and supporters, which would sustain personally and professionally her throughout her life, were formed as a student there in the 1940s. A younger classmate, Cordelia Oliver, would go on to become one of her fiercest supporters, writing the first book-length critical biography of the artist in 1988 and mounting several major posthumous exhibitions of her work. Her close friend and early collaborator, Margot Sandeman, was also a fellow classmate and lifelong advocate of her work. Eardley's early career was intrinsically linked with her primary place of education, from her diploma between 1940-43 and her post-diploma year in 1948 to attendance at evening classes in between. From her Guthrie prize-winning self-portrait in 1943, now held by National Galleries of Scotland, to her first solo exhibition in 1949, Glasgow School of Art is an entirely fitting venue for this special exhibition of works on paper in her centenary year.

[Biog details](#)

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References for images – numbers in text relate to these catalogue numbers in the GSA Archives and Collections

1. Easel: NMC/0634
2. Mule with Cart: NMC/0071
3. Italian Farmhouse: NMC/0065
4. Church interior, Basilica di San Marco: MNC/0080
5. Second study of the above: NMC/0077
6. Covered Market 1: NMC/0088
7. Covered Market 2: NMC/0087
8. Life Drawing: NMC/0074