

The Observer Painting

Richard Brooks
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'Most paintings should have been burnt': Augustus John's granddaughter attacks artist's later works

Celebrated painter 'went down the drain from the 1930s', claims Rebecca John in a new interview



The artist Augustus John in 1951 when he was 73. Photograph: Alfred Eisenstaedt/Life Picture Collection/Shutterstock

The granddaughter of Augustus John, Britain's most famous and successful artist of the early 20th century, has delivered a damning critique of his later works. Rebecca John, the leading authority on the artist, says in her first interview for two decades that "most should have been burned. My grandfather went down the drain from the 1930s onwards, drank too much, lost his judgment, and took every opportunity to earn money from portraits of society ladies and the wives of notable men".

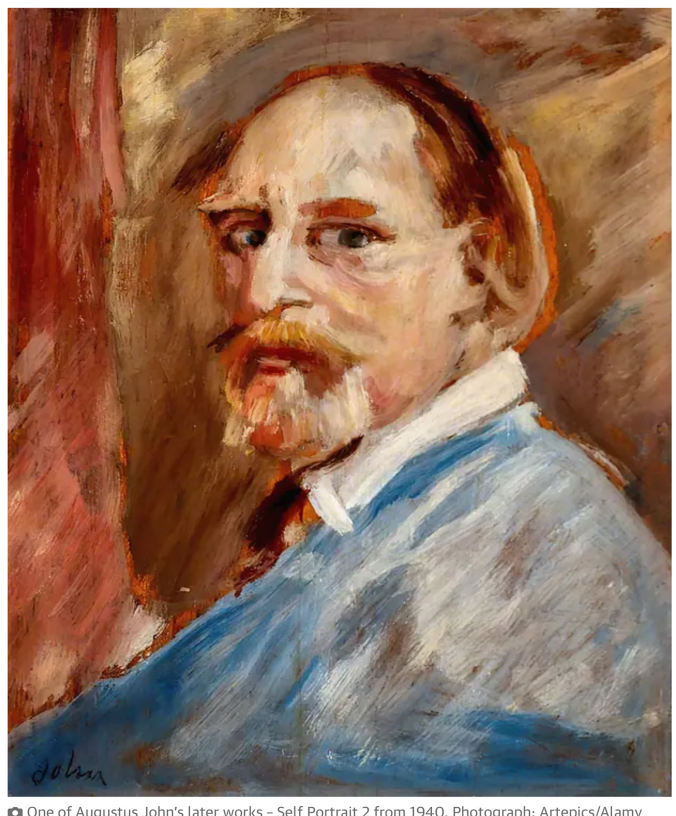
From about 1900, Augustus John had produced beautiful drawings, stunning landscapes and portraits of great men including TE Lawrence, James Joyce, George Bernard Shaw and Thomas Hardy. He was even honoured in 1928 with a cover photo for *Time* magazine. But those artistic skills declined from the mid-1930s until his death aged 83 in 1961.



Augustus John, right, in his studio in the 1950s. Photograph: The DL Archive Collection/Alamy

While very critical of her grandfather's later work, Rebecca John, herself a noted watercolourist of plants, believes that his earlier work "shows that he was a brilliant draughtsman. No wonder his skills were compared to some Old Masters".

She also accepts that her grandfather was probably driven to churn out second-rate portraits because he needed the money to pay for girlfriends plus at least 13 children and countless grandchildren. It was once remarked that John, while living in Chelsea, would walk down the King's Road and pat every child on the head in case it was one of his.



One of Augustus John's later works - Self Portrait 2 from 1940. Photograph: Artepics/Alamy

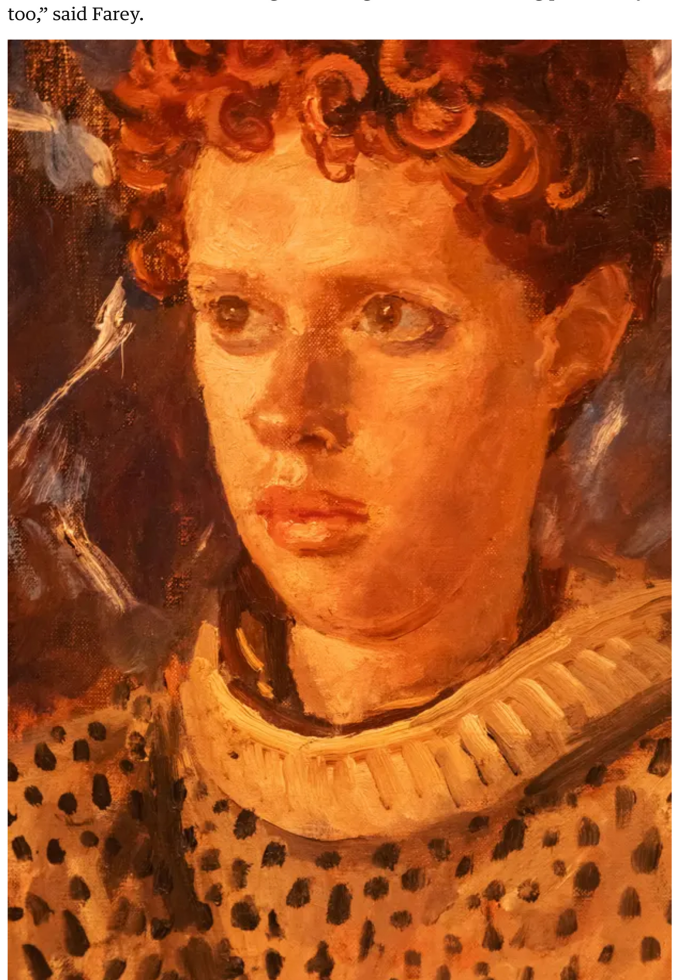
Born in south Wales in 1878, Augustus John became the star pupil at London's Slade School of Art. He married Ida Nettleship when he was 23, and they had five children in the six years before her premature death in 1907. Yet even within that short marriage he was having an affair with Dorelia McNeill, who had two children by John and then another two when they lived together until his death. But there were many other flings during his relationship with McNeill, including one with Caitlin Macnamara, who later became Dylan Thomas's wife. It is widely accepted that John's 1935 portrait of Thomas, with his curly hair and youthful looks, was his last great painting.



The studio collection of Augustus John at the National Museum Cardiff, containing some paintings from the later 1930s. Photograph: Steve Vidler/Alamy

Rebecca John might be attacking the later work of her grandfather but she defends his free-love lifestyle: "He was handsome, famous and exciting. So, understandably, women wanted to go with him. He was the Mick Jagger of his day, or like Pablo Picasso and Lucian Freud."

John's attractiveness is also remarked on by Luke Farey of the Piano Nobile gallery in west London, which is showing an exhibition of 33 of John's works from 1899 until 1914, running from 26 April to 13 July. "He had this alluring carrot-coloured hair and wore gold earrings. And such a strong personality too," said Farey.



John's 1935 portrait of Dylan Thomas is considered his last great painting. Photograph: Steve Vidler/Alamy

Rebecca John, who in 2017 co-edited the letters of his wife Ida, is not involved with this exhibition, but is pleased that it focuses on his early work. Included are drawings of Ida and McNeill, who got on well despite being love rivals, as is shown in some of the letters.

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The Piano Nobile exhibition is curated by David Boyd Haycock, inspired by his 2023 book *Brilliant Destiny: The Age of Augustus John*. Nearly all are from private collections with some never having been seen in public before, including one landscape, *Arenig Fach*, painted in Snowdonia in 1911, which was owned by Elizabeth Taylor from the 1970s until her death in 2011.



John's earlier work, from 1919, Colonel TE Lawrence. Photograph: Fremantle/Alamy

Rebecca John still has fond memories as a young girl of her grandfather: "I would visit him at his house, Fryern Court, in Hampshire. I can recall a huge presence and a booming voice. Perhaps he shouted because he was deaf. I can't think of many conversations, but we had one about my learning Latin.

"So I grew up with this very famous grandfather - one who never stopped working. But he has been undone by his later decades and by modern attitudes, which only seem to rate art if it is incomprehensible. His was straightforward and understandable. In the end, too, it was his reputation as a bohemian which took over from that of an artist. But I'm nevertheless very proud of him."

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