



Left: Augustus John, *Landscape in Wales*, 1911-13; Below: Augustus John, *Portrait of Percy Wyndham Lewis*, 1905



EXHIBITIONS

HUON MALLALIEU

AUGUSTUS JOHN AND THE FIRST CRISIS OF BRILLIANCE

Piano Nobile, London W11,
26th April to 13th July

When Augustus John (1878-1961) arrived at the Slade School of Art, he was 'quiet, methodical and by no means remarkable' – according to his teacher Henry Tonks.

Then, during the 1897 summer vacation, he smashed his head on rocks while swimming at Tenby. When he returned to the Slade, he was a changed character. By the end of his time there, William Rothenstein said he possessed 'the eager understanding, the imagination, the readiness for intellectual and physical adventure one associates with genius'.

Several of his Slade contemporaries were particularly gifted, which gave rise to Tonks's coinage 'crisis of brilliance'. However, John's draughtsmanship was exceptional even among them, and his wild Bohemian glamour established him as *the* archetype of an artist.

Between the wars, he was Britain's pre-eminent portrait painter. But by 1938, Anthony Blunt could suggest he was to some extent frittering his talent: 'John is almost as gifted as a painter can be. It is only because his gifts are so great that one is forced to judge him by the very highest standards, and it



Above: Gwen John, *Sleeping Nun*, 1914. Above right: Derwent Lees, *Lyndra*, 1909



is only by such standards that he seems to fail.'

Despite the evident decline, his *New York Times* obituarist could still call him 'the grand old man of British painting, and one of the greatest in British history'.

Post mortem, his reputation went down much further, partly owing to over-large studio sales which put far more of his work out onto the market than it could absorb. His prophecy that 'in 50 years' time, I will be known as the brother of Gwen John' came true.

Without detracting in any way from

Gwen's rightful current eminence, it is now time for a rebalancing of Augustus's reputation.

This show will be an excellent start. It demonstrates that his landscape paintings in the decade between his leaving the Slade and the First World War could be heart-stopping; they are dashed down with freedom and facility but are in no way facile. Particularly effective are those of the Arenig valley, North Wales, which he visited with fellow painter James Dickson Innes around 1910.

As well as paintings, drawings and etchings by John himself, the exhibition provides context by showing works by a number of his brilliant contemporaries, including Derwent Lees, Henry Lamb, Jacob Epstein, William Rothenstein, William Orpen, Ambrose McEvoy – and of course, Gwen John. 