

LAURA KNIGHT

1877–1970

FRYN TENNYSON JESSE

Oil on canvas

24 x 20 inches; 610 x 510 mm

Signed lower right: 'Laura Knight'

Painted c.1909



Collections:

Lay's Auctioneers, Penzance, 24th August 2023, lot.53;

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This beautiful portrait by Laura Knight dates from early in her career, painted when she was living and working in Newlyn, in Cornwall. The sitter, Fryn Tennyson Jesse, described by Knight in her memoirs as 'slender and graceful like a wand', was a pupil of Stanhope Forbes. Jesse would go on to have a celebrated career as a journalist, war reporter and writer.

Laura Johnson was trained at the Nottingham School of Art, where she met Harold Knight, a fellow student. The pair were married in 1903 and spent time living and painting in Staithes in North Yorkshire. In 1907 the Knights moved to Newlyn to work with Stanhope Forbes and his followers. Knight gives a characteristically picaresque description of their time in Cornwall in her memoir *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*. In Newlyn they found 'Student life of sunlit pleasure, and leisurely study', although older than most of Forbes's other followers and more established with growing reputations in London. Harold Knight was in demand as a society portrait painter and Laura Knight became increasingly ambitious, working on a series of large, outdoor works for the Royal Academy. As she noted in *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, 'once again I became aware of latent power. Daring grew, I would work only in my own way. An even greater freedom came – glorious sensation, promise for a future when anything might be attempted.'¹

Cornwall provided an important circle of fellow artists, Alfred Munnings, Samuel John 'Lamorna' Birch, Augustus John and his first wife, Ida Nettleship, along with Forbes and his followers. Knight identified Ernest Procter as the most talented male student, offering, in her rich account of the colony of artists she encountered, a description of some of the female students she knew:

'In the heart of Newlyn an old Georgian house remained intact, surrounded by a garden and myrtle trees. Its half-circle bay windows and fine proportions had great distinction. In it four girl students lived. They were the *élite*. Among them was Dod Shaw and

¹ Laura Knight, *Oil Paint and Grease Paint*, London, 1936, p.169.

Friniwid Tennyson Jesse. Mrs Shaw, Dod's mother, presided over the group. Finiwid was slender and graceful like a wand, her hair was auburn. They talked literature, some wrote tales and poems, some did woodcuts, some painted. Some did all three.'

Dod Shaw would go on to marry Ernest Procter and became a distinguished professional painter, Royal Academician and a close friend of Knight.

This beautifully articulated portrait almost certainly shows the auburn-haired Jesse in around 1909. Knight shows the sitter dressed in a simple white blouse, with black bow in her hair and at her neck arranged against a geometrical background of stark verticals. Knight's handling shows the loosening of her technique, Jesse is modelled with great freedom; the simplicity of the design, underscores the quiet introspection of the portrait. Knight was a remarkably sympathetic painter of women and in her depiction of the beautiful young artist she captures something of her character.

Wynifried Jesse was the daughter of the Reverend Eustace Tennyson Jesse and great-niece of the poet, Alfred, Lord Tennyson. Following time spent as a pupil of Forbes, living with Dod Procter and her mother, Jesse became a pioneering war correspondent, reporting from France and Belgium for the *Daily Mail*. Jesse was commissioned by the Ministry of Information to report on the Women's Auxiliary Corps and the First Aid Nursing Yeomanry. In 1919 she published a book on her experience: *The Sword of Deborah: First Hand Impressions of the British Women's Army in France*, which became an important text in the ongoing struggle for universal suffrage. Jesse would remain a vocal advocate for female causes, including divorce and abortion rights. Post war she became a distinguished crime reporter, contributing a number of cases to *Notable British Trials* and a successful novelist. *Moonraker: or the French Pirate and her Friends*, published in 1927, is remarkable for its gender reversal and sensitive handling of race.



Bassano Ltd
Fryn Tennyson Jesse
Bromide print
7 5/8 x 5 5/8 inches; 194 x 144 mm
1912
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