

HISTORY IN ART

Sir William Orpen 1878–1931

31 August 2022

1878 – William Newenham Montague Orpen born in Stillorgan, County Dublin, Ireland, the son of two amateur painters.

1891 – Orpen is enrolled at Dublin Metropolitan School of Art before he is even 13 years old and he stays there for 6 years, winning a number of prizes.

1897 – He begins studying at the Slade in London. He proves to be very versatile, and delights in creating confusing images in his paintings.

1899 – He wins the Slade composition prize for his *Play Scene from Hamlet*. He exhibits at the New English Art Club and becomes a member the following year, exhibiting *The Mirror*, an expertly crafted contemporary portrait but clearly influenced by *The Arnolfini Portrait* by Van Eyck and by Vermeer's paintings of the Dutch Golden Age.

1901 – Orpen marries Grace Knewstub, the sister-in-law of the artist William Rothenstein. Their marriage isn't happy, and he soon begins an affair with an American millionairess, Evelyn Saint-George. He has three children with his wife and one with Mrs Saint-George.

1903 – He leaves the Slade and begins teaching privately in London and at the Dublin Metropolitan School of Art, where he originally developed his skills as an artist. One of his pupils in Dublin is Grace Gifford, an Irish Republican who marries one of the Easter Rising participants, Joseph Plunkett, in Kilmainham Gaol a few hours before he is executed. Another of his pupils, Seán Keating will document the Irish War of Independence in his art.

1911 – Orpen begins a series of portraits of Vera Brewster, wife of Joseph Hone, biographer of W.B. Yeats. The three works impress John Singer Sargent and Sargent begins to recommend Orpen as a portraitist, which is very important as he attracts many lucrative commissions. By the beginning of the First World War, he is famous and hugely successful.

1916 – While working as a clerical officer within the Army Service Corps, Orpen continues to paint and one of his portraits is of Winston Churchill.

1917 – Orpen is appointed an official war artist, painting both British troops and German prisoners, and also images of the dead on the battlefield of the Somme. He also paints portraits of Sir Douglas Haig and Sir Hugh Trenchard, the commander of the Royal Flying Corps, and a self-portrait of himself, *Ready to Start*.

1918 – He is threatened with a court martial after producing two paintings of a French Red Cross worker, Victoria Aubicq, with whom he was having an affair, and entitling both paintings *Spy*. He later renamed the pictures *The Refugee*. A third version was identified on the BBC's *Antiques Roadshow* in 2010. After witnessing some macabre scenes on the battlefields, he becomes mentally exhausted and his paintings become less straightforward representations, more allegorical

statements and sometimes with black humour. In November, he becomes very ill and is nursed back to health by Victoria Aubicq.

1919 – Orpen is commissioned to paint the participants in the Paris peace conference. He also paints a highly controversial picture of a coffin draped in a Union flag and attended by two ghostly figures representing the soldiers killed in the war. When exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1923, it is voted picture of the year by the public but is vilified by some critics and the newspapers.

1921 – His painting of the head chef at the Hotel Chatham in Paris is bought by the Tate with the Chantrey Bequest, which was only for works entirely painted in the United Kingdom. But several people complain that they saw Orpen painting the work in France, so he has to take it back.

1925 – He paints one of his finest works, *Sunlight*.

1931 – He becomes seriously ill and dies, aged just 52.