

“Sheer Verve”: The Women’s International Art Club
Ben Uri Gallery, London NW8 ORH, 02 June – 26 August



Orovida Pissarro, *Ceremonial Dance*, 1927, Egg tempera on silk, Private Collection, London © The Artist’s Estate

The Women’s International Art Club (WIAC) was founded in Paris in 1898 to give female artists a platform at a time when it was difficult for them to exhibit their work. It also set out to encourage networking opportunities between women artists who were often dismissed by the male art establishment. The inaugural exhibition, held in London’s Grafton Gallery in 1900, went on to become a feted annual event until the club was dissolved in 1978.

More than a century after the WIAC’s inception, Ben Uri showcases the club’s “sheer verve”, in the words of *Arts Review* critic Bettina Wadia (26 January 1963) with work from 21 of its collection artists including Sonia Delaunay, Dora Gordine, Clara Klinghoffer, Orovida Pissarro and Otilie Tolansky.

Encompassing paintings, drawings, sculpture, prints and lithographs depicting landscapes, interiors, still life, figures and abstracts in all their “astonishing variety”, as *Art News & Review*’s Barbara Wright put it, it presents an exhilarating snapshot of the club’s radical artistic output over seven decades.

Highlights include Orovida’s richly decorative *Ceremonial Dance*, featuring homemade egg tempura applied in delicate washes to silk, Tolansky’s bold *Portrait of a Girl*, and Baranowska’s deeply impastoed *Actaeon Devoured by his Hounds*.

A series of events including lectures, virtual exhibitions and an online issue catalogue with an essay by WIAC expert Una Richmond, accompanies the exhibition.

Notes for editors:

Una Richmond is an AHRC CHASE-funded doctoral student in the department of Art History at the University of Sussex. The working title for her thesis is ‘No Second Sex in Art: The Women’s International Art Club 1950–1978’.

Artists featured: Janina Baranowska (1925–2021), Sandra Blow (1925–2006), Ruth Collet (1909–2001), Sonia Delaunay (1885–1979), Amy Drucker (1873–1951), Zena Flax (b. 1930), Lily Delissa Joseph (1863–1940), Elsa Fraenkel ((1892–1975), Dora Gordine (1895–1991), Laura Knight (1877–1970), Clara Klinghoffer (1900–1970), Halina Korn (1902–1978), Margaret Marks (1899–1990), Anna Mayerson (1906–1984), Else Meidner (1901–1987), Erna Nonnenmacher (1889–1980), Lena Pillico (1884–1947), Orovida Pissarro (1893–1968), Adèle Reifenberg (1893–1986), Lotti Reizenstein (1904–1982), Otilie Tolansky (1912–1977) and Katerina Wilczynski (1894–1978).

The Ben Uri Collection was formed in 1915 in London’s East End by Russian-Jewish decorative artist and craftsman Lazar Berson to support Jewish artists working outside the cultural mainstream. The Collection, begun in 1919, principally reflects three waves of migration to the UK: first- and second-generation Eastern-European Jewish migration prior to the First World War; the so-called ‘Hitler émigrés’ (1933–45), and wider multicultural immigration after the Second World War. In contrast to the national average of around 4%, two-thirds of the artists are immigrants and one third are women.

Ben Uri’s collection and exhibiting history often reflect WIAC membership with women from both Jewish and immigrant backgrounds regularly exhibiting at both venues. Lena Pillico was the first female artist to exhibit under Ben Uri’s auspices in 1927, Clara Klinghoffer’s work was the first to enter the permanent collection in 1935, and Lily Delissa Joseph successfully negotiated her artistic, religious, familial, and political identities, while maintaining an international exhibiting profile. Orovida Pissarro, a key and high-profile WIAC member, served on the selection, hanging, and executive committees almost continuously from 1928–1950, while Lena Pillico, Janina Baranowska and Ruth Collet were all involved in WIAC committees.

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