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The Club of Female Greats at Ben Uri Gallery, London



Barbara Hepworth, 'Disc with Strings (Moon)', 1969, aluminium and string, private collection, courtesy of Piano Nobile, London

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Title:

"Sheer Verve": The Women's International Art Club 1898-1978

Times:

Wed - Fri 10:00 - 17:30

From: 13 Sep 2023

To: 15 Dec 2023

Venue:

Ben Uri Gallery and Museum
108A Boundary Road
St John's Wood
London
Other
NW8 ORH

Website:

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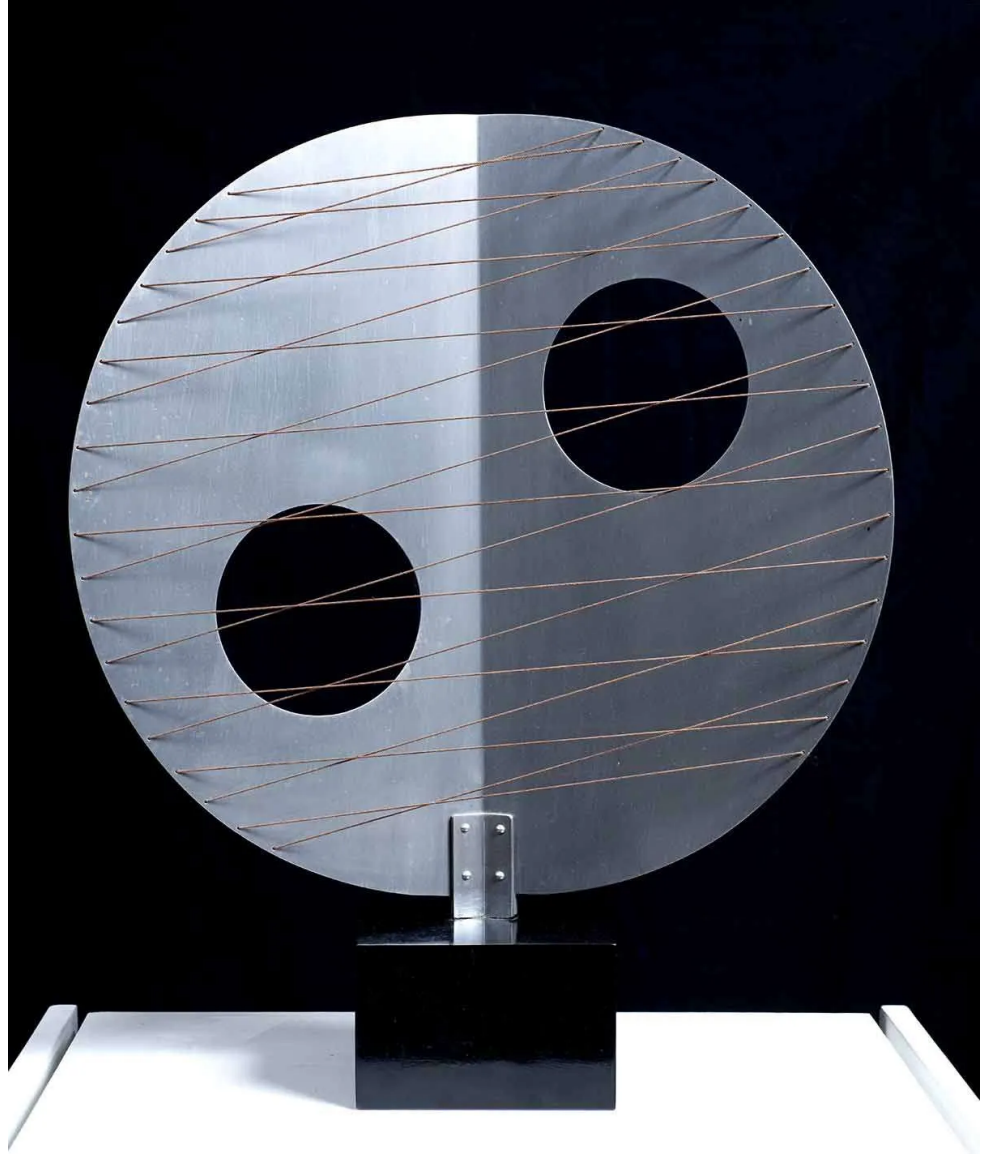
Born in England in 1877, Laura Knight became an acclaimed artist and best-selling author. She served as the president of the Society of Women Artists from 1932-1967, was the first woman artist to be awarded a damehood and to be elected a full Royal Academician, and the only woman artist sent to document the Nuremberg trials in 1946. Knight DBE, is just one of the artists on show at, *"Sheer Verve": The Women's International Art Club (1898-1978)*, which has recently opened at London's Ben Uri Gallery, celebrating the 125th anniversary of the WIAC's inception.



Laura Knight, 'A Resting Clown', 1970, coloured chalks on paper, private collection

Whilst Knight is famed for her oils and watercolours, often depicting the English landscape, *A Resting Clown*, 1970, in coloured chalk, shows her ability to work with a diverse array of media, and emphasises her meticulous realism.

“*Sheer Verve's*” curation is carefully considered, with works displayed thematically, creating unity between the artists, which the group itself sought to foster by providing an exhibition platform for women artists, at the time restricted, amidst a male-dominated art establishment. Each artist has their own unique story which is illustrated by selected works.



Barbara Hepworth, 'Disc with Strings (Moon)', 1969, aluminium and string, private collection, courtesy of Piano Nobile, London

Central to the main gallery space is the organic form which could only be the work prolific sculptor, Barbara Hepworth. *Disc with Strings*, 1969, conveys Hepworth's connection to the natural environment. Here celestial aluminium shapes converge with crossing strings where tension perhaps reflects the pull between the moon and sea, and in turn works to reel in the viewer.



Marlow Moss, 'Construction Spatial', 1953, brass/ bronze, private collection, UK

Hepworth herself was famously tactile, always said to have her hand on something whether it be a pebble or a shell. This palpability is reflected in the smooth golden forms of *Construction Spatial*, 1953, by the recently rediscovered Marlow Moss, which is displayed adjacent to *Disc with Strings*. The Ben Uri exhibition sets celebrated exhibitors, like Gwen John and Paula Rego, alongside those who have been neglected by the art historical canon. Moss moved from France to work alongside Hepworth, as a member of the St. Ives' circle, however, was later excluded from the School, perhaps due to Moss's homosexuality.



E Q Nicholson, 'Jugs and Quinces', 1946, gouache, indian ink and collage on paper, The Women's Art Collection, Murray Edwards College, Cambridge

The weight and permanence of both the sculptures defies the stereotype that women artists did not possess the strength and skill to construct these forms. As Curator Sarah MacDougall told me, there are no 'charming still lives', gesturing to E Q Nicholson's *Jugs and Quinces*, 1946, where the pairing of graphic shapes and bold colours seems so ahead of its time. The artists have "Sheer Verve", as the name suggests – seen in all the works, not least *Ceremonial Dance*, 1922, by Orovida.



Orovida Pissarro, 'Ceremonial Dance', 1927, egg tempera on silk, 1927, private collection, London

The bustling painting is said to be a response to the artist's visit to a Chinese and Japanese exhibition at the British Museum. The dramatic gestures of the figures convey the dynamism and excitement of the dance. Orovida asserted artistic independence from her family by shedding her surname, Pissarro, and rejecting Impressionism, which her family is known for. Everything from her own success to the egg tempera she used, to the floral silk print which borders the painting, she made herself.

Orovida was born into a Jewish family and was a second-generation émigré, which is another common feature of the exhibition, as the Gallery focuses on the contribution of Jewish, refugee and immigrant artists to British visual culture since the start of the twentieth century. The gallery is intertwined with these artists, with many, like Knight and Orovida, a part of the Ben Uri collection. This connection is on show for all, as the display continues into the library on the lower ground, where the gallery's records document this history.

Whilst these women were remarkable, they did not want to be known as such. They were pioneers, fighting for women's equality, in the hope that someday the exhibition of their work would not be unusual. Though the group disbanded, their goals are still relevant today, and "Sheer Verve" is a reminder of this and a testament to the artists who displayed at the WIAC.

With thanks to Nelly Laycock for this review.