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Sister act: the French muse of William Orpen

Treasures

Eleanor Flegg

Ireland's fine arts, antiques and collectables column

Yvonne Aupicq was not a nun. Neither was she a German spy nor a refugee but her lover, the Irish artist William Orpen (1878-1931), painted her in all three roles. One of these, *Portrait of Yvonne Aupicq as a Nun (Sister X)*, is coming up for auction at Adam's sale of Important Irish Art on March 1 (Lot 61: est. €30,000 to €50,000). Sister X wears a white habit with a golden crucifix around her neck. Her expression is complex and utterly present. The background is inky black.

During the First World War, Orpen was an official war artist, employed by the British military and sent to the Western Front to document the war. His war paintings are disturbing and profound.

He met Aupicq when she was volunteering with the Red Cross and he was in hospital. They began a 10-year relationship. Orpen was neither tall nor handsome but he was prone to romantic entanglements. He had a wife and daughters in London, who were probably glad to see the back of him.

Aupicq, being French, was culturally better equipped to deal with this aspect of his personality than his English or American lovers. Orpen painted Aupicq many times and in many guises, most famously as a scantily clad German spy.

When confronted by his commanding officers asking why he had painted a naked woman when he should be painting war scenes, Orpen invented a fabulous story of a young female German spy he encountered as she was awaiting her execution wearing nothing but a fur coat and slippers. He told them that as she faced the firing squad, she had thrown open the coat to reveal herself in death. Whether they believed this isn't recorded but Orpen did avoid sanction.

Orpen later painted Aupicq in a blue coat and titled it *The Refugee*. Both this, and a portrait of Aupicq under a tumble of blonde curls, are now in the British Imperial War Museum. The portrait During World War II, Grover-Williams was one of three racing drivers who played a significant role in the French Resistance.

As a British special operations executive (SEO) operative he was dropped into occupied France in 1942 were he and Aupicq ran a resistance cell in Paris. Grover-Williams was reputedly captured by the Germans and executed by firing squad in 1945.

Motor historian Richard Armstrong writes that there is probably no truth in the rumour that he survived the war and was reunited with his wife in 1948 under the name of Georges Tambal. Yvonne Aupicq claimed that Tambal was her cousin, but the neighbours thought they acted like lovers.

Coincidentally, Tambal shared a birthday with Grover-Williams and was very knowledgeable about motor cars.

Yvonne Aupicq bred Highland terriers and became a judge at Crufts. She died in 1973. According to Armstrong, Georges Tambal "sold up and moved to Agen, near to where Grover-Williams had been born. And in 1983 he died in a road accident when he was knocked off his bicycle by a car driven by a German tourist".

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of *Sister X* clearly meant something to Orpen. He painted two versions against different backgrounds: one black; one white.

Orpen would give her the version on a white background and he kept the other in his own collection. This version of *Sister X* was sold by the Neptune Gallery around 1950 and shown at the National Gallery of Ireland in 1978 as part of Orpen's Centenary Exhibition. It was mistakenly catalogued as "Lady Diana

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Manners in theatrical costume".

By 1921 Major William Orpen returned to civilian life. He remained with Aupicq for a time in Paris, bought a Rolls Royce and hired a chauffeur. He painted several more significant paintings of Aupicq, including the delicately erotic *Nude Girl Reading*. Orpen's biographer, Bruce Arnold, suggests these portraits offered the artist a respite from painting society portraits.

Eventually, Orpen and Aupicq drifted apart. He returned to London and the life of a society artist. She married the chauffeur and Orpen gave them the Rolls Royce. The chauffeur, William Grover-Williams, became a Grand Prix racing driver. Racing as "W Williams" he drove a Bugatti and was the first winner of the Monaco Grand Prix in 1929.

Painting habit: *Portrait of Yvonne Aupicq as a Nun (Sister X)* by William Orpen and above, one of Orpen's famous self portraits

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