

SAUNDERSFOOT AND DISTRICT HISTORICAL SOCIETY

THIRD MEETING OF THE 2014-15 SEASON

David Dando: The Nina Hamnett Story

Nina Hamnett was born on St. Valentine's Day 1890 at her grandmother's house at 1 Lexden Terrace in Tenby, and it seems that she was largely brought up by her. A rather carefree early life spent primarily at the harbour, sketching the men and boys working there and learning sea shanties, was succeeded by a varied and not particularly successful selection of girls' boarding schools. It was not until her family found the money to send her first to the Pelham School of Art, and later the London School of Art, that Nina found her milieu. One of her tutors was Frank Brangwyn whose large-scale mural works, destined for but rejected by the House of Lords, can be found today in the Brangwyn Hall within the Guildhall in Swansea.

Nina quickly took to the artistic set, became friendly with among others Walter Sickert, and enjoyed the heady atmosphere of the Cafe Royale. Her own artistic style was developing, notably distinctive three-quarter length portraits. She briefly visited Paris where she met Epstein before returning to London. Around this time she posed for the sculptor Henri Brzeska and for a portrait by Sickert. Returning again to Paris in 1914 she took rooms in the artists' quarter of La Roche and threw herself into the social and artistic world she found all around her: posing for Modigliani, Zadkine and Foujita among others, dancing nude on the tables of La Rotonde, further developing her portrait style but increasingly drinking very heavily. There was a brief marriage to the then interned Norwegian Edgar Bergen – Sickert painted a study of the ill-matched pair - and a return to London in 1915.

There she joined Roger Fry's Omega Group and by association the Bloomsbury Group, producing fabrics, clothing and artefacts for wealthy clients. She sat for a portrait by Fry and completed a study of the poet, Osbert Sitwell. Again restless, she returned to Paris in 1920. Her output included drawings for magazines, sketches and more of her distinctive portraits. She also found a form of employment as a cafe ice-breaker or, in Dylan Thomas's words 'a professional introducer,' which allowed her to roam the artists cafes and to continue to drink ever more heavily. On one notable occasion she introduced James Joyce to Rudolf Valentino, with the former talking to, above and around the latter for two hours. But her hedonistic lifestyle was taking its toll and both Sickert and Fry commented on her declining appearance.

Nina returned to London, to the bohemian quarter of Fitzrovia, in 1926, and for more than a decade she haunted the Fitzrovia Tavern where she often met up with Augustus John, her fellow Tenby artist, and Dylan Thomas. While she continued a modest output of portraits and sketches her heavy drinking rather than her art had begun to define her. Nevertheless, she continued to move in artistic and literary circles: her autobiography 'Laughing Torso' was published in the 1940's and she managed to be sued unsuccessfully by the occultist Aleister Crowley.

After the war Nina went into further decline, living in squalor and cadging drinks in the Colony Room in return for tales and gossip. And she certainly had tales of the artistic world to tell. For over two decades she knew almost everyone of note in both Paris and London, as artist, model, muse,

mistress and friend. Nina remained a well-known and popular figure, the subject of numerous magazine interviews and profiles, even a radio play which she apparently disliked.

Her life ended tragically on 16 December 1956 when she fell, or jumped, from her rooms in Paddington onto the railings outside. In its obituary *The Times* described her as 'the Queen of Bohemia.'

The vote of thanks to the speaker was proposed by the Society's chair, Mrs. Mary Cavell.

The next meeting of the Society will be the Christmas party at the Wiseman's Bridge Inn on 17 December.