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Violet Evelyn Arnott (1901 – 1953)

Self-portrait

Oil on canvas

61 cm high x 50.8 cm wide (unframed)

Inscribed on verso:

‘ARNOTT ANNUAL EXAM’

Stamped on verso:

‘R.A. STUDENTS CANVAS, C. ROBERTSON & Co. Ltd, 155 PICCADILLY LONDON’.

Painted c.1925-1927

This self-portrait by British artist Violet Evelyn Arnott (1901 – 1953) is perhaps one of the most striking and intriguing of the early twentieth century. Executed with painterly bravura and left attractively ‘unfinished’ in the lower half of the work, Arnott loosely sketches the outline of her right arm which extends beyond the bounds of the canvas. Although cropped at the wrist, we can assume that the artist holds a paintbrush. The seated composition suggests Arnott was looking at a small mirror located near the bottom right corner of the canvas. Raising her highly arched eyebrows and concentrating intensely on the process of capturing her own likeness, the rebellious young artist looks down at the viewer with a somewhat recalcitrant ‘side-eye’. With rouge applied to her lips and cheeks, the slim, the angular nature of her face is

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emphasised by her very short, 'Eton-crop' hairstyle, that was hugely fashionable in the mid-1920s. Interestingly, another recently discovered contemporary portrait of Arnott drawn by Margaret Ida Euler (born 1903) depicts her with longer eyelashes and a fuller more traditionally 'feminine' face (fig.1). In contrast, Arnott appears to represent herself in a more 'masculine' way in her self-portrait. This effect is reinforced by Arnott's androgynous attire of a shirt, tie and short-sleeved V-neck cardigan. This could be interpreted as an attempt to self-identify as a member of the LGBTQ+ community, 'non-binary' or 'genderfluid' - a hundred years before such terms would be conceptualised and come into common parlance. Due to the widespread illegality of homosexuality during this period,¹ it is possible that the fashion for androgyny emerged out of a desire to construct a sartorial code that subtly displayed the wearer's alternative sexuality, or genderfluidity. Although masculine clothing could be both disturbing and entertaining to interwar social commentators, it was not really interpreted by British public as an expression of an alternative sexual identity until the 1928 prosecution and censorship of the lesbian novel *The Well of Loneliness*. After this, the female adoption of the masculine look began to get linked to same-sex desire.² However, it must be noted that the attire Arnott depicts herself wearing adhered to the fashionable trend for female 'cross-dressing' in Britain during the 1920s and such modes of representation did not necessarily represent lesbian or transgender identities, whether coded or otherwise. The fashion was adopted by heterosexual and lesbian women alike as a tool to assert their identity and individuality in a largely patriarchal society (fig.2). British icons of the androgynous look included the poet and aristocrat Vita Sackville-West, who adopted the breeches and gaiters of a wartime land army girl (fig.3), the military hero Radclyffe Hall (fig.4), the artist Hannah Gluckstein (known as Gluck) and actress Edna Best. They were building on the tradition established by the 'New Women' of the late 19th-century, who wore matching plain jackets and skirts, sometimes with a tie and an unadorned hat. The 'New Woman' of the 19th century went on to form the backbone of the suffrage struggle of the 1910s³ and their emancipated tailored style continued through

¹ Sexual Offences Act 1967:

In 1967 the Sexual Offences Act was passed which decriminalised private homosexual acts between men aged over 21, while at the same time imposing heavier penalties on street offences.

The law was not changed for Scotland until 1980, or for Northern Ireland until 1982.

Criminal Justice and Public Order Act:

In 1994 the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act lowered the age of consent for gay men from 21 to 18, and in 2001 it was further lowered to 16.

² Oram, *Women in History*, English Heritage

³ However, it must be noted that in their marches suffragettes often dressed in ultra-feminine clothes with great irony, to make a political point

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to the 1930s.⁴ Alison Oram explains that “the wearer hoped to show that she was of independent mind, did not seek flattery from men and was serious about her new profession, whether as social worker, writer or school teacher.”⁵ The First World War also saw British women take up work in the uniformed services, which introduced the pleasures of masculine clothing to thousands of female. Shocking at first, it soon became a sign of modern women giving brave service.⁶

Little is known about Violet Arnott other than she was born to a wealthy family in Brampton, Northumberland, in the North of England and studied at The Slade school of art, before entering the Royal Academy of Art on 19th February 1925. Despite her obvious talent, she rebelled against the regime of the Royal Academy Schools. Records show she had a woeful attendance record (having attended only 79 times out of a possible 1103) and seemingly refused to submit work for the exam prizes, despite winning a 2nd Prize Premium in December 1925 for 'Two Painted Figures'. The inscription on the reverse of this canvas reads ‘Arnott Annual Exam’ and although the date of the work is unclear, it is stamped as a ‘R.A. STUDENTS CANVAS, C. ROBERTSON & Co. Ltd, 155 PICCADILLY LONDON’. Therefore, this self-portrait was one of the works Arnott submitted for examination between February 1925 and until the time she was kicked out for poor attendance in 1927. In 1928, Arnott married Geoffrey Robert Sutton in Northumberland, who hailed from a wealthy ship owning family, whose estate was worth the equivalent of £17,000,000 today.

With thanks to Mark Pomeroy, Archivist at the Royal Academy of Arts for kindly providing the biographical information for the artist

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⁴ Oram, *Women in History*, English Heritage

⁵ Oram, *Women in History*, English Heritage

⁶ Oram, *Women in History*, English Heritage

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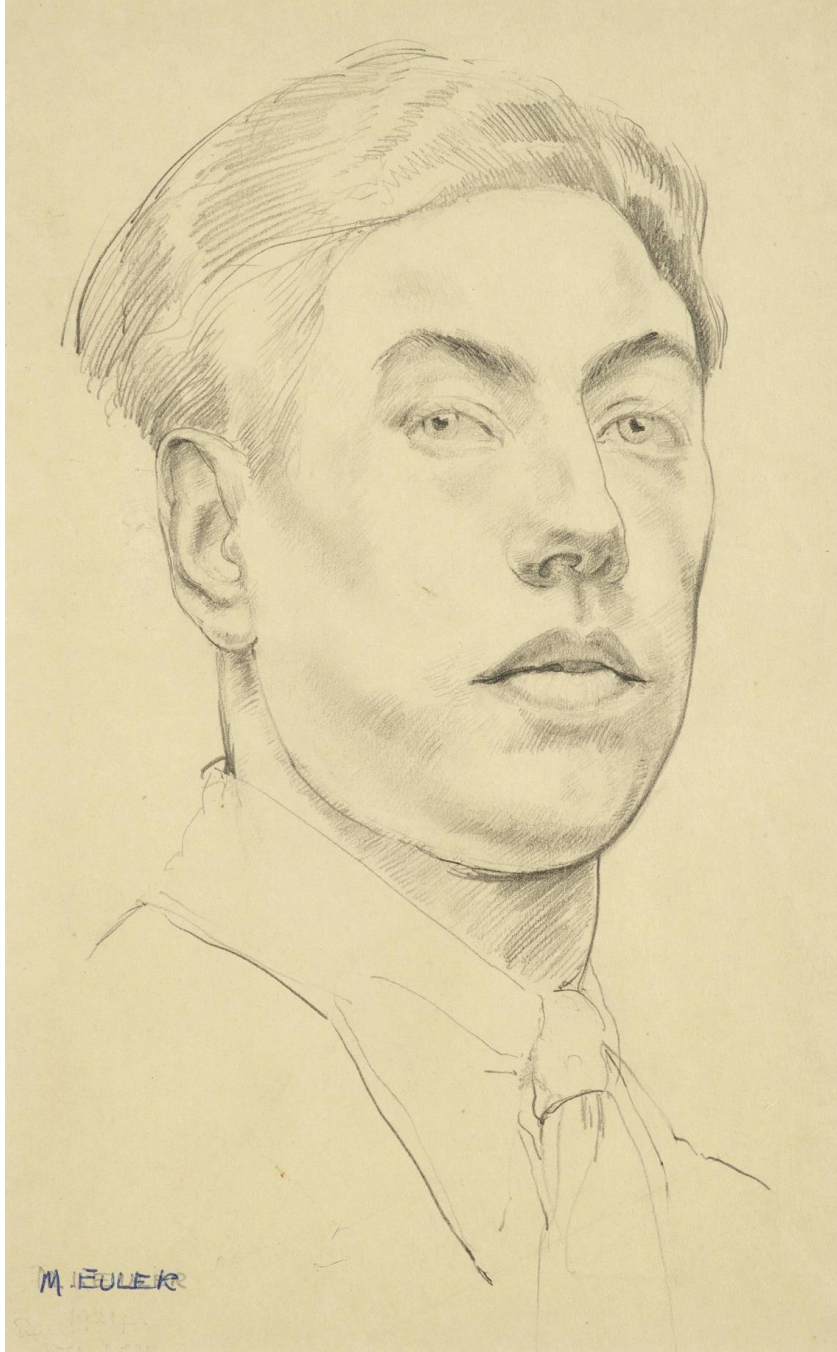


Fig.1) Margaret Ida Euler (born 1903), *Portrait of Violet Evelyn Arnott (1901 – 1953)*, pencil on paper. Signed: M. EULER (highlighted in biro pen)

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Fig.2) Two women model their masculine suits, gaiters and cloche hats in London in 1928

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Fig.3) Radclyffe Hall (right) and her partner Lady Una Trowbridge in 1927

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Fig.4) Vita Sackville-West at Sissinghurst in 1950.

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