



"Girl on a Couch" (ca 1915) by Agnes Goodsir.

Goodsir, Agnes Noyes (1864-1939)

by Elizabeth Ashburn

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An Australian portrait painter who became part of the legendary lesbian scene in Paris in the 1920s and 1930s but whose lesbianism always remained closeted, Agnes Goodsir was born in 1864 into a wealthy family in Portland, Victoria. Her father was the commissioner of customs in Melbourne and he financed her later studies in Europe.

Goodsir's initial art training was in Australia at the Bendigo School of Mines in the 1890s. Since she had begun her formal studies late (in her 30s), she decided that she needed to study overseas. In 1899 there was an "art union," or lottery, of her work in Bendigo to assist her study in Paris.

In Paris, Goodsir studied initially at the Académie Delécluse and later at the Académie Julian and Colarossi's. She lived in Paris until 1912, when she began to alternate living in London and Paris. Her work was well received and shown at the New Salon, the Salon des Indépendants, and the Société Nationale des Beaux Arts in Paris and at the Royal Academy and the Royal Institute in London.

Goodsir's work is strongly composed and drawn. Although she produced many watercolors of Paris streetscapes, she was mainly interested in oil paintings. While she also painted still lifes and interiors, her strength lay in portraiture. Among her important sitters were Count Leo Tolstoy, Dame Ellen Terry, and Sir Bertrand Russell.

Goodsir admired the art of many modernists and she was surrounded by the innovations of the avant-garde. But her work, although influenced by contemporary English and French painting, is quite conservative.

Nevertheless, Goodsir's figure studies and portraits of women (particularly her representations of the archetypal independent Parisian woman) have an erotic and radical edge. Her studies of these beautifully dressed and sophisticated women often stress their androgynous qualities, as, for example, in *Type of the Latin Quarter* (ca 1926). In *Miss G. in Pyjamas* (ca 1924), Goodsir uses male clothing to produce an intimate "morning after" portrait of a coquettish woman who is very likely a lesbian.

Goodsir was one of the few Australians elected to the Salon Nationale des Beaux Arts; and in 1924 she won the Silver medal at the Paris Salon for *The Red Cloak*.

At the age of 63 she returned in triumph to Australia to exhibit at Macquarie Galleries, Sydney, and the Fine Arts Gallery, Melbourne. In the nine months she was in Australia she was given several important portrait commissions, including one of the writer Banjo Patterson.

Despite the fact that Australia had many talented and recognized women artists at this time and many of these frequently traveled to and from Europe, the local reviewers were patronizing in their faint praise of Goodsir's "quality of restraint, for which of course, we should be grateful."

Not surprisingly, the artist never returned to provincial and conservative Australia, which lacked a climate

of tolerance for variant sexual preferences.

However, after Goodsir died in 1939, her studio model and "close companion," Mrs. Rachel Dunn, sent several of Goodsir's works back to Australia where they were placed in State and Regional Galleries.

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About the Author

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