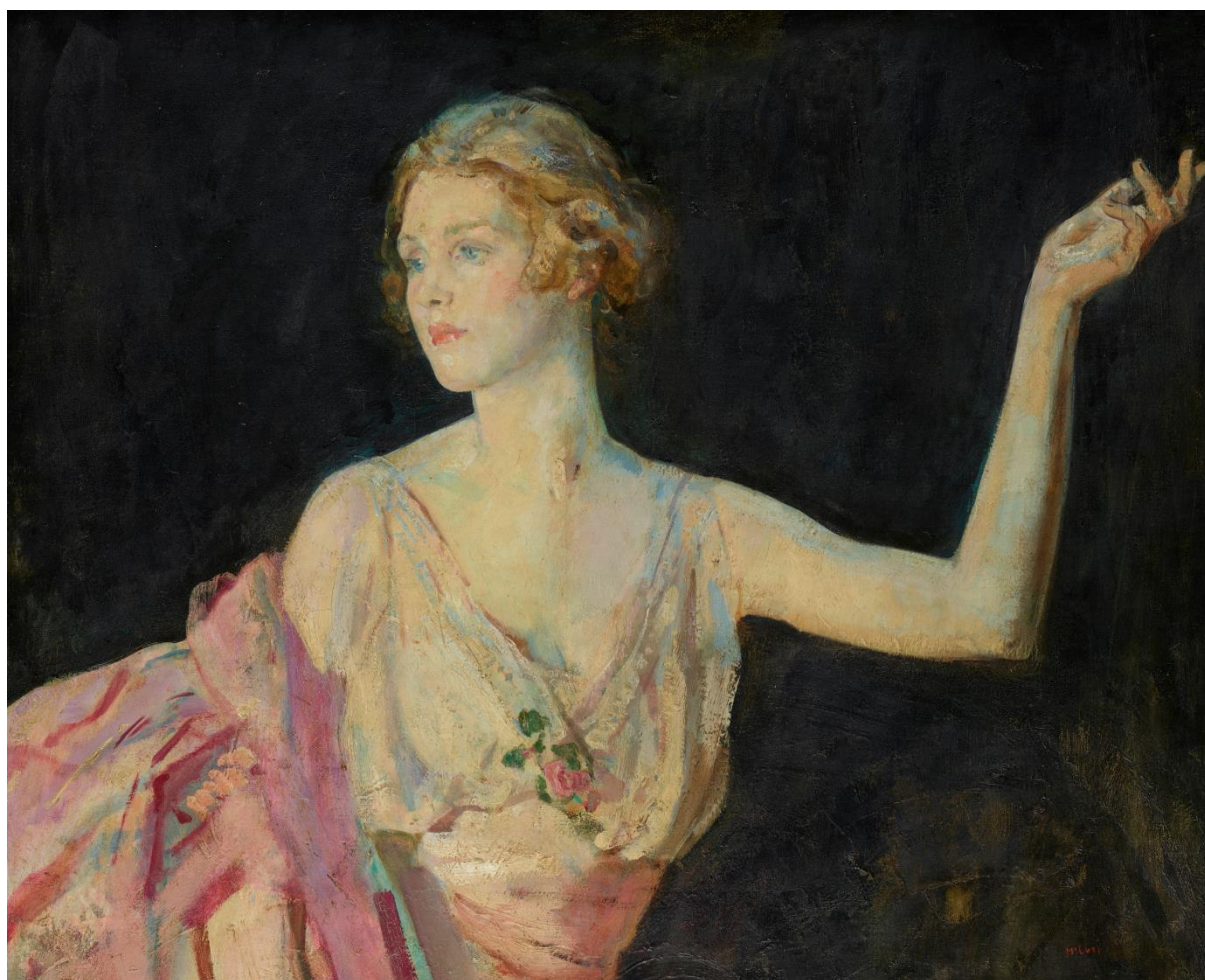




Press Release
September 2019

DIVINE PEOPLE: THE ART OF AMBROSE MCEVOY
(1877-1927)
26 November 2019 – 24 January 2020



Ambrose McEvoy (1877-1927) *Portrait of Lady Diana Cooper 'Call to Orgy'* (1918) (©Philip Mould & Company)

Philip Mould & Company will be holding a major retrospective of the work of Ambrose McEvoy ARA (1877 -1927) - the effervescent society portraitist whom art history had all but forgotten.

This is first major exhibition of the artist's work in almost fifty years and comprises over 40 works loaned by major public institutions and British private collections. 'Divine People: The Art of Ambrose McEvoy' will showcase some of the most daring and progressive portraits from the artist's pioneering oeuvre. McEvoy's subjects - often dramatically illuminated by his novel use of coloured light bulbs - have been generally overlooked in the broader history of 20th century British art, his paintings overshadowed by that of his close friend and contemporary at the Slade, Augustus John. Whereas John remains a household

name today, McEvoy has been largely forgotten despite having painted such notable figures as Winston Churchill, Lady Diana Cooper, The Hon. Lois Sturt and Prime Minister James Ramsay Macdonald.

At a time when public interest in the early-20th century has grown exponentially and modern British artists are beginning to captivate a collective demand for work that actively defied the direction taken by continental Modernism, the work of Ambrose McEvoy is ripe for re-evaluation. As an artist he straddles the margin between traditional society portraiture and gestural experimentation. The resultant works, collectively displayed here for the first time, stand as testament to McEvoy's unique and progressive vision.

James Abbott McNeill Whistler, a close family friend, encouraged the young boy to pursue an artistic career. Recognising a precocious talent in the youthful McEvoy, Whistler did all that he could to provide the aspiring painter with a sense of professional guidance. This he did by recommending he enrol at the prestigious Slade School of Fine Art which McEvoy did at the age of just 16 (though claiming he was 15). Soon after leaving the Slade, McEvoy set himself up in a small studio in Danvers Street and gained a reputation as a talented painter in oils, working in a manner undoubtedly influenced by his former mentor, Whistler. Early works, such as *The Ear-Ring* (exhibited 1911) [Tate Collection N03176 – on loan to Philip Mould & Company] exemplify this early period when McEvoy was marking himself out in the stylistic conventions of the time. It is a painting in which subject-matter takes precedence over the technique itself, which in this case is conventionally academic in approach, something that McEvoy would later abandon entirely.

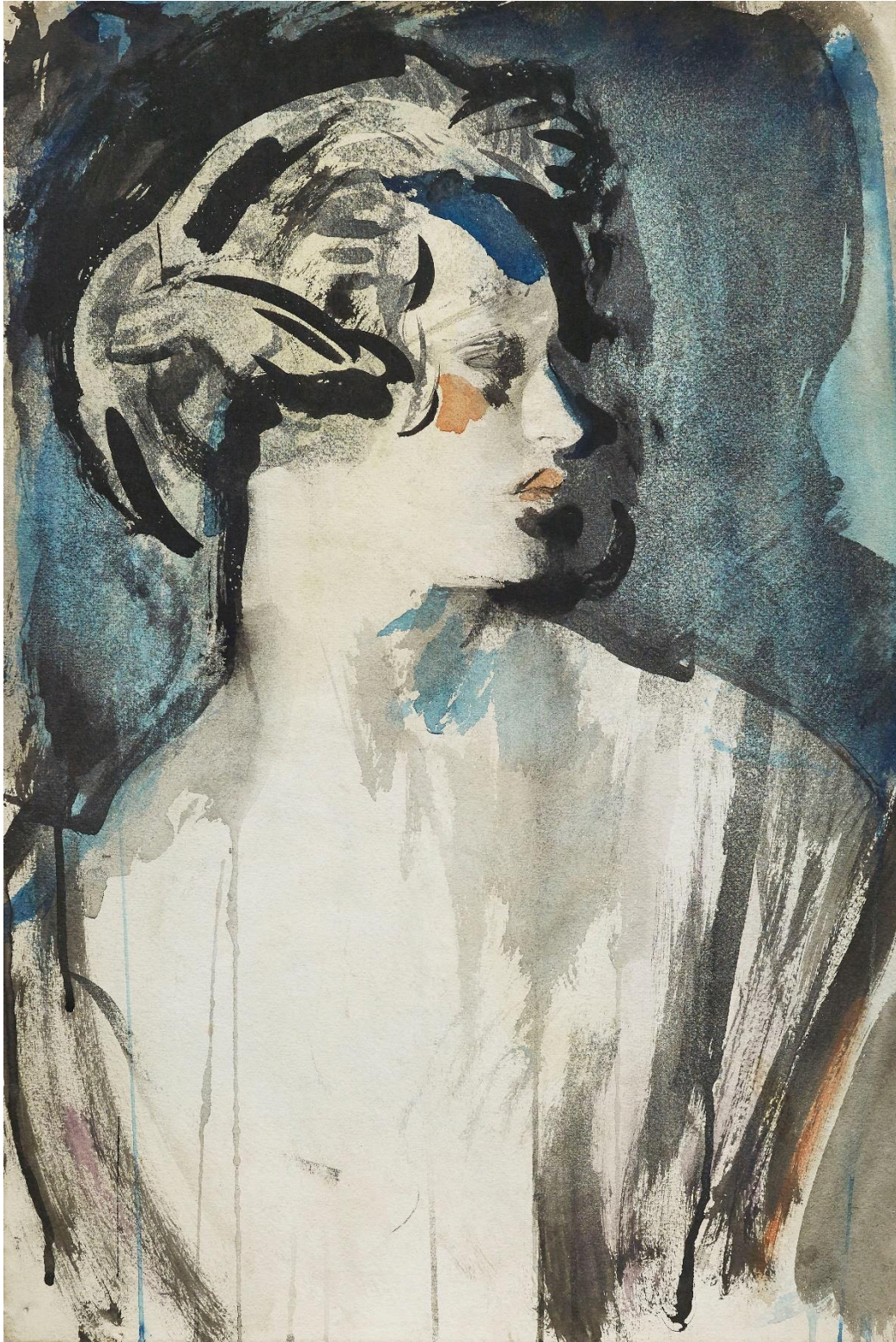
At the time of his death on 4th January 1927 Ambrose McEvoy ARA was at the pinnacle of his career. Aged 49, he had already established himself as the go-to alternative society portrait painter for England's young mercantile and industrial elite. The 'modern Gainsborough' of his day, his confidently experimental work was in high demand during the 1920s and in 1927 McEvoy had more commissions scheduled in his diary than at any other point in his career. However, by the 1950s, McEvoy's frenetic portraits of socialites, celebrities and bright young things, formerly celebrated for their free-spirited abandon, had ceased to retain their appeal to a society recovering from the aftermath of war. The frivolity and opulence that had come to characterise Edwardian England was no longer deemed an appropriate expression of the period. Instead, Britain was looking towards the future and pre-war reminders swiftly fell out of favour. This regrettably has included the work of Ambrose McEvoy. An artist who should be remembered as one of the most successful British portrait painters of the early-20th century, is instead represented proudly at a select few discerning public institutions and private collections.

At the height of his career, McEvoy's seemingly unfinished painterly technique appeared to echo the demand among certain members of British elite society for a more exuberant artistic expression of the era. Portraits of such notable socialites as Lady Diana Cooper [shown above], The Hon. Lois Sturt and The Hon. Daphne Pollen (née Baring) were revered for their sensitivity and temperament but also for their striking contemporaneity. Compared to peers such as Sir Oswald Birley, McEvoy's portraits are strikingly unorthodox.

Across the works that will be shown in our exhibition, conventionality blends with ease into the avant-garde with McEvoy's sitters appearing to discard all manner of formal etiquette as they are engulfed in a foray of frantic brushwork. Their anatomies fall away into chaotic improvisations that often verge on the purely abstract. It is rare to find comparative examples from this period and genre where a concern for figurative accuracy is in constant tension with an artist's desire to express more than the sitter's physical appearance.

Philip Mould has said:

‘Becoming reacquainted with the works of McEvoy has been startling. Art history can lose artists as well as anoint them. “Divine People” is a long overdue coming-out party for a head-turning talent of early 20th-century British portraiture.’



Ambrose McEvoy (1877-1927) *The Hon. Lois Sturt (later Viscountess Tredegar)* (1900-37), (1920) (©Philip Mould & Company)

To accompany the exhibition Philip Mould & Company will be producing a fully illustrated catalogue with accompanying essays. In addition to this, Lawrence Hendra, Head of Research at Philip Mould & Company has edited a previously unpublished biography of Ambrose McEvoy, written by Eric Akers-Douglas, 3rd Viscount Chilston. The manuscript had been thought lost but through archival research conducted by the gallery was rediscovered among a box of letters and biographical material pertaining to the artist's life and work.

The accompanying biography will be published by Paul Holberton publishing and is due for release in December this year.

See here for further details: <https://www.paulholberton.com/product-page/divine-people-the-art-and-life-of-ambrose-mcevoy-1877-1927>

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'Divine People: The Art of Ambrose McEvoy' runs 26th November 2019 – 24th January 2020

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