



AUGUSTUS JOHN (1878-1961)

Edgar 'Loben' Slade

1898

Oil on canvas

23 ½ x 19 ½ in. (59.5 x 49.5 cm)

PROVENANCE

Probably the sitter;

Jean Hornak, née Slade, by descent from the above;

Michael and Jane Thomas, acquired from the above c. early 1960s;

Private collection, by descent from the above;

Olympia, London, 10 June 2026, lot 20;

Philip Mould and Company, London, acquired from the above.

EXHIBITIONS

Possibly London, Wilton Gallery, *Drawings by E.A. Slade, Paintings by Carl Grönewald*, December 1961.

PHILIP MOULD

& COMPANY



Thought to have been painted when Augustus John was twenty, on the eve of his first formal portrait commission, this portrait of his friend Edgar 'Loben' Slade dates from a transitional moment in the artist's early career. John would go on to become one of the most prominent British artists of the early twentieth century, celebrated above all for his daring portraits.

John entered the Slade School of Fine Art in 1894 and rapidly distinguished himself, becoming the outstanding pupil of the formidable drawing master Henry Tonks. Yet the commanding and conspicuously bohemian figure admired today was still in formation [fig. 1]. In fact, accounts of John's student years describe a comparatively reserved young man whose personality and art altered markedly during his final years at the school.[1]

A critical moment came in the summer of 1897, when John was seriously injured after striking his head on a submerged rock while swimming near Tenby. Later accounts, drawing in part on the recollections of his Slade teacher Henry Tonks, associated the lengthy convalescence that followed with a marked change in both John's manner and his work. Contemporary scholars have rightly been more cautious about assigning the accident itself a causal role – even John himself declared '*I was in no way changed*' [2] – but what is clear is that John returned to the Slade for the 1897–98 session with a new assurance. The formerly reserved and methodical student became increasingly unconventional, and his draughtsmanship began to show more clearly the signs of freedom and confidence that would soon establish his reputation.[3]

This portrait of Edgar 'Loben' Slade, nephew of Felix Slade, the famous collector and benefactor who founded the eponymous art school, was painted at precisely this moment of transition. A label on the reverse of this work records that John painted Loben '*the evening before his first portrait commission*'. John's first formal commission is documented in 1898, for an elderly woman living in Eaton Square [fig. 2].

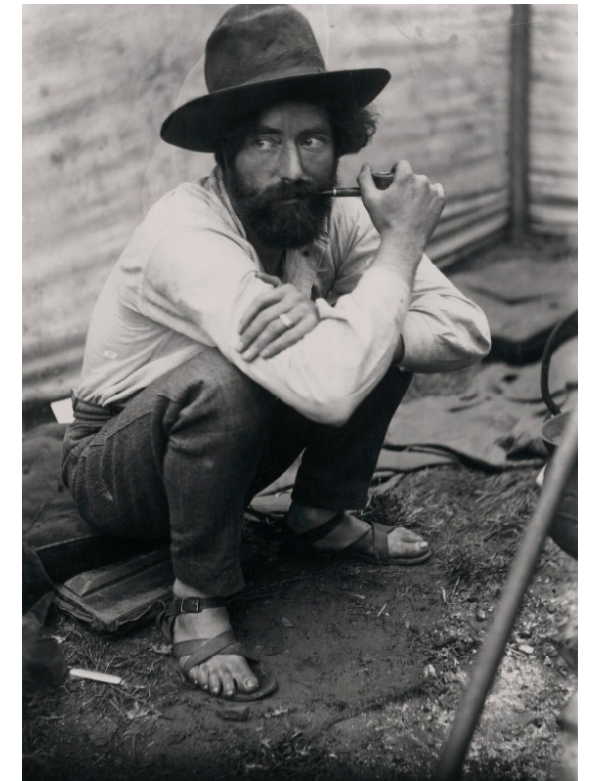


Fig. 1 | Charles F. Slade, *Augustus John*, 1909. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Fig. 2 | Augustus John, *An Old Lady*, 1898-1899. Tate Britain, London.



John's handling of Loben's portrait is notably freer than in his more formal portraits of the period. His dark coat and loosely described necktie merge into a rapidly worked brown ground, with areas of ground left boldly visible and deliberately unresolved. By contrast, Loben's features are built up in denser passages of paint, bringing the face into sharper focus. This contrast between an intensely observed head and a more vigorous, loosely handled body and background would become increasingly characteristic of John's portraiture, lending many of his later sitters the striking psychological presence for which he became renowned.

Loben entered the Slade in 1898, studying under Tonks, just as John was approaching the end of his studies that same year. Their friendship continued when Loben later married Jessie McNeill, sister of John's muse Dorelia, and it is thought that this work remained in Loben's possession until his death. Both a poignant record of friendship and a notable work within the early oeuvre of one of Britain's most acclaimed painters, this portrait is an interesting survival.

[1] Malcome Easton and Michael Holroyd (1975), *The Art of Augustus John*. Kent: Westerham Press Limited, p.1-2.

[2] Augustus John quoted in David Boyd Haycock, (2023) *Brilliant Destiny: The Age of Augustus John*. London: Lund Humphries, p.39.

[3] David Boyd Haycock, (2023) *Brilliant Destiny: The Age of Augustus John*. London: Lund Humphries, p.36-39.