**CDA7: Augustus-John**

**‘Romantic, Daring, Scandalous’: Reassessing Augustus John at Amgueddfa Cymru**—**Museum Wales**

**How to apply and further details:**

**Supervisors**

* Dr Grace Brockington (University of Bristol, g.brockington@bris.ac.uk)
* Dr Samuel Raybone (Prifysgol Aberystwyth University, sar69@aber.ac.uk)
* Nicholas Thornton (Amgueddfa Cymru—Museum Wales, nicholas.thornton@museumwales.uk)

Grace Brockington is a specialist in British art, alternative modernisms, and Anglo-European cultural networks in the C19th and C20th. She was guest curator for the exhibition *Gaudier-Brzeska: Disputing the Earth* (RWA, Bristol, 2019); and collaborated with Impermanence Dance Theatre and *British Art Studies* to make a film and virtual exhibition about experimental theatre in the First World War ([*Theatres of War*](https://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-11), 2019). She has supervised eleven PhDs to completion, three of them CDAs, including one with Nicholas Thornton at Amgueddfa Cymru on the subject of Graham Sutherland. Current PhDs under her supervision include studies of Laura Knight, Stanislawa de Karlowska, William Nicholson, and Gwen John (as a CDA with Amgueddfa Cymru).

Samuel Raybone is a specialist in the history and historiography of Impressionism, nineteenth-century photography, and ephemera (transient, disposable images like postage stamps, restaurant menus, and trade cards). He takes an interest in critical theory, most recently Walter Benjamin's writings on modern historicity, temporality, and aesthetics. His book, [*Gustave Caillebotte as Worker, Collector, Painter*](https://www.bloomsbury.com/uk/gustave-caillebotte-as-worker-collector-painter-9781501339943/) re-interprets Caillebotte’s career by foregrounding his compulsions to work and to collect. His present research examines transnational and decolonial approaches to Impressionism, focusing on the relationships between transnational circuits and national imaginaries in the collection, display, and reception of Impressionism in Wales; and ephemera as evidence for an alternative aesthetics of modernity.

Nicholas Thornton has worked as a museum curator for over 20 years. Since 2008 he has been Head of Fine Art at Amgueddfa Cymru—Museum Wales, where he has particular responsibility for researching and developing the Museum’s modern and contemporary collections. He has curated a wide range of displays and exhibitions, most recently *David Nash: Sculpture through the Seasons* (2019-20). He has co-supervised four CDAs and supported students’ research by developing opportunities for wider public engagement through associated displays, publications and events.

**Subject**

Augustus John (1878–1961) was a Welsh artist whose experimental technique early in his career, charismatic personality and fascination with Bohemian subjects marked him out as a leader in his generation: ‘romantic, daring, scandalous and brilliant’, as the artist Paul Nash remembered (Nash 1949). However, aspects of his achievement have become problematic as critics increasingly notice his macho posturing, decline into traditional portrait painting, and othering of Romany communities and Jamaican people of colour. The John collection at Amgueddfa Cymru—Museum Wales, the largest and most comprehensive collection of his work in existence, presents a unique opportunity to confront these issues, bringing new material to bear on debates which are critical to revisionist histories of modernism, as well as changing perceptions of this particular artist. The project will expand the discussion about John, for example, by re-examining his relationship with his homeland, re-evaluating his place within global modernisms, and devoting new attention to his remarkable practice as a draughtsperson and print-maker. It will fill a gap in Amgueddfa Cymru’s understanding of one of its major holdings at the point when it is being digitalised in its entirety, and made accessible for the first time on a new platform to be launched in 2023; and it will provide a blueprint for the management of other collections which present similar ethical challenges.

**Research questions and methods**

This project is motivated by two main questions: ‘How might an examination of the Augustus John collection at Amgueddfa Cymru change the way we think about this artist?’ and ‘How might such a reappraisal inform the curation of other problematic collections?’ The CDA will give the student the necessary freedom to develop and refine their own research questions, but given the strengths of the collection and the state of the research field, we would encourage them to explore at least one of the following areas:

1. **Trajectory**: How might a revised interpretation of John’s development across his whole career inform ongoing critiques of modernism?
2. **Geography**: How does John’s habit of revisiting the places that mattered to him – Gwynedd, Dorset, Provence – contribute to an expanded concept of Welsh (inter)nationalism?
3. **Materiality**: John was a prolific print-maker but very little has been written about his etchings. What does the relationship between these and his work in other media reveal about his artistic process?
4. **Museology**: How might scrutiny of this and other problematic modernist collections help museums to engage with marginalised communities?

This project is based on large-scale, systematic archival research. The approach to the archive will be both quantitative and qualitative: the student will survey the whole collection in order to identify trends, rather than starting with preconceived priorities. They will then select material which is representative of those trends. These case-studies will draw on curatorial methods of object analysis, display and interpretation (particularly where they feed into displays or online content curated or interpreted by the student, and through engagement with John’s Jamaican art as part of the Museum’s work of decolonisation);and on art-historical methodologies to give conceptual rigour to the contextualisation of those objects, including post-colonialism (addressing John’s approach to marginalised communities), geography and transnationalism (Wales in its global contexts) and materialities (making and media).

**Research context**

Scholarship and exhibitions have tended to celebrate John’s early experimental work rather than examining his career in the round (Tate 2004, Poole Museum 2018, Lady Lever Art Gallery 2021). This project looks to Lisa Tickner’s ground-breaking essay (Tickner 2000), which confronts the problem of John’s ‘uneven production’ and demonstrates how his ‘equivocal status as a “modern”’ opens new lines of enquiry by challenging assumptions about how modernism is defined and valued. As Tickner showed in her account of ‘the local “Orientalism” ’ of Romany scholarship in the early C20th, research on John must respond to the imperative to decentre, decolonise and pluralise the map of modern art. This project’s museological aims should be seen in the context of Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, and the drive by museums and universities to support these movements through exhibitions and research. There is a need for institutions to respond to wider societal change and expectations, which in turn requires academic and curatorial re-evaluation of collections.

**Main resources/collections in this area**

There are significant holdings of John’s work in Wales. The Augustus John collection at Amgeddfa Cymu contains 134 oils and 1261 prints and drawings. In Aberystwyth, the Llyfrgell Genedlaethol Cymru | National Library of Wales holds 30 volumes of John’s letters and manuscripts, in addition to being a legal deposit library, and conserves a significant collection of artworks and images relating to Wales, including by John. The Aberystwyth University School of Art Museum and Galleries also has a strong collection of modern Welsh and European art, including 27 prints by John. The student may also wish to consult other collections with relevant material, such as Tate Britain gallery and archives, the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, and the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.

**Outputs and outcomes**

The student will produce a thesis of ca. 80,000 words. As an intrinsic part of this *collaborative* doctoral project, s/he will have the opportunity to contribute directly to Amgueddfa Cymru’s public programmes. This could include rethinking how John is displayed and interpreted at the Museum, where his work often provides a bridge between European modernism and modern Welsh art. There is potential to support the Museum’s work with communities of relevance to decolonise its collections, in particular with reference to John’s paintings and drawings of black sitters produced in Jamaica in 1937 which have largely remained in storage since being acquired in 1972. There will also be opportunities to develop online access to the John collection through contributing blogs and articles, and improving and recontextualising public-facing catalogue entries. Commencing autumn 2022, Thornton and Brockington are co-supervising a CDA exploring the Gwen John collection at Amgueddfa Cymru. The two studentships examining the John siblings in parallel would enable a coordinated re-evaluation of their art, challenging what Lisa Tickner has termed ‘the Augustus-and-Gwen myth’.

**Skills development and employability**

Training will be prioritised early in the studentship, with a focus on use of the Museum’s collections database, accessing works in store and object handling. Thereafter training needs will be reviewed at least annually at team meetings and at transition points in the project. The student will work alongside a curatorial team responsible for an internationally important collection and gain experience of all aspects of curation, including developing new gallery displays and online content. The doctoral training programme at Amgueddfa Cymru – which currently supports 20 CDAs – encourages placements with other relevant organisations to enhance development beyond the immediate research project. This ensures that the student acquires the skills, experience and networks to pursue a career in museums, galleries or the wider heritage and visual arts sector as well as in academia.