

AN ARTIST IN WARTIME

Nicola Gauld

The devastating impact of World War Two on Coventry has been well-documented. Less familiar is the part the city's women played during this conflict. The work of female war artists has also been overlooked but Laura Knight brilliantly captured the contribution of women to the war effort and the defence of Coventry.



A Balloon Site, Coventry, Dame Laura Knight, 1942.



Barrage Balloon Workers of Coventry, Dame Laura Knight, 1942.

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the city's airfield to raise barrage balloons. The balloons were designed to force enemy bomber planes to fly above 5,000 feet, thereby denying low-level airspace and reducing the accuracy of the bombs.

These huge balloons, measuring on average 19 metres in length and over 7 metres in diameter, were floated up into the sky on strong weighted cables, making it possible for the workers on the ground to control the height that the balloon eventually reached. The employment of women to operate the balloons began in early 1941; it was found that fourteen women could replace a ten-man team.

In Knight's drawing one of the Air Force workers is shown reaching up to attach weights to the balloon, with Coventry's skyline hinted at in the distance. This drawing was a preparatory sketch for a large oil painting, *A Balloon Site, Coventry*, part of the Imperial War Museum's collection. Although small and understated, *Barrage Balloon Workers of Coventry* has tremendous impact and Knight celebrates the crucial role women were playing in fighting the enemy. In so doing, she also illustrated that women like her were contributing to the war effort in other ways. ●

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Further Reading

Laura Knight, *The Magic of a Line: The Autobiography of Laura Knight* (William Kimber, 1965).

Kathleen Palmer, *Women War Artists* (Tate Publishing, 2011).

Dame Laura Knight: The Official Website: www.damelauraknight.com

For a film about another Midlands artist, Florence Camm, visit our website at www.historywm.com

By the outbreak of war in 1939, Derbyshire-born Dame Laura Knight (1877–1970), was an established artist, arguably better known than her husband, fellow artist Harold Knight, and was famous for painting ballet dancers and circus acts. She was also the first female artist to become a full Royal Academician since Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser in 1768.

Used to working in a male-dominated field, Knight was employed by the Ministry of Information and awarded commissions by the War Artists Advisory Committee, led by Sir Kenneth Clark, then Director of the National Gallery.

During the Second World War official war artists were employed by the government for information or propaganda purposes to record various aspects of conflict both at home and on the frontline. It was understood by the government that 'a war so epic in its scope by land, sea and air, and so detailed and complex in its mechanism, requires interpreting by artists'.

Barrage Balloon Workers of Coventry

Knight's paintings and drawings focused attention on women's contribution to the war effort on the home front. In *Barrage Balloon Workers of Coventry*, Knight shows members of the Women's Auxiliary Air Force who worked at