

***Sculpting Lives* podcast transcript**

Series 2, Episode 1: Dora Gordine

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- Fran Lloyd: She was astoundingly good at ensuring that her work went into all of the key sculpture venues.
- Cathie Pilkington: She kind of feels all around you, not just her work, but the fact that she's designed that house and the whole lifestyle. I mean, it's like an installation.
- Johnathan Black: You'd count the number of well known female sculptors on both hands and you'd probably have a few fingers spare.
- Jo Baring: Hello and welcome to Sculpting Lives, a podcast with me, Jo Baring.
- Sarah Turner: And me, Sarah Turner.
- Jo Baring: Welcome to series two. We're very excited to be here, but a lot has happened since we released series one, hasn't it, Sarah?
- Sarah Turner: It has. Yeah, we released series one last year in March, 2020 and lockdown happened soon after that, but sculpture has also hit the headlines. There are a lot of questions about its role in the public realm and we felt for Sculpting Lives that there was still lots of unfinished business, still lots of questions to ask, issues to raise and themes to explore about women working in sculpture.
- Jo Baring: In this episode, I'm really excited about our first episode, because we are going to be delving into the life and work of someone called Dora Gordine. Now, when she died in 1991, she was a recluse, she'd really fallen out of the histories of modern sculpture in Britain, not well known at all, but in 1938, she'd been hailed as possibly the finest woman sculptor in the world. She was born in Latvia in 1885, but as you will hear, her biography is somewhat enigmatic and subject to change, and she was actually responsible for a lot of that, which is really interesting in terms of how she framed herself as a sculptor.
- Sarah Turner: And so to find out more about her work, we went to Dorich House, the studio home that she built with her third husband, Richard Hare. He

was a diplomat and art collector. And that really stands as a testament to her ambitions as a professional and public sculptor and it's now a museum that you can visit.

Jo, we're stood on the roof terrace of Dorich House in Kingston, an amazing building and we are here to find out more about the life and career of the sculptor Dora Gordine.

Jo Baring: That's right. So we've had a little Sculpting Lives field trip. So as you say, we're stood on the roof terrace of somewhere called Dorich House.

Sarah Turner: The name Dorich is a conflation of her name, Dora, and that of her husband, Richard Hare, who was a scholar and a researcher on Russian art and they had an incredible collection of Russian art and artefacts which they homed here along with studios and working places for Dora to make her portrait busts and her other sculptures.

Jo Baring: What's so interesting about it is that actually we're up on the top but there's the domestic arrangements, which actually only take up a very small amount of the building. So the ground floor and the first floors are dedicated to her as a sculptor.

Sarah Turner: It's like a temple to sculpture.

Jo Baring: It is. Well, it's a real statement of intent, isn't it?

Sarah Turner: Yeah, huge rooms, very tall ceilings, massive windows to let that light in so that she could invite people here to sit for their portraits, that she could work in plaster and really capture their likenesses. So it was a real space dedicated to her practise as a sculptor.

Jo Baring: What's also absolutely fascinating about Dora is that normally when we start these Sculpting Lives episodes, we'd give you a bit of biography, set the scene a bit. The thing about Dora is that she is impossible to pin down. So she changes her date of birth. She was married three times and on each successive marriage certificate she lops off a few years of her age, which I love, and also there's kind of differentiation in where she was born, which is absolutely fascinating, isn't it, Sarah?

Sarah Turner: Yeah, absolutely. And so we spoke to Fran Lloyd who is professor at Kingston University to ask her to explain to us a little bit more about Gordine's formation as an artist and as a sculptor.

Jo Baring: When we started researching Dora, we were intrigued by the mystery around her biography because the details are so sketchy. There's so

many varying stories. How much of that was perpetuated and encouraged by Dora herself?

Fran Lloyd:

Oh, I think a lot of it. And indeed that was one of the really difficult things about the research because Dora Gordine had a number of stories about her life. She didn't make reference to Estonia although she was born in Latvia, which was then part of the Russian empire and then they moved to Estonia, to Tallinn or Revel as it was then. She didn't make reference to that and to her family; instead she'd make reference to being in St. Petersburg, being in music, art, meeting the Ballet Russe and so forth, Stories of fleeing from the Bolsheviks. She deliberately kept all those elements of her life rather vague. That's interesting. Why? We've debated this a lot and maybe a lot of it is about if you're going to propel yourself into the sort of the heart of Europe, into Paris to make a reputation, Estonia, so that's a bit more unknown Russia if you are thinking early 1920s. Of course everyone's aware of the Russian revolution. There was great interest obviously in Russians that had fled the country and the Czarist family indeed and their survival.

So Russia came to be, I think, quite an easy shorthand for her. Clearly this was somebody that was absolutely set on being an artist and sculptor and also I think if we look across other sculptors of that time, it's to Paris they went for training. She'd been to Paris before. She'd been to Berlin. Undoubtedly she had been to St. Petersburg as well. So this is someone used to travelling, coming from a well off middle class family, had the money to be able to do that and to support their education. So I think Paris was natural because you had to learn, if you like, the profession in a studio. So clearly that's where she set herself as the centre of the art world in training, which I think's right because if you compare it to the UK at that time it's one of the things that a lot of women of her generation have referenced is the lack of being able to have studio facilities. So Paris it was.

Sarah Turner:

So what we can hear there is Fran telling us that Gordine has ambitions for her career from a very early age and she sets her sights on Paris which is then the heart of the European art world and it's in Paris that she builds a first her studio homes and these are purpose built studio home spaces made for sculptural production. She got the leading modernist architect of the day, Auguste Perret, to design a really substantial building for her. And Fran now is going to tell us about how Gordine used the studio home to set the stage for creating her artistic identity.

Fran Lloyd:

On one side was her modelling studio where she would work from the live model and then underneath the windows you'd open back these wooden shutters so the sculpture could be lowered up and down to the

street level when it's going out to the Foundry, perfectly designed. So you've got your working section. She also has on the same level another display section. So when visitors come they can see both the work she's done but also her work in progress and she also had then the kind of messier plaster studio, another studio on that floor. And then when you go to the next floor then there's your private accommodation, much smaller.

Now that model was perfect for a woman sculptor. It overcomes reliance on galleries to show your work. Obviously she was really active on that front, but it allows her a gallery space. It allows to show her as a professional sculptor.

Sarah Turner: So then did she take those ideas and transfer them and rework them for Dorich House?

Fran Lloyd: Very much so. Dorich House when you go there, it's really striking. I mean, it's striking because it's this tall from the outside rather austere four levels building. Difficult quite where you place it. It's certainly not an art nouveau at all. There's some details there. It's a sort of modernist, rather austere building entirely built for sculptural production. It's all so carefully devised and that goes back to, I think, the nature of sculpture. She's working with heavy pieces so that it's carefully designed so that when she's working in the studio on the first floor with the model and the plaster cast and clay, then she has a lift that takes the sculpture down to the ground floor to of the plaster room and back up and of course the exit, as I've said, out from the plaster room. So all for ease of production. It's really well thought through.

Jo Baring: So we've really got a sense of how Gordine set herself up as a sculptor, particularly in terms of her reputation to the outside world. What about the work itself? How does that relate to what else is going on at sculpture at the time? What's important about Gordine is that she always models in clay. She was a figurative sculptor and she was particularly well known for her portraiture. She made a lot of money from her portrait work. She was really fastidious about process and choosing her foundries, choosing her patternner. compared to the work that her peers are making, so if you think at the time, there's that vogue for direct carving, you've got people like Henry Moore and Barbara Hepworth exploring abstraction, you can see why Dora slightly then is on the outside of the avant-garde.

Sarah Turner: And she really wanted people to look at her work. She said, "If people want to know me, let them look at my sculpture because words are not my medium at all. It is sculpture that's my medium." We talked to

Jonathan Black, senior research fellow at Kingston University to tell us more about her work.

Jo Baring: Can we talk a little bit about her style as a sculptor, can you describe it to us?

Johnathan Black: Well, she was very loyal, I think. She didn't change much over the years. I think she arrived in Paris in the mid 1920s, about 1924 and very quickly fastened upon as her exemplar and model the work of Aristide Maillol and also related to some of contemporaries, Joseph Bernard], Charles Despiau and to extent, Paul Landowski who all sort of contemporaries, friends, neighbours of Dora's in Montparnasse. But it was particularly Maillol whose example that she chose to emulate in a sort of refined, paired down, streamlined classicism which you can associate with Maillol from before the first world war, but really became fashion in the 1920s around the time of the art deco exhibition in 1925.

Rather akin to Maillol, Dora throughout a career paid special attention to surface finish and texture and the patterner of her sculpture that she made very faithful to bronze too. She was always a modeller, not a carver even though she was encouraged to take up wood and stone carving by some of her British contemporary sculptor friends such as Eric Kennington, but she remained faithful to the idea that up to date modern sculptor was a modeller and worked in clay, plaster and bronze. And she was certainly aware of other artists like Hepworth and Moore and she was aware that there was certainly in France by the late 1920s she was aware that there was a sort of vogue for stone carving or wood carving. But when she was once interviewed on this question she said in the thirties that she still modelling in clay for casting in bronze as a much more still modern and contemporary practise and that she thought that stone carving was just too time consuming.

I think it's very interesting that she thought in relation to modern mass production techniques, that the art world should try and emulate some of that as opposed to spending years on one particular commission. She thought it was sort of a more modern and up to date to have a number of commissions or projects on the go but working in bronze.

Jo Baring: There are different strands within her work, but particularly portraiture seems to be something that she did throughout her practise. Can you tell us about the importance portraiture to her work?

Johnathan Black: I think it's central really to the emergence of her people taking notice of her from the 1925 when she exhibited her portrait of a Chinese gentleman and later known as the Chinese philosopher, Mr. Chia-Chu

Chang who later turned out to be more the Chinese banker. He became a prominent member the Nationalist Banker of China by the late thirties. But the head of him that was exhibited in National Salon in 1925 was the work that first made people pay attention to her and to attract very admiring criticism and that she was an artist to look out for.

So this was something that Dora specialised in quite early on in her career and certainly portraiture dominated her first solo exhibition that she had at the Leicester Galleries in October, 1928. And a lot of the critics of the time, Konody and Rutter and Reggie Wilensky [00:00:16:25] all noted that she had this particular talent for portraiture.

Jo Baring:

So Jonathan mentions that, that Gordine had an important exhibition at the Leicester Galleries. Now the Lester galleries is a really crucial positioning for Gordine, just points to how clever she is at positioning herself and where her work is seen. So at this time, the Leicester Galleries are one of the leading galleries, particularly for modern sculpture. They represent people like Epstein. Now at the same time, Tate acquires a piece called Mongolian Head in 1928 which apparently is the first work by a living woman sculptor to enter the national collection. But how it got there is absolutely fascinating and it really points to how good Dora is at the behind the scenes work about getting her work into institutions and networks and collectors.

The piece was gifted to the Tate by the diplomat and Russian art scholar, Richard Hare who actually goes on to become her third husband.

Sarah Turner:

And at the time of the Leicester Galleries show that you mentioned Jo. She's living in Paris still, but suddenly she ups sticks and she goes to Singapore and that's on a tip off that there are some lucrative portrait commissions to be had, especially from the municipality of Singapore. And so she sets up another studio home. She leaves behind that one that she's just had designed by Perret in Paris and sets up a home in Singapore. And she lives there for five years, travelling extensively around the Southeast Asia region and she also marries again, this time to someone called George Garlick, who's an art collector and a doctor and she also gets a British passport through that marriage.

While she's there in Singapore she starts making a series of sculpted heads of people that she's seen on her travels in Southeast Asia when she's going to places like Thailand and Bali, Hong Kong and these heads are quite a problematic group of sculptures to deal with. They're often given generic titles. Jo, you mentioned the one Mongolian Head. We don't know who that person is. They're not given their name. So

their identity has fallen out of art history. We just don't know much about them.

So she makes these groups of rather stereotyped, racialized depictions of people and it is a difficult body of material to work with and it's something that we spoke to the artist and curator and researcher, Erika Tan, who's looking at these sculpted heads, many of which are now in Dorich House and Erika is working on a project for Kingston University where she's a fellow researcher in residence to discuss this more controversial area of Gordine's practise.

And we are stood with you in Dora Gordine's modelling studio, quite an incredible space with these really high ceilings, this huge window letting in the light, a platform where she could sit and where sitters could sit. But tell us how you first encountered Gordine's work?

Erika Tan: It was a bit of an accident actually. I didn't actually know about Gordine, but I went for an interview for the Stanley Picker Fellowship and in the interview we were talking about other things. I was talking about Singapore because that's where I'm from and David the director at Stanley Picker said, "Oh, and we've got friends in Singapore." And I thought, what did that mean? And that led to the conversation about Dora and then realising that Dora Gordine was one of the first women to be commissioned to make artwork for Singapore, for the Singapore context by the colonial government. And that's where it sort of started in a way, seeing a connection to Singapore, which is always probably what I'm looking for.

Jo Baring: So we're going up into their apartment now, Erika.

Erika Tan: Yeah, we're making the journey from the sort of public space that was for showing people her work up into the private space and it changes dramatically from those high ceilings, all that light coming through to something much more intimate. But for me, sort of quite compelling and a surprise was walking into her room, her house and seeing these Chinese moon gate doors, circular doors in her house with sliding wooden panels and a lot of the furnishing and furniture coming from China. And I know some of it is not original, but in the early photographs you can see that she's got a lot of material in her life that she's collected and brought back from she'd call the East or Asia.

Jo Baring: Because she travelled hugely, didn't she?

Erika Tan: She travelled a lot. And for me, the key thing I was interested in was the five years that she spent based in Singapore and I think she very much used it as a base to go to the rest of Southeast Asia. The history of her work is really interesting for me because... We can go

downstairs later on and have a look at it, the Chinese Head, which is also called the Chinese Philosopher, the Chinese Art Historian, the Chinaman. It's got several names. It was the piece of work that seemed to catapult her into the art world. She became well known for that piece. There's statements of her being a genius in making that piece. And then from there she goes to Singapore and gets these commissions. She made four pieces for the Singapore context.

Jo Baring: We've come into the gallery. Very squeaky floors. Tell us, Erika, what should we look looking at now?

Erika Tan: One of the things that comes through when you look at the Asian heads is often the Asian heads don't have names whereas most of the other heads in this room that are of European, Caucasian, White subjects will have a name, and so they're contextualised, whereas the heads are usually labelled in terms of their ethnic origin.

Jo Baring: Dorich House isn't just a museum, it's also a site of contemporary intervention, which makes it really exciting. There's a residency series there which supports women's sculptors and many of whom have grappled with Gordine's complex and controversial histories and biographies. We spoke to the first resident, the sculptor Cathie Pilkington who tells us how she tested out the space.

Cathie Pilkingt...: The idea was that I would actually set up my own studio in Dora's studio and work there and kind of be her. I think that that residency really it becomes about channelling Dora because she kind of feels all around you, not just her work, but the fact that she's designed that house and the whole lifestyle. It's like an installation, isn't it? An installation of her whole life.

Jo Baring: And a performance in a way [crosstalk 00:23:46].

Cathie Pilkingt...: Yeah.

Jo Baring: Amazing.

Cathie Pilkingt...: And interesting that that house is it's very large at the bottom where the making happens and then it gets smaller towards the top, so the living quarters are not given much priority.

Jo Baring: And how did you respond to the actual work that she had made? What are your feeling about her work as a contemporary sculptor?

Cathie Pilkingt...: I find her work deeply problematic. I think that some of the ways that she looks at different ethnic physiognomy sort of like a topology that I think in contemporary life it feels bordering on a racist position and the

work is they're types. They don't seem to be people. She purports. She says they're portraits but they feel very much like closed object types, they feel generic and it's interesting thinking about her in the light of what was going on in modernism. If you think about what Brancusi was doing with his Sleeping Muse and able to deal with that, the question of the object, subject division and the self-contained object and then you look at what she's doing. They don't feel real to me. They feel like a surface of something and an effect. Now and again something happens with them but they're so overtaken with their appearance, with something that is very on the surface.

In the first floor of Dorich House we move up from the studio space into the gallery space. The gallery space is adjacent to Dora's studio and it's a bronze gallery. And I installed one of my figures called Twinkle in the bronze gallery and Twinkle is a figure who is barely there. She's almost like a spirit even though she's made of bronze. She's tiny and some of her body parts are made of fabric. So she looks like she's standing on these tiny little feet and she's standing against the Javanese Dancer who's completely opposite, this huge mighty figure who's very sure of herself and I found that quite interesting putting Twinkle in there in her questioning, doubtful state against these very, very determinedly, confident sculptures which I felt were kind of empty.

Jo Baring: And were you responding to the way that Gordine used bronze, the way that she was really interested in pattern and the... She talks about colour and the way that bronze actually isn't ever one finish or you can manipulate the colour. Is that something as well that you were thinking about materiality through Gordine whilst you were there?

Cathie Pilkington...: Yeah. I think what was interesting about some of Gordine's work is that she does actually... Because there's that whole question about European traditions of materiality where you don't think because a figure is made in black bronze that it's a black person or that if they're in white marble they're a White person, you just look at it as material and there's that huge sort of discussion about polychrome sculpture and the way that bronze can be used in anthropology museums to talk about race and colour. And she does actually start to do some of that.

Sarah Turner: And we also asked Erika Tan to tell us more about how Gordine was weaving herself into Tan's own work. Erika's currently making a film about four women artists that includes Gordine, the artist Georgette Chen, the sculptor Kim Lim who we featured in series one of Sculpting Lives and Erika's mother who is also an artist.

Erika Tan: The project is really about women and their legacies, their art practise in relationship to ideas of reproduction as well. Dora Gordine has some nice statements where she says all these sculptures are her children. I think Georgette Chen also has a kind of idea of art practise as a kind of way of reproducing herself or conscious of her legacy. The legacy of Dora Gordine's house, the fact that she wanted her house to be turned into a museum after her death I think is really interesting. She was already thinking ahead of how her life would be captured here. But there's a project at the moment here which is about how the house became a squat. So not everything went to plan and also lots of material got lost during that period of time.

Sarah Turner: So there Erika mentioned the Squatters Years project and we spoke to the project coordinator for the Squatters Years at Dorich House, Helena Bonett. And Helena has also done a PhD on the studio home of Barbara Hepworth.

Did anyone who was squatting know about Gordine or have a connection to her or was that sort of creativity really just felt through the fact that this was an artistic space? It had obviously been a studio because it had plaster casts in it and its architecture suggests that it was a creative space.

Helena Bonett: Yeah, I think it was very much that it just felt like that and the space was obviously was like an artistic space. They were having parties or something like that and there were these plaster casts around and they just talked about how much respect they had for being in the space that was incredible, seeing these artworks. And they were like, "Oh my God. I can't believe we get to dance and be around this and this amazing sculpture." And it in some way is like a creative afterlife, although it's very different. I think there's lots of ideas around squatting and all of those kinds of things as being destructive, but actually I think a lot of the people had a lot of care and they talk a lot about stewardship as caring for the space and that system of squatting is actually. A building is derelict and actually it's better for people to be in it than for it to be empty because it at least means that it gets looked after in a certain way.

Jo Baring: So Helena, how do you think that Dorich House fits into the wider conversation about artists studio homes and in particular women artists who build these studio homes?

Helena Bonett: I do think she's incredibly unusual in that way. And I've been talking with the Artist's Studio Museum Network recently in their network of... I think they've got over 150 members in their network across UK, Europe, Russia, further afield. And they've done a survey of their

network to look at how many of these studio homes are of individual women. And of over, I think, something like 156 members, only eight of them are just women.

And what I find very interesting in comparing actually with Hepworth is how in some ways Gordine and her had to kind of fit into that establishment in some way. They had to fit in almost like a archetypal idea of I'm a professional artist, I have my professional artist space look and this is my space of creativity but also the kind of masculine intellect in some way, that's the kind of studio represent that and the professionalism, whereas we might think that maybe a lot of women artists maybe their studio space is also like the kitchen table or something like that. So I think it's very much like if you're going to be perceived by the establishment as well as being a serious professional artist, you need to have in a sense the studio backdrop of I am and I will be taken seriously. In fact with Gordine, of course, because she sculpted busts of so many famous people as well, having that kind of space where you could bring somebody, your sitter to sculpt them and they would see, okay, this person is serious. There's like a proper space and look at this, their gallery with all their artwork in it as well.

Jo Baring:

So let's get back to Dora's career. As you know, Sarah, I'm really interested actually in how artists make a career for themselves, how they engage their networks and commercial galleries and institutions to really make a living. I think it's really important to consider. They're not just making work in isolation. And what comes across us in all the interviews about Dora is just how good she is at maintaining relationships, maintaining relationships with collectors, institutions, networks. And there's a real intertwining of her personal life and her and her work life and it's almost as if there is no delineation, is there? She sets up her home. She invites collectors in. The collectors are her social life. And it's really interesting. It's something that we went to talk to Fran Lloyd about.

Fran Lloyd:

She was astoundingly good at ensuring that her work went into all of the key sculpture venues. So she would regularly show at the Royal Academy. She would regularly show at the Royal Society of British Sculptures. She in fact was important for one of the founding members in the fifties of the Society of Portrait Sculptors as well, which is interesting. So these societies were really important to her. At the same time, she was extraordinarily good about the way in which she networked in terms of patrons and what you see when you look at it is that she had a diverse set of audiences, collectors and patrons. And so on one side that would go from the important Greek collector, George Eurmorfopoulos who collected avant-garde but also ancient and Chinese art. He was a patron for Gordine but also for Hepworth, Skeaping. Bought their first work. Really important person.

He would have an open house once a month in Chelsea where he would promote. He wrote the first forward for Gordine for her exhibition in 1928, really supportive. So you have this variety. Now, she wasn't elected to the Royal Academy despite several friends, people like the architect Charles Wheeler who put her forward on numerous occasions. She wasn't elected. But then actually when you look at that at the time neither was Epstein, neither was she Hepworth. I don't think I ever tried or cared.

So that actually positions her interestingly with that kind of group of more modernist that the academy wouldn't have liked this. It's quite complicated because there's also quite a lot of research that could show that the Royal Academy in the 1920s, thirties and forties and fifties wasn't very keen on émigrés either, took a long time to be elected there. That's another kind of story. So it was important that her work was shown there but she wasn't really part of that circle and actually didn't need to

Sarah Turner: Do you think it didn't really bother her in some ways? She was sort of confident really about her own position and place or her own trajectory that she wasn't actually that bothered about being part of the British establishment.

Fran Lloyd: I don't think she was in that way. And also she was actually in good company when you look at it historically about who was in and out of the Royal Academy. Now with our kind of perspective on what might be a modern art that deals with modernity. Most of those were out rather than in.

Sarah Turner: Jonathan, you've obviously done so much work about Gordine, but I'm interested to hear what you think about her legacy and whether you think she's important now as an artist.

Johnathan Black: Well, I think she's important as an example, what a woman artist in an era which was not terribly understanding towards women artists. The fact that she was, I think, very conscious throughout her life, her productive life that you'd count the number of well known female sculptors on both hands and you'd probably have a few fingers spare. She was one of the few who were sort of genuinely known to a wider audience.

I remember when Sarah McDoodle from the Ben Uri interviewed Anthony Caro and Caro said that when he was a young lad, a young student, that there were only about two or three sculptors who were names to count with. There was Epstein, Dobson and Dora Gordine.

Sarah Turner: So during this episode, we've heard from a number of art historians and artists about Gordines rich and varied career full of travel and how she constantly intertwined the public and the professional and the personal, but that suddenly stops in 1966. It's really associated with the death of her husband. She becomes a reclusion and actually many people think she's actually died when in reality she's retreated into her sanctuary of Dorich House behind those high walls surrounded by her works and by the art collection that she and her husband had established.

Jo Baring: What I think comes across in this episode in the interviews is really Dora's ambition and that doesn't end with her death because after her death came out that her expressed wish had been to donate the collection, the Russian art collection, Dorich House itself and its contents to the nation. That didn't happen. The Russian art collection was sold off, but Kingston University has taken over Dorich House and it is now a museum open to the public and for visitors. And it's amazing that so much of Dora's work, particularly plaster work survived for us to see.

Sarah Turner: Absolutely. And it is a really unique place. There really aren't that many places like that, a studio, a home and a museum dedicated to a woman's sculptor in the UK or nationally or internationally. So it is really worth going and having a visit.

Jo Baring: Thank you to all our contributors for this episode, Cathie Pilkington, Fran Lloyd, Jonathan Black, Helena Bonnet and Erika Tan. If you want to see any of the artworks we've discussed in today's episode, visit our Instagram page at Sculpting Lives.

Sarah Turner: Join us next time for an episode on the sculptor Veronica Ryan. This podcast series was written and presented by Jo Baring and Sarah Victoria Turner. It was supported by the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art, produced by Clare Lynch, with research assistance from Chloe Nahum.