



# Helen Mabel Trevor (1831-1900), an Irish artist abroad

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THE IRISH ARTIST HELEN MABEL TREVOR WAS BORN INTO A WELL-TO-DO PROTESTANT family on a large estate in Lisnagead, near Loughbrickland, county Down, on 20th December 1831. Her parents were Edward Hill Trevor and Mary Lucy Trevor (*née* Trevor). She was one of seven children, none of whom married or had children, and with the exception of her sister Rose her siblings did not enjoy good health. From a young age she showed a gift for drawing, and her father set up a studio for her at home where she worked until she was in her early forties. Creating art was considered to be a genteel hobby for young ladies who were encouraged to draw and paint, particularly in watercolours. However, for a woman to aspire to have a career, much less a career in art, required a very determined personality and independent funding to finance training and travel. No information exists as to whether Trevor received any formal tuition in art at this time but there is a record of the Louvre granting her permission to draw on 11th September 1869.<sup>1</sup>

Trevor's work was first exhibited at the Great Industrial Exhibition of 1853, where five works were shown – two paintings, *Portrait of William III* and *The Youthful Mechanic*,<sup>2</sup> and three watercolours, *Portrait of a Cat*, *Portrait of a Boy*, and *Portrait of a Girl*.<sup>3</sup> In 1854 she began to send paintings to the Royal Hibernian Academy (RHA) Annual Exhibition, exhibiting regularly until 1897, showing a total of twenty-nine works over this period.<sup>4</sup> These were mainly portraits of animals, and suggest local commissions; *Hounds of the Newry Hunt*, exhibited in 1856, was 'grouped after the manner of a French Picture, by request of the possessor, J.H. Loftus, ESQ., J.P.'<sup>5</sup> After the death of her father in 1872, Trevor moved to London with her mother and her sister Rose, where they lived close to the home of Thomas Carlyle (1795-1881), the Scottish essayist, historian and satirical writer in Chelsea. Trevor completed a watercolour caricature of Carlyle in Stationer's Hall, one of the ancient livery halls of the City of London, in 1875 (Plate 2).<sup>6</sup>

In 1861 Laura Herford became the first woman to be admitted to the Royal Academy (RA) School. The following ten years saw thirty-four women admitted to the School, but not to the life classes until 1903.<sup>7</sup> Trevor is listed on the School's register as having started her probationary period on 3rd July 1877, with E.J. Poynter as her sponsor.<sup>8</sup>

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1 – *Helen Mabel Trevor (1831-1900), SELF-PORTRAIT [detail]*  
1890s, oil on canvas, 66 x 55 cm (© National Gallery of Ireland [NGI 502])



Helen Mabel Trevor

2 – *EN STATIONERS' HALL, DRAWN FROM THE LIFE*  
1875, watercolour, 33 x 25 cm (© National Trust)

3 – *THE OLD HOUSE, PONT-AVEN*  
1882, oil on canvas, 66 x 46 cm  
(private collection; image courtesy deVeres, Dublin)



She gained full admission to the RA School on 31st December 1877, again recommended by Poynter. The register lists her age as thirty-four, although she would have been forty-six at the time. A search of the student registers from 1825 to 1890 reveals that only five students over the age of forty were registered, and one aged fifty-seven. So while the majority of students at the RA were in their late teens and twenties, age does not seem to have been an issue for the Academy at the time. It was during her time at the RA that Trevor met the British sculptor Emmeline Halse (1853-1930), who was also a student there. Halse had been admitted to the Academy at the age of twenty-three. Despite the age difference, the two women became lifelong friends, corresponding throughout their lives. Trevor painted a portrait of Halse which remains in the Halse family's possession, and Halse published a selection of Trevor's letters in a small book, entitled *The Ramblings of an Artist*, a year after Trevor's death in 1900.<sup>9</sup>

Trevor moved to Paris c.1880 to continue her artistic training in the studios of Carolus-Duran and Jean-Jacque Henner. Accompanied by her sister Rose, who was to remain her chaperone and constant companion for the rest of her life, they lived on income from the family estate in Lisnagead. Portraiture had always been an important part of Trevor's practice and she may have chosen to study with Carolus-Duran, a pre-eminent portrait artist. According to a former pupil, the atelier was organised on a democratic basis with students paying a monthly stipend for the cost of rent, heating, and the hire of models.<sup>10</sup> However, unlike other ateliers in Paris, Carolus-Duran gave his teaching 'gratuitously, in the service of art and in gratitude for similar gratuitous instruction received in his youth'.<sup>11</sup> He emphasised tonal values and techniques

as much as draughtsmanship in his teaching, and discouraged copying, a view shared by Trevor: ‘That copying business was the mistake of the past generation; I maintain it is not so good practice as nature.’<sup>12</sup> Three portraits by Trevor are listed in the records of the National Portrait Gallery in London – Thomas Carlyle, Emmeline Halse and a self-portrait (Plate 1), now in the National Gallery of Ireland. An article in the *Belfast News-Letter* of 12th September 1903 mentioned a number of portraits of ‘celebrities associated with Belfast and Northern Ireland’ in the National Gallery, including ‘a self-portrait in oils of that somewhat famous artist Helen Mabel Trevor, of Lisnagaed’,<sup>13</sup> and recommended copies be acquired for the (then) Belfast Municipal Art Gallery as a source of ‘emulation’ for ‘our young people’.<sup>14</sup>

Between 1880 and 1883, the Trevor sisters made regular trips to Brittany and Normandy, preferring the former: ‘We tried Normandy but we prefer Brittany and we consider the Bretons a far more gracious race – or we were unfortunate in our acquaintance with the Norman manners.’<sup>15</sup> Trevor began to paint her well-known Breton genre scenes, and particularly loved to work with children. In 1881 she sent *Breton Boys – en retenue* to the RA annual exhibition (Plate 4),<sup>16</sup> and *A Daughter of Eve* (also known as *The Young Eve* (1882), now in the Ulster Museum) (Plate 5) to the RHA in 1883.<sup>17</sup> Although these paintings may be described as sentimental, the children’s ragged clothes are painted with great realism and attention to detail.

Of the 207 artists recorded by Nina Lübbren who stayed at Pont-Aven between 1870 and 1910, eight percent were women.<sup>18</sup> In a letter to Halse, Trevor recalls the cama-

4 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *BRETON BOYS – EN RETENUE*

1881, oil on canvas, 96.5 x 140 cm (private collection; image courtesy Sotheby’s, London)





5 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *THE YOUNG EVE*  
1882, oil on canvas 122.5 x 88.5 cm (© National Museums of Northern Ireland [Belum.U189])



6 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *PLAYING WITH KITTENS*

1887, oil on canvas, 48 x 60 cm (private collection; image courtesy Bukowskis, Stockholm)

raderie among the artists in the village: ‘There are many artists here, and we have a grand night class in the large Salon of the Hôtel des Voyageurs next door, to which we go three times a week, and have models. Each one carries his or her easel and candle, and then we draw for places.’<sup>19</sup> In *A Morning Dream* (1881) (Plate 9) the young girl’s costume is very well depicted and identifies her as a native of Pont-Aven.

The Hôtel du Lion d’Or, the Hôtel des Voyageurs and the Pension Gloanec were the main inns in Pont-Aven for visiting artists and travellers. They each attracted different clientele, with English and American artists favouring Hôtel des Voyageurs, and French artists and travellers preferring the Hôtel du Lion d’Or. The interiors of all the inns were covered with paintings and decorations by the visiting artists, some a gift to a popular landlady, others payment of a debt, and Lübbren refers to this ornamentation ‘as a kind of marker of territory’.<sup>20</sup> Over time, landladies became more discerning as to who could hang paintings on the walls. Two of Trevor’s landscape oils were hung in l’Hôtel Julia (the former Hôtel des Voyageurs) – *L’Aven devant le Hénant* and *Paysage, arbre isolé*.<sup>21</sup> The house depicted in Trevor’s *The Old House, Pont-Aven* (1882) was located in the village square, adjacent to Pension Gloanac (Plate 3). Painted with great attention to detail, the scene is enlivened by two women selling their wares.

Trevor’s works at this period may have been influenced by Jules Bastien-Lepage,



7 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *LA MÈRE DU MARIN (The Fisherman's Mother)*  
1892, oil on canvas, 65 x 53 cm (© National Gallery of Ireland [NGI 500])



8 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *INTÉRIEUR BRETON*  
1892, oil on canvas, 63 x 46 cm (© National Gallery of Ireland [NGI 501])





9 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *A MORNING DREAM*  
1881, oil on canvas, 81 x 68.6 cm (private collection;  
image courtesy Milmo-Penny Fine Art, Dublin)

10 – Helen Mabel Trevor, *CAPRI*  
n.d., oil on canvas, 118 x 79 cm  
(private collection; image courtesy Sotheby's, London)



acknowledged leader of the emerging Naturalist School, and they were both in Concarneau in 1883.<sup>22</sup> By the end of the 1870s, the port of Concarneau, with its picturesque, walled and medieval *Ville Close*, had become an international artists' colony, absorbing many of those who found Pont-Aven overcrowded. Both Bastien-Lepage and Trevor had grown up in rural locations and liked to paint genre scenes of the local people, although, unlike Bastien-Lepage, Trevor did not come from a peasant family. She had probably seen Bastien-Lepage's work when she lived in London. He had exhibited paintings in the RA annual exhibitions in 1878, 1879 and 1880, when Trevor was a student at the RA School.<sup>23</sup>

In 1883 Trevor began a six-year-long tour of Italy, accompanied, as always, by Rose.<sup>25</sup> They stayed in Assisi, Perugia, Florence, Venice, Rome and Capri, and her Italian letters to Halse included pen-and-ink illustrations of local buildings and people, and sketches of works in progress. In Rome, on seeing Michelangelo's Sistine Chapel, his *Pietà* and Raphael's *Stanze*, she wondered if art would ever 'surpass these or even come up to them'.<sup>24</sup> Although she wanted to see the Old Masters, she had little interest in copying them: 'But what is the good of eternally drawing those straight noses and oval eyes and perplexing lather of curls which I used to lose myself in an antique head? It surely does not prepare you for modern craniums.'<sup>25</sup> In Capri she lived in a farmhouse which was covered in flowers and ferns, possibly the scene depicted in *Capri* (Plate 10). During her time in Italy, Trevor sent a number of paintings of Italian subjects to exhibitions in London and Dublin, including *Venetian Bead-Stringers* (Royal Society of Artists, 1886), *Dopo Pranze* (Society of Women Artists, 1888) and *From the Hills of Perugia* (RHA, 1888).

She also painted the charming *Playing with Kittens* (1887) at this time (Plate 6).

In 1889 the Trevor sisters returned to Paris, and Helen resumed her training at the studios of Carolus-Duran, Jean-Jacques Henner and Luc-Olivier Merson. The last decade of her life was the most successful period of her career. She exhibited in the competitive Paris Salon every year from 1889 to 1898, missing only the 1892 Salon. Portraiture continued to be an important part of her practice and her paintings now showed greater realism and less sentimentality than those of the 1880s. *La Mère du Marin* (*The Fisherman's Mother*) (1892) painted while Trevor was in Douarnenez, was shown at the 1893 Salon (Plate 7). In a review of that year's exhibition in the London newspaper *The Morning Post* on 1st May 1893, the correspondent described it as 'a study of an old woman's face, which is full of character'.<sup>26</sup> Julian Campbell has praised her 'hunched pose, weathered face and heavy clothes' that told of 'the hardship of her life', while 'the clasped rosary beads show the deep religious faith of the Breton people'.<sup>27</sup> Elderly subjects were widely viewed as guardians of tradition and featured regularly in the work of artists who lived in French artists' colonies during this period.

Julian Campbell has listed the fifteen Irish artists who exhibited at the Paris Salon between 1850 and 1914.<sup>28</sup> Trevor exhibited fifteen paintings over a ten-year period from 1889 to 1898, winning an honourable mention for *Intérieur Breton* (1892) in 1898 (Plate 8), thereby joining the 'Liste des Artistes Recompensées'. The painting shows an elderly woman, alone in a room, absorbed in her task of preparing vegetables. Light comes in through a half-open shutter illuminating her face. As in *La Mère du Marin*, the modelling of the face is academically treated when compared to the clothes, which are loosely painted in a more naturalistic style, while the earthy palette is typical of the artist's work during this period. Trevor's *Etude à Venise* was included in *l'Exposition internationale blanc & noir 1890* in Paris.<sup>29</sup> She sent fourteen paintings to the RHA between 1890 and 1897 and her work was shown at the RA annual exhibitions in 1894 and 1895. Trevor lived in Paris during the height of the Impressionist movement, and she shared the Impressionists' interest in natural observation and painting scenes of everyday life. She recalled Jean-Jacques Henner's response to her picture of light effects (possibly *Lumière des Dunes* shown at the Paris Salon in 1899) when he accused her of being influenced by the Impressionists.<sup>30</sup> However, as Campbell has remarked, Trevor's studies of Breton widows in interiors are hardly 'impressionistic' when compared with Roderic O'Connor's experimental studies of Breton peasants at the same period.<sup>31</sup>

Although Paris remained the sisters' base until Helen's death in 1900, they also regularly returned to Brittany, spending the winter of 1895-96 in Concarneau. They visited St Ives in Cornwall in c.1893 and Antibes in the south of France in c.1897. Still living largely on the income from the family estate in Lisnagead, by the 1890s this income was dwindling. Trevor wrote to her friend Emmeline Halse: 'I know you will be sorry to hear that there has been another sweeping reduction of our rents in Ireland which affects us gravely. What the end of it all will be I am sure I don't know – a crust, a glass of water, and a garret perhaps!'<sup>32</sup> The Trevor sisters did end up living in a garret at 159 Boulevard Saint-Germain, Paris, from 1893 to 1897. The income from the Trevor estate was also funding the care of the sisters' eldest brother Hugh Marcus, who lived in a private mental asylum in Dublin from the age of twenty until his death in February 1900 at the age of

seventy-two. When the asylum sought an increase in maintenance payments, the Office of Registrar in Lunacy was informed by the family's solicitor of the Lisnagead estate's reduced income, and that should the allowances to the Miss Trevors be discontinued, the ladies would be absolutely destitute.<sup>33</sup> Helen Trevor invited the American artist Henry Mosler to their 'little garret' in Paris to view her St Ives' paintings,<sup>34</sup> but did not encourage his wife to come 'because the stairs are high, 115 steps!'<sup>35</sup> The same letter also referred to paintings she wanted to show to another American artist, William Lamb Picknell, who was also in Paris at the time. All three artists had spent time in Pont-Aven, where they may have met.

Most of the Irish artists who went to France during this period came back to Ireland or England to teach and work as professional artists. Trevor's artistic career was unusual. She started her formal academic training in her late forties, moved to Paris when she was almost fifty, and never returned to live in Ireland or England. There are no records of whatever income she made from the sales of her paintings, but she was evidently unable to support herself and Rose from any such sales. One of her most famous works, *La Mère du Marin* was shown at the RA in 1895 with a price of £150 and at the RHA in 1896 priced at £135. The painting was never sold and Trevor donated it to the National Gallery of Ireland in her will, along with *Intérieur Breton* (Plate 6).<sup>36</sup> After Helen's death, her sister Rose donated the artist's *Self-portrait* (c.1893) to the Gallery. In her article 'In a Dublin Salon' in *The Leader* newspaper on 24th November 1900, Sarah Purser remarked: 'I feel more sad to think of poor Miss Trevor, whose works are now hanging among the masters in the National Gallery, and who died still vainly petitioning to be admitted to the slender privileges of an honorary Hibernian Academician.'<sup>37</sup> She wrote also of how it 'would have been a help to her earning her bread in Paris', where they thought 'so much' of 'any sort of public distinction'.<sup>38</sup>

Trevor told Halse that if she had any gift it was for painting and she intended 'to stick to that to the end of my days'.<sup>39</sup> She died of a heart attack aged sixty-eight in her studio at 55 Rue du Cherche-Midi, Paris, on 3rd April 1900, leaving an estate valued at £703 10s to Rose. She is buried alongside her mother in the graveyard of the Church of All Saints, Birchington, Kent. A plaque to her memory, erected by Rose, reads:

In loving memory of my dearest sister Helen Mable Trevor, *Artiste Peintre*, who died suddenly in her studio 55 Rue du Cherche-Midi, Paris, 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1900.

Also of Rose Trevor, Born 3<sup>rd</sup> April 1834 – Died 16th February 1910, who is buried at Letchworth, Hertfordshire, and by whom this Tablet was erected.

*Though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil.*

(Psalm XXIII)

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NOTE – The author would like to hear from anyone who has information about the extended Trevor family and the whereabouts of paintings by Helen Mabel Trevor. She can be contacted at coyleca@tcd.ie.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Archives Portal Europe, *Autorisations accordées aux artistes de travailler dans le musée 1850-1960*, [https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation/ir/pdfUD.action?irId=FRAN\\_IR\\_053951&udId=c1qg2cvd2m3g-10g88vo5g8gam](https://www.siv.archives-nationales.culture.gouv.fr/siv/rechercheconsultation/consultation/ir/pdfUD.action?irId=FRAN_IR_053951&udId=c1qg2cvd2m3g-10g88vo5g8gam), accessed 17th November 2017.
- 2 *Official Catalogue of the Great Industrial Exhibition 1853*, 176. <https://archive.org/details/officialcatalogu00exhi>, accessed 22nd January 2018.
- 3 *ibid.*, 178.
- 4 Ann M. Stewart, *Royal Hibernian of Arts, Index of Exhibitors and their Works 1826-1979*, 3 vols (Dublin, 1987) III, 217.
- 5 *ibid.*
- 6 A print of this painting is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London, NPG D2021.
- 7 Amy Bluett, ‘“Striving after excellence”: Victorian women and the fight for arts training’, <https://www.royalacademy.org.uk/article/striving-after-excellence-victorian>, accessed 9th September 2017.
- 8 Royal Academy archives, Burlington House, Registers of Admission of Students and Students’ Records. Edward Poynter was Director for Art and principal of the National Art Training School, South Kensington, from 1875 to 1881, suggesting that Helen was either a private pupil of Poynter’s or a student at the school. There are no official records for students from this period.
- 9 Helen Mabel Trevor, *The Ramblings of an Artist* (London, 1901).
- 10 Will H. Low, *A Chronicle of Friendships, 1873-1900* (London, 1908) 16.
- 11 *ibid.*
- 12 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 82.
- 13 *Belfast News-Letter*, 12th September 1903, 8. <https://www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk/viewer/bl/0000038/19040913/183/0008>. Note alternative spelling: Lisnagead and Lisnagaed.
- 14 *ibid.*
- 15 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 82.
- 16 Algernon Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: a complete Dictionary of contributors and their works 1769-1904*, 4 vols (comprising vols 1-8 of original ed.), (London (1898), 1905-06) IV, 20.
- 17 Stewart, *Royal Hibernian of Arts, Index*, 217.
- 18 Nina Lübbren, *Rural Artists’ Colonies in Europe, 1870-1910* (Manchester, 2001) 172.
- 19 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 96.
- 20 Lübbren, *Rural Artists’ Colonies in Europe*, 30.
- 21 Gwenaëla Souet, ‘Les décors peints dans les auberges et les hôtels du Sud-Finistère aux XiXe et XXe siècles’, unpublished Mémoire de DEA, Université Rennes 2 – Haute Bretagne, 1993-94, 74.
- 22 Julian Campbell, *The Irish Impressionists: Irish artists in France and Belgium, 1850-1914* (Dublin, 1984) 16. According to Campbell, although he did not teach at an atelier, Bastien-Lepage had a greater effect on British and Irish students than did any of their academic teachers.
- 23 Graves, *The Royal Academy of Arts: a complete Dictionary*, III, 37.
- 24 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 52.
- 25 *ibid.*, 75.
- 26 *The Morning Post* (London), 1st May 1893, 5.
- 27 Julian Campbell, ‘Helen Mabel Trevor’, *Irish Women Artists from the Eighteenth Century to the Present Day* (Dublin, 1987) 96.
- 28 Campbell, *The Irish Impressionists*, 273-74.
- 29 *Catalogue officiel illustré de l’exposition internationale de blanc & noir* (Paris, 1890), <https://archive.org/details/catalogueofficie00unse>, accessed 2nd February 2018.
- 30 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 109.
- 31 Campbell, ‘Art Students and Lady Travellers’, *Irish Women Artists*, 18.
- 32 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 104-05.
- 33 Documents received from the archives of Highfield Healthcare, Dublin, formerly the lunacy asylum Hampstead Hospital, Glasnevin, where Hugh Marcus Trevor resided.
- 34 Smithsonian Museum Archives of American Art, Mosler Archives, letter from Helen Mabel Trevor to Henry Mosler, <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/henry-mosler-papers-9068#ref64>, accessed 22nd January 2017. The letter is dated 6th February but no year. The address on the letter, 159 Boulevard St Germain, was Trevor’s address from 1893 to 1897 as listed for her Paris Salon, Royal Academy and Royal Hibernian Academy exhibition entries during those years.
- 35 *ibid.*
- 36 Trevor’s will, received by email from Probate search.servicew.gov.uk, 23rd November 2016.
- 37 Sarah Purser, *The Leader: a review of current affairs, politics, literature, art and industry*, 24th November 1900.
- 38 *ibid.*
- 39 Trevor, *Ramblings*, 116.