



Artist Una Watters and the Cost of the Marriage Bar on Irish Libraries

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During a recent trip to the [National Gallery of Ireland](#), I paused as I walked by a striking painting of a woman walking in the rain, holding an umbrella in front of Trinity College. As I began to read the short blurb that accompanied it, I learned it had been painted by Una Watters, an Irish librarian and artist. 'Una was forced to retire from her post as a librarian due to the Irish marriage bar in 1945,' it explained.

The Irish marriage bar was introduced in the 1920s, requiring female civil service workers to retire from employment once they married ([Foley, 2022](#)), anchored by a bedrock of deep enmeshment between religious and civil life. It grew into a pervasive cultural norm across banks, primary teaching, local health boards and the private sector until the civil service requirement was ultimately revoked in 1973.

Before I had even made it home that evening, I began furiously Googling Una Watters. As a teacher currently working in an academic library, I felt acutely aware that it could have been my career that needed to be sacrificed, had I been born just a few decades earlier. I had thought I had stumbled upon a famous painter I had somehow never heard of, expecting to find hundreds of articles, possibly some podcasts and certainly listings of other exhibitions where I could see more of her work. In reality, the results were frustratingly sparse. While a few online articles documented Una's life, they fell far short of the extensive record an artist of her talent deserves.

Yet even with an academic library catalogue at my fingertips, the search results were starkly blank: a frustrating reminder that collective memory often fails some of the most talented and brilliant women. But who better to be tasked with finding information buried deeply than those of us who work in libraries? In the Avengers universe, this is my form of superpower.

Born Una McDonnell in 1918, she grew up in Finglas and entered Dublin's public library service in the late 1930s. Dual identity seems to be a theme of Una's life, as by day she was a library clerk working in the Capel Street and Phibsborough branches, and by night she was a student at the National College of Art and Design. Due to ill health, she never had the chance to complete her studies, but clearly what she had learned and the innate talent she possessed was more than enough to allow her to create some incredible works of art.

In 1945, Una was forced to resign from her job as a librarian when she met her husband Eugene Watters. Looking back, we can clearly identify the devastating historical drain of female intellect and institutional memory the marriage bar caused within Irish libraries. Our profession missed out on intelligent, creative, interesting women, like Una, who had so much to give. It should give us pause to consider just how different our libraries and public services might look today without the enforcement of the marriage bar.

Think, for instance, of Henriette Avram, who invented machine-readable cataloguing (MARC) in the 1960s. This became the international language of information, allowing libraries anywhere in the world to instantly share cataloguing data, paving the way for the automation of libraries and setting the stage for the modern internet search systems we use today. Without Henriette Avram, the global library network as we know it today would not exist. If Henriette had been a married woman in Ireland, the world may not have MARC records today. How many *Irish* Henriette Avrams did we legally cast aside? What standard, what system or what creative breakthrough did Irish libraries lose forever simply because a brilliant woman decided to get married?

Though the State took her library job, it couldn't strip away her archivist's instinct, and Una found a new way to catalogue history. With her free time, Una created incredible works of art with a unique modernist style, using elements of Cubism and Futurism to depict figures in interesting, angular forms. She used her art to document social change in paintings like Cappagh Road (1960). This painting documents a vanished era when community life was lived out on the street. It captures a time when neighbours congregated on corners without phones to distract them from conversing with one another and the local shop was the true centre point of the estate.

Una's untimely death occurred in 1965 when she was just 47 years old, and Eugene subsequently gifted her paintings to family and friends. It was that same year Una had won an Arts Council competition to design the official emblem for the 1916 Rising Golden Jubilee, known as the Sword of Light. The logo was used on badges, stamps and even Dublin buses. The £100 prize cheque arrived in the post on the morning of Una's funeral, once again symbolising that Una's life was sadly marked by an undeserved series of 'almosts'.

Because Una's work was hung in the dining rooms and kitchens of her loved ones around Ireland, she was eclipsed from Irish public memory. However, in 2022, Una's niece Sheila Smith endeavoured to become a new keeper of her memory. Using the 1966 catalogue from the memorial exhibition Eugene had held in her honour before dispersing her paintings, Sheila, partnering with writer Mary Morrissy, began tracking down the missing canvases. They ultimately located most of her original 37 paintings, culminating in the 2022 retrospective exhibition in Dublin's United Arts Club aptly titled 'Una Watters: Into the Light'.

Serendipitously, one place where her work remained visible to the public throughout that time was Phibsborough Library where Una had once worked. She had gifted her painting 'The Four Masters' to the library in 1959. There is a profound irony here: a woman whose own legacy faded into the shadows had painted a masterpiece celebrating the Franciscan friars who were the ultimate keepers of Irish memory. Una left a physical anchor of her talent in the custody of information-keepers, ensuring that the library would guard her memory until we were ready to discover it again.

Una's story brings to mind the many women who stayed in the shadows, with their genius and creativity halted because of restrictions like the Irish Marriage Bar. Librarians have the skills and passion to discover, share and celebrate information and stories that were once forgotten or even buried. Our priority must be to champion those who have been pushed to the margins or left off the shelves entirely.