

RCEWA – Allegorical Painting of Two Ladies, English School, circa 1650

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the painting meets Waverley criterion three.

Further Information

The 'Applicant's statement' and the 'Note of Case History' are available on the Arts Council Website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

British School

Portrait of Two Ladies wearing Beauty Patches

1650s

Oil on canvas

640 x 750 mm

Inscription:

'I black with white bespott: y^u white wth blacke this Evill:
proceeds from thy proud hart: then take her: Devill.'

Condition:

A note concerning condition is available on the Trevanion auction house website, including detailed photography and UV images (link below). The picture has been lined; there are areas of previous repair and retouching, and some of the latter is now discoloured; there is a horizontal strip along the bottom of the canvas which has a differently treated dark ground, over which the drapery has been painted; and currently there is extensive pigment loss to the darks, particularly affecting the hair, pupils and eyebrows of the figure on the left. Retouching can correct the losses. While conservation is evidently necessary, the condition of the picture does not affect its essential content or importance.

<https://auctions.trevanionanddean.com/catalogue/lot/a0a134e0781aa2f9d9ac2d7412e18f0d/a7180bf4b4bbb20d27ed1aac9c041a473/the-june-fine-art-antique-auction-lot-564/>

Provenance:....; by family descent in the family of Tyrell-Kenyon, Barons Kenyon of Gredington; sold Trevanion, Fine Art and Antiques sale, 23 June 2021, lot 564, estimate £2,000 - 4,000, sold for £220,000.

Literature:

Lord Kenyon, correspondence section, *Country Life*, 7 October 1949.

Waverley criteria three:

This is a rare painting in British art that visualises, in a way no other painted image does, early modern debates about gender hierarchy, female agency, beauty and blackness, ethnicity, morality and sin. Unknown to scholarship until its recent emergence at auction, it will hold an important place in the critical thinking on these subjects that are significant and relevant today.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of object(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

The work shows two women, one Black, one white, side by side. Their dress, hair and jewellery are similar, the white sitter in pink silk with a pearl necklace, the Black sitter in striped white with a pearl necklace and pearl drop earrings. The depiction of a Black female sitter in a 1650s English painting is extremely rare, especially a woman of adult age rather than a child occupying a position of subservience. It is difficult to think of another example and in this respect the picture is perhaps unique. Here, the two women are presented as companions and equals, the composition inviting comparison between them. The other unusual and remarkable aspect of the work is the depiction of beauty patches, for which there was a fantastic vogue at the time, together with a correspondingly large body of literature condemning them. The white sitter wears multiple black patches of various shapes, the Black sitter white ones, the two women appearing as opposite images of each other. The latter points with her finger at her companion and speaks via the inscription above them - through her voice the viewer is told that the wearing of 'spots' is a sin that comes of pride. Rather than a portrait, it is clear that the picture is allegorical. The manner in which it conveys its message, through image and text supporting each other, has an affinity with popular woodcut prints of the period. It is most likely from this world - of polemical tracts, satirical verse, pamphlets and sermons - that the picture, by an unknown and relatively unsophisticated hand, as well as its moral admonition, has its origin.

The picture was unknown to scholars until its recent appearance at auction in June of this year. The only prior mention of it was a letter sent to *Country Life* by Lord Kenyon in 1949 seeking opinions on 'the curious picture which has hung here [Gredington] for many years, but of which I know of no real explanation'. So far it is not known when the picture entered the Kenyon collection, or who commissioned it. Its agenda, and the role of the Black sitter within it, therefore to some extent remain ambiguous. But the price paid at auction is testament to the intense interest in this picture. It visualises in a way that no other painting of the period does the early modern debates concerning the morality of cosmetics use; discourses on ideal beauty and blackness; issues concerning gender hierarchy and female agency; as well as attitudes to race and ethnicity, especially so in an age that witnessed increasing global contact through trade and colonial expansion. Now the work is in the public domain and available for critical analysis it will occupy an important place in scholarship in these areas.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the object(s).

The context for viewing this picture is the proliferation of printed material - drama, poetry, sermons, pamphlets and polemical tracts - that warned against the use of cosmetics and the wearing of beauty spots. The fashion for 'black patches', of silk or velvet, and which came in different shapes (crescent moons, stars, spots, diamonds and hearts) was courtly and aristocratic but filtered through society. Intended to accentuate the paleness of the wearer's skin, fairness being the ideal standard of beauty, they also came to be associated with women of easy virtue who wore them to hide signs of disease. A search of EEBO (Early English Books Online) reveals a large array of printed material of the 1650s aimed against the practice. Arguments were principally aimed against women, and were both religious and moral. The invective was not just Puritan but came from across the religious and political spectrum. The publications share recurring phrases and tropes and use the same stock

examples from classical literature and the Bible to reinforce the validity of the message. Authors such as Thomas Hall, *Comarum aksomia the loathsomeness of long haire ... with an Appendix against Painting, Spots, Naked Breasts &c*, 1654; Andrew Jones, *Morbus Satanicus: the devil's disease: or, The sin of pride arraigned and condemned*, 1656 onwards; John Gauden (attrib), *A Discourse of Artificial Beauty ... between Two Ladies*, 1656; and R Smith, *A Wonder of Wonders: Or, a Metamorphosis of Fair Faces Voluntarily Transformed into Foul Visages, Or an Invective against Black-spotted faces*, 1662 (with passages taken from *Musarum Deliciae*, 1655) are agreed that the altering of natural appearance is a sin stemming from vanity and pride; that black patches are the mark of the devil; and that 'spotted faces have but spotted souls'. 'Devils are black, who doubts it? Yet some write / that there are Devils likewise that are white / Well, I have found a third sort, which are neither / they be py'd Devils, black and white together', wrote an anonymous contributor to Smith's volume. Most authors warn that the practice of wearing patches will provoke the wrath of God and cite the example of the painted and richly adorned Jezebel, whose fate was death.

The sentiment expressed in the painting's inscription clearly has its origins in this body of literature. The image itself, showing a Black woman and a white woman alongside each other wearing contrasting beauty patches, does not appear to be a direct copy of a print, but has similarities with a woodcut engraving that appeared in the 1653 edition of John Bulwer's *Anthropometamorphosis: Man Transform'd: or, the artificiall changling ...* (first published 1650) (see Appendix). Bulwer's publication catalogues examples of body transformations from cultures across the globe but his agenda is to warn against the moral corruption of subverting and opposing God-given, natural appearance. He describes the faces of English women as 'full of foule black patches', a disfiguring 'Cosmeticall conceit' borrowed from 'Barbarous Nations'.

The extent to which attitudes towards race infiltrated this type of discourse has implications for how one interprets the role of the Black figure in the painting. Bulwer specifically cites the origin of facial decoration as being 'Indian', so it may be that the sitter in the portrait is intended as Indian rather than African. Either way, in moralising anti-cosmetics literature historians have noticed how the long history of metaphysical contrasts between black and white, good and evil, moral purity and sin, is insistent. While white was the colour of virtue, and pale skin defined ideal beauty, and reflected inner goodness, blackness had negative associations. In moralising tracts, constant references are made to the 'Ethiopian' bride of Christ, and her original sinful condition, and to Jeremiah 13:23 (can an Ethiopian change his skin?). A series of poems of the period, which have their origin in George Herbert's *Æthiopissa*, written in the voice of a female Ethiopian maid who pleads with her white lover for acceptance, actually reinforce negative stereotypes concerning blackness and racial difference. It is difficult to divorce the portrayal of the Black sitter in this picture from the negative references of blackness, evil and immorality found in the popular tracts that seem to have influenced its production; nor from Bulwer's association of the origins of facial transformation with 'Barbarous Nations'.

Despite a certain ambiguity that remains concerning the painting's precise meaning, nevertheless it is a highly significant work in its capturing of attitudes to and debates about gender and ethnicity of the time. Its audience then would have been confronted by its moralising tone. The work continues to prompt and provoke debate about issues that are of critical relevance today.