Sir John Lavery RA RSA RHA (1856-1941)

LADY IN GREEN (MRS. CARA H.), 1903

oil on canvas

signed lower right; signed again and inscribed with titled and dated at 5 Cromwell Place, London on label on reverse; also with exhibition label, partially removed Caledonian Railway label and label indicating name and address of original owner, all on reverse. 35 by 24ins. (91 by 64cm)

Provenance:
The property of E.F.B. Johnston, Esq., K.C. Toronto; Harry Diamond, Toronto purchased circa 1958; His Estate, Toronto; Private collection

Exhibited:
The Art Museum of Toronto (now the Art Gallery of Ontario), the "Second Exhibition Catalogue of a Loan Collection of paintings of the English, Old Master, Modern Dutch, French and other European Schools Contributed by Private Collectors" from 24th November-16th December 1909, catalogue no. 38.

Literature:
The Art Museum of Toronto, The Second exhibition catalogue

The recovery of Lavery’s previously unrecorded Lady in Green from a private collection in Canada sheds new light upon an important phase of his work in the early years of the twentieth century. Although much is known about his management of the International Society of Sculptors, Painters and Gravers as its vice-president, his close relationship with its president, James McNeill Whistler, in the years leading up to the latter’s death in 1903, has not been fully described.1

While his movements cannot be accurately plotted following the society’s foundation in 1898, the consistent feature of his work during these years was the influence of Whistler. Both revered the work of Velazquez and from the Hague School fieldwork subject matter. Johnston lent two other Laverys to the 1909 Toronto exhibition – Lady in Pink (no 37) and Mary in Black (no 39). This latter picture (sold Christie’s 26 May 2011), although a head and shoulders study, 14 x 10¼ ins, also shows the model seated on a similar gilded cane chair.

Although he later came to the opinion that contact with Whistler prevented him from ‘painting with any vigour’ for a time, it is undoubtedly true that some of Lavery’s subtlest and most evocative portraits were painted as a result.2 In these the sitter was often unidentified and the works, when shown, were simply entitled according to their particular colour harmonies – hence, A Lady in Green.

In the present case the sitter’s identity continues to remain a mystery, as does the picture’s early history prior to its arrival in Toronto.3 At that point it became the property of Ebenezer Forsyth Blackie Johnston KC, described by his peers in the Canadian Club as ‘an earnest patron of the fine arts and an assiduous collector of high class oil paintings and watercolours’.4 We note his wider interests in modern Dutch art – Hague School painting that allied him closely with Lavery’s early Scottish patrons.5

Lady in Green (fig 2) was thus a sophisticated purchase by a sophisticated patron, and it slips seamlessly into the general pattern of Lavery’s painting in the years leading up to 1903. During that year he exhibited the portrait of Idonea La Primaudaye at the New Gallery – a picture which, like the present example employs a gilded ladder-back chair as its only visible prop (fig 3).

Described as ‘quiet, yet accomplished’, the portrait of Miss La Primaudaye carries the same air of distinction evident in Lady in Green and it forms part of a sequence that includes ladies in pink, purple and black.6 They were decorative rather than dutiful and in at least one instance, that of Nora (Private Collection), harmonies of colour and tone were considered so subtle that reproduction would fail to do it justice.7 The sequence was however, best summed up by James Stanley Little in 1902, when he wrote, … Mr Lavery’s art grows on one. More and more, as one looks at it, its subtle charm, both in the sense of refined and elegant craftsmanship, and in the sense of spiritual and intellectual qualities, pervades the onlooker … Everything that leaves Lavery’s easel has the stamp of finality and spontaneity upon it which marks the master hand.8

Such an encomium applies as much to the present work as to others of the period.

Prof. Kenneth McConkey
September 2014

€20,000–€30,000 (£16,000–£24,000 approx.)


2 McConkey 2010, p. 81.

3 Further research is required to establish the full name of ‘Mrs Cara H —-’. Lavery for instance exhibited a portrait of Mrs Hoare (unlocated) at the Royal Scottish Academy in 1903. His RSA Diploma work, eight years earlier had of course been a seated portrait – The Rocking Chair (McConkey 2010, pp. 67-8). It has not been possible at this time to determine if Mrs Hoare’s portrait was indeed the present picture, nor can we discover why the canvas was apparently sent to Dunoon from Glasgow, as the old Caledonian Railways label on the reverse indicates.

4 See EFB Johnston, ‘Toronto’, Proceedings of the Canadian Club of Ontario, 22 April 1912. Johnston (d 1919), a barrister, had his original practice in Acton, Ontario before moving to Toronto where he became Hon President of the Ontario Bar Association and Vice-President of the Royal Bank of Canada.

5 Johnston wrote on ‘Canadian Collectors and Modern Dutch Art’, for The Canadian Magazine … vol xxxvi, 1910-11, pp. 430-4; and his monograph, Painting and Sculpture in Canada, was published in 1913. Leading Canadian collectors of this period were often of Scottish Protestant lineage – hence their admiration for Hague School fieldwork subject matter. Johnston lent other two Laverys to the 1909 Toronto exhibition – Lady in Pink (no 37) and Mary in Black (no 39). This latter picture (sold Christie’s 26 May 2011), although a head and shoulders study, 14 x 10¼ ins, also shows the model seated on a similar gilded cane chair.

6 Although Lavery’s seated portrait compositions can be taken back to After the Dance, 1883 (Private Collection, McConkey 2010, p. 20), while Whistler’s Arrangement in Grey and Black, no1, the Painter’s Mother, 1872 (Musée d’Orsay, Paris), remained his most celebrated and accessible portrait by the 1890s. Around this time Lavery produced other ‘harmonies in grey’ – such Mary in Green, (National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa) and The Green Coat (Bradford Museums and Art Galleries), both of which depict his German model Mary Auras.


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