

STORIES FROM THE COLLECTION

LADY MARY CATHERINE RICHARDSON



Circle of Sir Joseph Highmore, British, 18th century, THE LADY IN BLUE (Lady Mary Catherine Richardson), Circa 1745, Oil on canvas, Gift of G.B. Kahn

This lovely portrait of a British lady was given to the museum in 2008. The donor purchased it, but we don't know from whom or where. The donor thought the painting was by **Sir Joseph Highmore**, an English portraitist and history painter who lived from 1692 to 1780.

It is often very difficult to identify an artist if a painting isn't signed, as is the case with this one, but it is also difficult even when it is! We all know about forgeries and that they can be difficult to detect, even by experts working in internationally-known museums and collections.

To research this painting, we looked at known examples of Highmore's work, for comparison purposes. Until the 1740s, Highmore painted members of the Georgian middle class. But then he became Governor of the Foundling Hospital, which served women who were desperate and sometimes abused. His subject matter changed, and he painted allegorical paintings depicting the suffering of women. The paintings were allegorical in that they didn't tell the story directly. For example, Highmore's painting of **The Angel of Mercy** shows a mother killing her baby. In the background is the Foundling Hospital, which could have saved them from this tragedy.

Given this information about Highmore's career, we concluded that if Highmore was the painter, the work might date from before the 1740s. But our conclusion is really a conjecture.

We did discover, however, that the painting was once put up for sale at Christie's Auction house in New York

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City. Their experts did not attribute the painting directly to Highmore, instead identifying it as “from the Circle of Sir. James Highmore.” Lesser-known or fledgling artists often studied in the studio of better-known artists, or even worked in their studios, some specializing in the painting of fabrics, for example. Given that this painting is not signed but is very much in the style of Highmore, the Christie’s attribution is well taken, and one we adopted.

Solving the mystery of this painting—**is it a Highmore or isn’t it**—is one of our many goals. Researching **provenance** (previous ownership) is key to understanding this portrait, but is very difficult to do. Reaching out to Highmore experts requires even more resources.

Although we may not know who exactly painted this lovely piece, we can enjoy it nevertheless as a classically composed tour de force replicating luminescent fabrics and rich colors and textures. In fact, when our docents talk about this painting with our young visitors, they never even mention who the artist might be. They focus on the tactile qualities of the work and how different this lady looks than those of today.

If you would like to see this stunning portrait of Mary Catherine Richardson, you will have that opportunity when the museum reinstalls parts of our **European collection** later this year. Hope to see you then!