



Portrait Of Lady Elizabeth Shirley On Porch By Marble Table C.1705-1710, Circle Godfrey Kneller



10 150 EUR

Signature : Entourage de Sir Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723)

Period : 18th century

Condition : Très bon état

Material : Oil painting

Width : 121

Height : 145

Depth : 9

Description

Few portraits of this period combine such commanding scale, unusually secure sitter identification and such evocative links with one of England's great landed dynasties. Painted when Lady Elizabeth Shirley was around thirty years old, this impressive three-quarter-length portrait was very probably associated with the ancestral picture collection of the Shirley family, Earls Ferrers, whose great Leicestershire seat was Staunton Harold. The painting presents in excellent overall condition for a canvas more than three centuries old: the flesh remains clear and legible, the silvery draperies retain their crisp highlights and the magnificent passages of crimson curtain preserve the theatrical richness on which the composition depends. Through her mother, Elizabeth Washington, the sitter shared

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the same English family origin as George Washington, later first President of the United States. Lady Elizabeth is seated beside a marble-topped table, her left arm resting with studied ease upon its edge while her other hand gathers the lustrous folds of her gown. To the left an architectural opening gives onto trees and an expanse of blue sky, relieving the dark interior and lending the picture the spaciousness of grand-manner portraiture. Jewellery is conspicuously absent: rank is communicated instead through costly fabric, elegant gesture, architectural setting and the sitter's assured but restrained bearing. The costume and coiffure point convincingly to the first decade of the eighteenth century, most probably circa 1705-10. The low rounded neckline, visible white chemise, loose sleeves and softly ruffled cuffs accord with female portrait fashion of Queen Anne's reign, while the hair is dressed relatively close to the head, with a long curl descending over one shoulder, rather than in the towering coiffures fashionable in the 1690s. Born on 20 June 1678, Elizabeth would therefore have been approximately twenty-seven to thirty-two years old, consistent with the woman represented here. The genealogical inscription must post-date the sitting, since it calls her father "Earl Ferrers", a dignity Robert Shirley did not receive until 1711. It was evidently added to preserve her identity and descent for later generations. Elizabeth was the daughter of Robert Shirley (1650-1717), head of the ancient Shirley family, and his first wife Elizabeth Washington of Garsdon, Wiltshire. Robert became Baron Ferrers of Chartley and in 1711 was created 1st Earl Ferrers; his first marriage produced an exceptionally large family of seventeen children, including Washington Shirley, who succeeded as 2nd Earl Ferrers. Elizabeth thus grew up within a network of houses, titles and family alliances in which portraiture served not simply as decoration but as a visual record of lineage. Her mother's ancestry gives the sitter an unusually engaging American

association. Elizabeth Washington of Garsdon was the granddaughter of Sir Lawrence Washington, whose branch descended from the Washingtons of Sulgrave. George Washington, later first President of the United States, descended from another branch of that same extended Sulgrave family. Garsdon was therefore not George Washington's direct ancestral home, as was sometimes later claimed, but the two branches shared the same English family origin. Lady Elizabeth belonged to the collateral Washington kinship from which the American president also descended. She later married Walter Clarges, a younger son of Sir Walter Clarges, 1st Baronet. Walter died at Ludgershall, Wiltshire, in January 1723 at only twenty-six; the principal pedigrees consulted record no issue from the marriage. Elizabeth survived him for seventeen years and died in London on 7 March 1740. A particularly personal trace of her survives at Winchester Cathedral, where the burial register recorded her as "Lady Betty Shirley". An early account of the cathedral monuments describes her broken ledger stone, bearing the deeply cut Shirley arms, and observes that she appears to have been the last person buried in that part of the cathedral. The formal young woman represented here can therefore be followed from the world of the Shirley country houses to a surviving memorial in one of England's greatest medieval churches. The portrait was probably not commissioned to commemorate her marriage, which appears to have taken place considerably later, but rather as a dynastic image of an adult daughter of the Shirley house. Its likely date places it in the reign of Queen Anne, amid the War of the Spanish Succession and the political transformation of the 1707 Union of England and Scotland. Portraiture was one of the principal visual expressions of status in this society, and affluent families commissioned imposing likenesses not only to record individuals but to populate the portrait galleries of their houses with successive generations. The picture is most

appropriately placed within the Circle of Sir Godfrey Kneller. Kneller, born at Lübeck in 1646 and trained in Amsterdam under Ferdinand Bol, settled in England in 1674 and became the dominant portrait painter of the later Stuart and early Georgian court. Appointed sole Principal Painter in 1691 and knighted the following year, he developed a highly organised practice capable of meeting extraordinary aristocratic demand. The National Portrait Gallery notes that Kneller commonly painted the faces himself while studio assistants participated in the costume and backgrounds, helping to disseminate a recognisable Knellerian language throughout London portraiture. The present painting belongs closely to that language. Its scale and format, broad architectural setting, sweeping red drapery, luminous satin and controlled pose find close parallels in Kneller and his immediate orbit. The designation "Circle of Sir Godfrey Kneller" therefore acknowledges a painter working closely within his artistic milieu without overstating the evidence. The picture has nevertheless attracted other names: at Christie's in 1976 it was sold as Michael Dahl. Its family provenance is particularly persuasive. The painted inscription corresponds strikingly in its wording, placement, lettering and pale-gold colour to the inscription on a portrait of Elizabeth's sister, Lady Catherine Shirley, photographed by the Paul Mellon Centre in 1973 while still in the collection of Earl Ferrers at Hedenham Hall, Norfolk. A portrait of their brother Washington Shirley carries another related lower-right inscription. These surviving examples strongly suggest a systematic Ferrers-family programme of identifying ancestral portraits and make it highly probable that Elizabeth's portrait was within the same dynastic collection when its inscription was applied. Further evidence appears in the rare catalogue of the Shirley pictures sold at Staunton Hall on 17-18 June 1834. In the Great Drawing Room were a portrait described as "Lady Elizabeth Shirley", lot 50, and another as "the

Daughter of Robert, first Earl Ferrers", lot 69, both then attributed to Jan van der Vaart; two additional portraits called Lady Elizabeth Shirley were listed elsewhere in the house. As no dimensions were supplied it is impossible to identify the present canvas conclusively with any one of these entries, although the scale, subject and family inscription make the comparison significant. The catalogue itself remarks that many of the early Shirley family portraits were considered to be by Van der Vaart. Significantly, appearing in that sale did not necessarily mean leaving the family permanently: the great Van der Vaart group portrait of Robert Shirley and his family, also listed in 1834, was photographed still hanging at Staunton Harold in both 1913 and 1950. By 4 June 1976 the present portrait was unquestionably at Christie's, London, appearing as lot 26 in the "Old Master Pictures" sale, attributed to Dahl and described precisely as "Portrait of Lady Elizabeth Shirley, daughter of Robert, Earl Ferrers, three-quarter length, in a white dress leaning on a marble table", 49 by 40 inches. The Christie's catalogue cutting remains affixed to the reverse and the stretcher retains the corresponding chalk number "26", providing unusually tangible physical confirmation of this chapter in the painting's history. The portrait is far more than an attractive decorative Old Master: it combines monumental presence, excellent condition, a firmly identified sitter, an unusually rich family story, probable Ferrers collection history, documented Christie's provenance and the intriguing collateral Washington connection to the family of the first President of the United States. In a market crowded with anonymous "Portraits of a Lady", this is a picture whose sitter, family, social world and collecting history can be recovered with unusual depth--a portrait that offers both visual impact and a genuinely personal connection with British and transatlantic history. Provenance· Probably the Shirley family, Earls Ferrers, Staunton Harold, Leicestershire;

- Possibly Staunton Hall, sale by Mr Cheatele, 17-18 June 1834, lot 50, "Lady Elizabeth Shirley", or lot 69, "the Daughter of Robert, first Earl Ferrers", both as Van der Vaart; alternatively one of the portraits of Lady Elizabeth Shirley offered as lots 120 or 122;
- Christie's, London, "Old Master Pictures", 4 June 1976, lot 26, as Michael Dahl;
- Private collection