



Portrait Of Sarah Bodvile, Countess Of Radnor C.1660 Studio Peter Lely, Manor House Provenance



16 650 EUR

Signature : Atelier de Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680)

Period : 17th century

Condition : Très bon état

Material : Oil painting

Width : 144

Height : 180

Depth : 10

Description

Portrait of Sarah Bodvile (c.1640-1720), later Countess of Radnor, c.1660 Studio of Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680) Oil on canvas Few Restoration portraits combine beauty, biography and country-house provenance as compellingly as this imposing likeness of Sarah Bodvile (c.1640-1720), later accorded the rank and precedence of Countess of Radnor. Preserved in excellent condition and presented in a magnificent carved and gilded frame surmounted by an Earl's coronet, the portrait descended for generations at Adlington Hall in Cheshire, one of England's most remarkable historic houses. Most unusually, the painting can actually be seen hanging above the chimneypiece in Mrs Legh's bedroom in Gordon Nares's 1952 Country Life account of Adlington, where it is specifically

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identified as Sarah. Unlike the many unidentified seventeenth-century portraits that survive without a recoverable history, here the sitter, her family and the historic setting in which her descendants preserved her likeness are exceptionally well documented. Sarah's remarkable life can be reconstructed through family records, parliamentary proceedings and contemporary testimony, including that of Samuel Pepys, who met her and described her memorably as "the great beauty, and a fine lady indeed." Adlington Hall is not simply a former collection address but an important part of the painting's history. The house developed over centuries around its magnificent late-medieval Great Hall, with its celebrated timber-framed Tudor ranges, later seventeenth-century work and substantial Georgian additions. Successive generations of the Legh family transformed it into one of Cheshire's most remarkable historic interiors. The family were notable patrons of music: Adlington's famous organ has associations with George Frideric Handel, while the heraldry of John Legh and Isabella Robartes incorporated into the house provided a permanent reminder of the very marriage that joined Sarah's descendants to Adlington. Sarah is portrayed seated three-quarter length, enveloped in lustrous golden-brown silk, its broad passages of light providing a sumptuous foil to her pale complexion. Pearls encircle her neck, while her dark hair is arranged in the carefully controlled curls and ringlets fashionable among elite women around the end of the Interregnum and opening years of the Restoration. One arm rests upon a stone architectural feature while the other gathers the drapery at her breast. The low neckline, abundant silk and informal arrangement of the costume belong to the fashionable pictorial vocabulary developed by Lely and his circle during these years and support a date around c.1658-65, when Sarah was still a young woman. Particularly intriguing is the landscape opening behind her. Beyond the architecture beside the sitter lies an

extensive stretch of water, with a sailing vessel and a compact settlement or group of substantial buildings dominated by a square tower; beyond rise distant hills or mountains. The imagery is unusually resonant. Her inheritance and childhood belonged to the dramatic maritime landscape of Caernarfonshire and the Llyn Peninsula, while the Bodvile estates extended through numerous communities of North Wales and included interests as far west as Bardsey Island. The combination of water, settlement, tower and mountainous terrain therefore raises the tantalising possibility that the setting was intended to evoke Sarah's Welsh origins and landed identity. The probable date is important. Another version of the composition survives at Lanhydrock, the great Cornish seat of the Robartes family, while a second version was formerly preserved alongside the present painting at Adlington. The composition appears to have originated when Sarah was in her late teens or twenties, possibly around the period of her marriage in 1657 and her entrance into the powerful Robartes dynasty. A marriage portrait, or a likeness intended to mark her new position within that family, is therefore an attractive possibility. Sarah had grown up in circumstances considerably more turbulent than her serene appearance here suggests. Her father, Colonel John Bodvile of Bodfel in Caernarfonshire, belonged to an established Welsh landed dynasty. He had represented Anglesey in Parliament but supported the King during the Civil War, suffering the political and financial consequences that accompanied Royalist allegiance. Sarah's mother, Anne Russell, came from a very different political and religious world. A committed Puritan, she became bitterly estranged from her husband. Their disagreement went far beyond ordinary marital discord: in 1646 Anne petitioned the House of Lords concerning the custody of their children, seeking to remove them from their father because of the "bad example" she alleged he set them. Sarah therefore spent part of her

childhood in a family in which the divisions tearing apart England and Wales during the Civil War were being enacted within the household itself: a Royalist father on one side and a strongly Puritan mother on the other. That division would eventually determine the course of Sarah's own life. In 1657, Anne arranged her daughter's marriage to Robert Robartes (1634-1682), eldest son of the powerful Parliamentarian and Presbyterian John Robartes of Lanhydrock, later 1st Earl of Radnor. Sarah's father had not consented to the marriage and refused to recognise it. Contemporary documentation records bluntly that Anne had "married her daughter Sarah to Mr. Roberts without her husband's consent." Sarah thus crossed the political divide within her own family: the daughter of a Royalist gentleman was married, through the agency of her Puritan mother, into one of the most prominent Parliamentarian families in the country. The consequences were dramatic. When John Bodvile died in 1663, Sarah was his surviving daughter and natural heiress to substantial estates in Caernarfonshire and Anglesey. A later will, however, diverted much of that inheritance elsewhere. Sarah and Robert challenged the settlement, alleging that Thomas Wynn and others had obtained control over her elderly and ailing father and induced him to alter the disposition of his property. The resulting quarrel became far more than a provincial inheritance dispute. It reached Parliament and attracted the attention of one of Restoration England's most famous observers. On 3 May 1664 Samuel Pepys spent approximately five hours in the House of Lords listening to Robert Robartes's case against Wynn, recording the allegation that Wynn had used "false ways" to persuade Sarah's father to disinherit her. The woman represented so serenely in this portrait was therefore at the centre of a bitter contest over marriage, inheritance and family loyalty that was being debated before Parliament while Pepys himself sat listening. The dispute continued until

Parliament intervened. An Act for settling the Estate of John Bodvell Esquire deceased received Royal Assent in 1667. The victory was expensive: the long litigation contributed to serious financial difficulties and portions of the ancestral Bodvile property were subsequently sold. Sarah had recovered her position as heiress only after a struggle that had consumed part of the inheritance for which she and her husband had fought. Pepys finally encountered Sarah herself four years after attending the parliamentary proceedings. Dining at Lord Crew's house on 27 April 1668, he saw Robert Robartes's wife, formerly "Mrs. Boddevill", for the first time. His reaction supplies extraordinarily appealing contemporary testimony to the sitter before us: she was, he wrote, "the great beauty, and a fine lady indeed." It is difficult to imagine a more evocative documentary accompaniment to a seventeenth-century portrait. Sarah's celebrated appearance is not family legend or modern sales rhetoric; it was recorded by a man who actually met her. Sarah and Robert raised a substantial family. Their children included Charles Bodvile Robartes (1660-1723), subsequently 2nd Earl of Radnor, and Lady Isabella Robartes (1674-1725), whose marriage would eventually connect Sarah with Adlington Hall. In 1693 Isabella married John Legh of Adlington, uniting the Robartes family with a Cheshire dynasty whose association with Adlington stretched back into the Middle Ages. A significant group of Robartes family portraits was preserved at Adlington, including Isabella herself, her father Viscount Bodmin, and the remarkable family portrait of Lady Bodvile with her daughters, one of whom is the young Sarah. The presence of this interconnected group strongly suggests that portraits accompanied the Robartes-Legh dynastic connection. The most natural possibility is that the present portrait descended through Sarah's daughter Isabella following her marriage to John Legh in 1693. If so, Sarah's portrait remained among her descendants at Adlington for almost 350 years

before acquired by Titan Fine Art. Its documented presence among this remarkable concentration of Robartes family portraits demonstrates that it functioned not merely as decoration but as an ancestral image within Sarah's own extended family. The survival of the Country Life photographs makes this provenance exceptionally tangible. In December 1952 Gordon Nares recorded the portrait in situ above the chimneypiece in Mrs Legh's bedroom, captioning it unequivocally as Sarah. He also recorded that there were two identical portraits of her at Adlington, the second hanging in the adjoining sitting-room. Family tradition held that one was the original by Lely and the other a studio copy. The present portrait was historically regarded as the prime version, but the attribution adopted here to the Studio of Sir Peter Lely is deliberately conservative. Sarah's later life explains another fascinating aspect of the painting. Robert Robartes became envoy extraordinary to Denmark in 1681 but died there in February 1682, aged only forty-eight. Because he predeceased his father, Robert never became Earl of Radnor and Sarah was therefore not Countess of Radnor when this portrait was painted. When Robert's father, John Robartes, 1st Earl of Radnor, died in 1685, the earldom instead passed directly to Sarah and Robert's son Charles. Sarah and her daughters were then granted by royal authority the rank and precedence they would have enjoyed had Robert survived long enough to inherit the earldom. Sarah could consequently be accorded the precedence of an Earl's widow, and it was in this later capacity that she became known as Sarah, Countess of Radnor. This chronology is important when interpreting the physical history of the present painting. The reverse bears the historic identification "SARAH COUNTESS OF RADNOR", while the magnificent frame is surmounted by an Earl's coronet. Neither should be taken to mean that Sarah possessed that rank when the portrait was painted. The Lely-period

composition almost certainly predates the grant of precedence in 1685--indeed Lely himself had died in 1680. Rather, the inscription and coronet record Sarah's later identity and the elevated status by which she was remembered by succeeding generations. They are therefore valuable evidence of the portrait's continuing dynastic life: an earlier likeness of Sarah was subsequently identified and presented according to the rank she eventually attained. The reverse also retains historic seals and other physical traces of its long passage through an ancestral collection. Sarah remained remarkably active in her long widowhood. Robert had died without making adequate provision for her jointure, and further proceedings concerning her dower rights eventually reached the House of Lords. Nor did she simply disappear into aristocratic retirement. A rental of 1714 records lands belonging specifically to Sarah Robartes, Countess of Radnor, scattered across numerous Welsh communities, including Bardsey Island, Aberdaron, Tudweiliog, Nefyn, Llanbedrog, Pwllheli and Caernarfon. In her seventies she remained associated with a geographically extensive landed inheritance. She survived Robert by almost four decades and was buried at Chelsea on 20 September 1720, described in the parish record as the Right Honourable Sarah, Countess Dowager of Radnor. Artistically, the portrait belongs to the world of Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680), the painter who more than any other defined the appearance of Restoration high society. Born Pieter van der Faes and trained in Haarlem, Lely settled in England during the 1640s and successfully navigated the extraordinary transition from the court of Charles I through the Commonwealth to the restored monarchy. Appointed Principal Painter to Charles II, he became the most sought-after portraitist of the Restoration aristocracy. Demand necessitated a sophisticated studio organisation in which established compositions could be repeated for sitters and their families, explaining both the

existence of several versions of Sarah's portrait by Lely's own hand and that of his studio. The portrait's imposing carved and gilded frame is itself a major part of its visual effect. Richly ornamented and crowned by the Earl's coronet, it transforms the picture into an emphatic dynastic object and gives it considerably greater architectural presence than an ordinarily framed portrait. Together painting, later inscription and coronet encapsulate Sarah's progression from the beautiful young Welsh heiress portrayed around 1660 to the formidable widow who was ultimately accorded the precedence of a Countess. Few portraits offer such an unusually complete combination: an attractive and securely identified sitter whose personality emerges from contemporary testimony; a life encompassing Civil War divisions, a controversial marriage, disputed inheritance, proceedings before Parliament and personal notice by Samuel Pepys; association with the studio of the pre-eminent portrait painter of Restoration England; an evocative waterside landscape that may contain echoes of Sarah's Welsh inheritance; a magnificent coronet frame; excellent condition; and an exceptional descent among Sarah's own descendants at one of England's great historic houses. Most unusually, we can still see the painting exactly where an ancestral portrait was intended to be seen--hanging above the chimneypiece in a private bedroom at Adlington Hall, surrounded by the house, possessions and descendants of Sarah Bodvile's own family.

Provenance: o Probably commissioned by or for the sitter, possibly for the Robartes family at Lanhydrock, Cornwall; o Probably by descent through the Robartes family to Sarah's daughter Lady Isabella Robartes (1674-1725), who married John Legh of Adlington Hall in 1693; o Thence at Adlington Hall, Cheshire, and by descent through successive generations of the Legh family; o Documented in situ in Mrs Legh's bedroom, Adlington Hall, 1952; o By descent at Adlington Hall

Literature: Gordon Nares, "Adlington Hall,

Cheshire--III: The Home of Mrs. Legh", Country
Life, 12 December 1952, pp. 1960-63, p. 1962,
fig. 6, the present portrait illustrated in situ above
the chimneypiece in Mrs Legh's
bedroom. Measurements: Height 180 cm, Width
144cm framed (Height 70.75", Width 56.75"
framed)