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Found: how Lord Nelson's spurned wife took love for him to the grave

Newly-discovered portrait suggests Viscountess Nelson remained so devoted to her husband she wore a miniature of him until her death



Mr Downer, who regularly keeps an eye out for potential memorabilia relating to Nelson, spotted it and purchased it for a few hundred pounds Photo: Martyn Downer Works of Art



By **Hannah Furness**, Arts Correspondent

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She was humiliated by her husband in the most public of ways, endured the scandal of one of history's best-documented affairs and weathered the indignity of being estranged. But Viscountess Nelson, better known as Fanny, remained so devoted to her husband Lord Nelson she wore a miniature portrait of him until the end of her life, a newly-discovered portrait suggests.

The painting, the first new portrait of the Viscountess identified in a century and believed to be only the fourth in existence, shows her in old age, still resplendent in her robes.

"She obviously retained affection for her husband, as she is wearing a miniature to honour him. She retained her dignity, as shown by her Viscountess robes."

Art dealer Martyn Downer

She is adorned with two mourning bands, understood to represent the double loss of **Lord Nelson, at the Battle of Trafalgar**, and her son Josiah.

A cameo image of Nelson can be seen on a gold bangle on her wrist, designed as the Star of the Order of Bath and decorated by gem carver William Tassie.



A closer view of the newly-discovered portrait of Lady Nelson Photo: Martyn Downer Works of Art
The portrait, by a J.B Beech and dated 1831, has been identified by Martyn Downer, an author, art dealer and leading specialist in the identification of items relating to Nelson. He spotted it on eBay, advertised as a portrait of an unknown woman, and has now traced it back through the history books.

He now hopes the image will help restore the Viscountess' reputation for posterity, showing her with dignity, warmth and "no little humour".

Mr Downer is due to present his full findings to The Nelson Society in the autumn edition of *The Nelson Dispatch*.

He will argue Viscountess Nelson "has not been treated well by posterity", and "suffered badly at the hands of her attention-seeking usurper Emma Hamilton".



Lady Emma Hamilton by Johann Heinrich Schmidt Photo: Ferrari Press

He claims she was not the "icy" wife she is often portrayed as, but a woman of "deep and highly charged emotion".

"The miniature offers a vivid impression of Fanny Nelson at the end of her life and how she wished to be remembered: mourning her beloved son and commemorating her famous husband," he writes.

"It is a dutiful image, slightly old-fashioned and yes 'prosy' in style but one which betrays warmth, patience, kindness, intelligence and no little humour.

"A fitting tribute for a most maligned and misunderstood woman."



Martyn Downer holds the newly discovered portrait of Lady Nelson Photo: Eddie Mulholland

Before now, there were only three portraits accepted as showing a likeness of the Viscountess: one three-quarter-length oil painting of her as a young woman, one 1798 watercolour by Daniel Orne and another by Henry Edridge.

In contrast, Lady Hamilton, Nelson's mistress Emma, is the subject of countless depictions; an artist's muse and captured in dozens of films, plays, operas and novels. Biographies have referred to the existence of another portrait, created in the Viscountess' older age, but no image had been produced.

One such picture was mentioned in 1939 biography of the Viscountess by E M Keate, as being in the possession of a granddaughter of Josiah Nisbet, her first husband.



The portrait of Lady

Nelson by a J.B Beech is dated 1831 Photo: Martyn Downer Works of Art

It is now understood the picture could have been passed down that family line, and eventually given to cousins living near Gwynedd.

Earlier this year, a miniature of an unidentified woman emerged in a flea market 50 miles away in Malvern, one of many items in a house clearance sale.

It was bought by a local collector, who put the item for sale on eBay hoping it might be of interest.

Mr Downer, who regularly keeps an eye out for potential memorabilia relating to Nelson, spotted it and purchased it for a few hundred pounds.

After examining it in real life, studying the date and artist, he is now confident it is the fourth portrait of Viscountess Nelson.



Martyn Downer, with the newly discovered portrait of Lady Nelson

He has previously discovered an unrivalled collection of items belonging to Nelson, including the silk purse he carried with him when he died and a treasure trove of 72 letters from the Viscountess.

The artefacts had passed to the descendants of the Admiral's friend Alexander Davison, and sold for £2million at auction in 2002.

Speaking of the significance of the 1831 picture, Mr Downer told the Telegraph: "She obviously retained affection for her husband, as she is wearing a miniature to honour him.

"She retained her dignity, as shown by her Viscountess robes.

"It shows that even a few years before her death, she still had feelings for him."

Emma Rutherford, portrait specialist

"She's always come off very badly compared with her rival, and I hope this, the first portrait of her discovered in 100 years, will help redress the balance."

Emma Rutherford, a miniature portrait specialist, said the discovery is of "national importance" as an intimate image representing the "summation" of the Viscountess' life.

"It shows that even a few years before her death, she still had feelings for him," she said.

A detailed description of the discovery and its importance will be published in the autumn edition of quarterly magazine, The Nelson Dispatch.