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# TILL DEATH DO US PART

*THE SECRETS OF A MARRIAGE PORTRAIT*



*A recently discovered portrait by Sir Francis Grant P.R.A.  
the painter of Victorian High Society*

# The Secrets of a Marriage Portrait

**Last year, a mysterious and beautiful woman entered my life. I encountered her for the first time in a small semi-detached house in South London, whose owners had invited me to see a portrait, inherited in strange circumstances, which had been in their attic for years and which they wanted to sell.**

Seeing her for the first time was an almost physical shock. There, with more than a little incongruity amid the modest decorations of a 1930s semi, was a grand, lusciously romantic, portrait of a beautiful, raven-haired girl from 1850 or so, fit to grace any country house. Across a century and a half of time, she stared at me through piercing blue eyes with an immediacy, engagement and sensuality that is all too rare in Victorian portraits. On her exquisitely painted finger were engagement and wedding rings and, as in the most famous bridal portrait of the era – Queen Victoria’s by Winterhalter – she clutched an English rose.

## Echoes of Winterhalter’s marriage portrait

So, who on earth was she? How had she found her way to South London, of all places? Who had painted her and why? A multitude of questions fought their way through my astonishment, as I stood there, gaping, trying to think of something intelligent to say other than ‘Wow’.

The owners could answer few of my questions, other than to relate a family story that she had been inherited shortly before the turn of the last century by a grandparent – a West End tobacconist – who had allegedly received the portrait from an unknown aristocrat in lieu of payment of a debt, together with all the jewellery she wore in the picture and a pair of daguerreotypes (early photographs) in matching frames, one depicting the portrait itself.

As the fog of mystery surrounding the portrait thus thickened rather than cleared, the picture’s tactile beauty shone out ever more strongly: this was palpably a picture painted by a master hand, of a subject that had manifestly captivated and engaged the artist. It was this belief that kept me going through months of often frustrating and confusing research.

A year later, the scene has changed. Most of the questions have now been answered and I’m standing – like the Ghost of Christmas Future – under a Holm Oak tree in a dismal corner of Brompton Cemetery, clearing away a century or more’s ivy growth from a modest, scrolled headstone.

It reads simply: ‘In Affectionate remembrance of Mary Ann Robarts who departed this life April 17 1887, aged 58 years’. And then, in letters that had partly worn away over the years: “Blessed are the Merciful, for they shall Obtain Mercy’.

Her death certificate, witnessed by one John Edward Madocks, describes Mary Ann Robarts as ‘a gentlewoman’, which is certainly how she lived, in a rather grand Regency square in what is now Knightsbridge but was then the artists’ quarter of London and known as Brompton – a rather raffish, transient place where pasts weren’t questioned too closely.

## Brompton – the artists quarter & graveyard

So that was who she was: Mary Ann Robarts. Was this the end of the mystery? Robarts was certainly the name under which Mary Ann had lived for most of her adult life, but subsequent research revealed that it was not her real name at all, rather one assumed for the purposes of a respectability she had already lost by the time her youthful portrait was painted.



So what were the circumstances surrounding the production of this delectable portrait of a young woman apparently on the brink of what seems at least to be a prestigious and propitious marriage? Not every one, after all, has their nuptials depicted in so spectacular a way. And how did her real identity emerge?

In the early weeks and months after I first saw the portrait, all I had to go on was the image in front of me. It was its romanticism and sheer panache, together with the fact that it was not signed, which persuaded me that the most likely candidate for its painter, was the self-taught gentleman artist, Sir Francis Grant, who would later become President of the Royal Academy and whose clientele were often friends, thus precluding the need to sign his pictures. His best portraits, influenced by the European pictures Grant collected and learned from, have a vivacity and swagger that set them apart

from the often stodgy portraiture of the time. Grant’s glittering sitters book – a veritable Who’s Who of the British Aristocracy – provided a welter of likely candidates, but no clues as to whether our girl was among them.

The only other clues as to the identity of painter and sitter were her jewellery – and the pair of daguerreotypes – that were inherited alongside the portrait. I took the jewellery up to Wartski’s in Bond Street, to show Geoffrey Munn, the brilliant jewellery expert from the Antiques Roadshow – in the faint hope that perhaps some of it might be recorded and traceable but in the expectation that he would at least be able to tell me something about the wearer. This Geoffrey duly did: the jewellery was, he said, largely typical of a gentrywoman of that period, with one rather odd exception: a pair of large garnet earrings. Aristocratic women of the period did not wear earrings; mistresses, on the other hand, did. It was the first whiff that all might not be what it seemed in the picture of our young bride.

## Clues in matching daguerreotype cases

The next clue was the pair of daguerreotypes (early photographs) in matching cases that had been inherited along with the portrait. These came in matching cases, branded with the maker’s name at an address in Bond Street. One depicted our young lady’s portrait and the other, a more primitive portrait of a young army officer. Military historian, Charles Griffin, was able to narrow the regiment down to a Light Dragoon regiment, one of the dashing cavalry regiments famous for such exploits as the ill-fated Charge of the Light Brigade. This piece of information served to place our subject very much in Grant’s milieu: he had painted Lord Cardigan, the commanding Officer of the 11th Light Dragoons and his younger brother, General Sir James Hope Grant, had commanded the 9th Lancers.

A laborious trawl through the Army Lists of the period, however, set against the names of Grant’s sitters’ book, again proved fruitless. At this point, I decided to exhibit the picture for the first time, attributed to Grant, in the hope that more information might be forthcoming. But nothing emerged and I began to feel that the mystery would never be solved.

But then, late last year, I received a phone call from the owner of the portrait who’d found a box containing documents relating to his grandfather’s inheritance. Frustratingly, he said, there was nothing about the portrait, but in passing, he mentioned that his unmarried and childless great aunt, Mary Ann Haines, whose property had descended via his maternal line, had written a rather unusual – and contentious – will, in which she left her house in Brompton Square to a Lieutenant Colonel Madocks for the duration of his life. Even more strangely, she is described in the deeds as Mrs Mary Ann Robarts – a surname then entirely unknown in the family

## Closer to home

The conjunction of these two names, however – not apparently related to our portrait at all – suddenly set off a wild train of thought. Could this mystery soldier be the young officer in the daguerreotype and, even more excitingly, could the young woman in our portrait turn out not be a mysterious aristocrat at all, but an all-too-real great aunt? Initially, this seemed so far-fetched that I felt almost reluctant to broach the idea with the portrait’s owner, who had no idea that he could be related to the girl in the portrait.

But a quick search revealed that the connections were real. Madocks had indeed been a Captain in the 9th and then 11th Light Dragoons – as well as the High Sheriff of Denbighshire and the scion of an ancient family of Welsh aristocrats. Furthermore, Robarts – the name later found on Mary Ann’s headstone – was Madocks’s mother’s maiden name. It began to look as though the young girl in our portrait may not have been a young bride at all, but a young woman in the process of being set up as a mistress with an assumed family name – the portrait merely a particularly elaborate part of a grand deception. How could this beautiful young woman – the portrait seems to say – with her engagement and wedding rings so prominently displayed, not be the wife of this highly respectable army officer?

But, so far as the portrait was concerned, the evidence was still circumstantial. Madocks and Robarts could not be found in Grant’s sitters’ book – perhaps unsurprisingly, given the apparently clandestine nature of the relationship. It soon transpired, however, that Madocks was indeed intimately connected to Grant and his circle. His sister, Emily, had been painted by Grant, together with her children in 1855 and his brother-in-law, James Beech, in the same year. Grant would also go on to paint portraits of the Napier family, into which Madocks’s brother and niece married.

## At the heart of Grant’s circle

Significantly perhaps, although the quality and style of the painting is similar in all these family portraits, there is a direct, almost flirtatious engagement between artist and sitter in Mary Ann’s portrait that is noticeably absent from the other – socially legitimate – family pictures. While Mary Ann looks directly at the viewer, her lips slightly parted, Emma Beech, Madocks’s sister, is tight lipped and looks demurely downward and stage left.

Despite the apparent story of the portrait, Madocks and Mary Ann never married. The assumption of the name Robarts seems, in fact, to have been something of a family tradition among military Madocks men. John Edward Madocks’s uncle – an army officer, too – also, bizarrely, kept a mistress called Mary Ann, who became known as Mary Ann Robarts and with whom he produced two illegitimate children.

It is probable, though unstated in any official records, that Mary Ann and John Edward Madocks lived together in the house in Brompton Square. The 1881 census revealingly describes the occupant of the house as Mary Ann Maddox (sic), a slip of the pen revealing both the bogus nature of the ‘Robarts’ name and the real, wifely nature of her relationship with the mystery soldier, to whom she would ultimately leave the house. John Edward Madocks is also to be found on various censuses, either living at his London club or ‘under his own means’ at the houses of friends.

It would seem, however, that, unconventional though it was, the affair between the lovely Mary Ann and her officially unattainable young Dragoon, was lifelong and heartfelt. It is John Edward Madocks, after all, who is present to sign Mary Ann’s death certificate, on which he describes her, pointedly and poignantly, as ‘a gentlewoman’. It is probable that he too, was behind the equally poignant valediction on her grave: ‘Blessed are the Merciful, for they shall obtain Mercy’.