



The Queen of Souls

The intimate drawings
of Violet Manners,
Duchess of Rutland



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Violet Manners

The Queen of Souls

The beautiful and talented Violet Manners (1856-1937) lived a long and charmed life, artistically and socially. A cousin of Sir Coutts Lindsay, who ran that temple of aestheticism, the Grosvenor Gallery, Violet displayed a precocious artistic talent. Unusually for the time, her father – a younger son of the Earl of Crawford – bothered to notice and asked no less an authority than Burne-Jones to teach her, but he advised instead that she should sit herself down in front of a mirror and record what she saw.

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It was inspirational advice and, almost from that moment onward, portraiture: of herself, family and intimate friends, became a fixed daily habit, developing almost into an obsession. Her grandson, the writer and historian, John Julius Norwich, describes their quality and quantity as an ‘embarras de richesse’. The drawings are fascinating products of their time certainly, recording and fixing a fleeting social milieu like so many butterflies in a case, but



Violet, aged 30 by Herbert Barraud.
Oscar Wildean

they also have an ethereal beauty that places them principally in the timeless realm of the aesthetic.

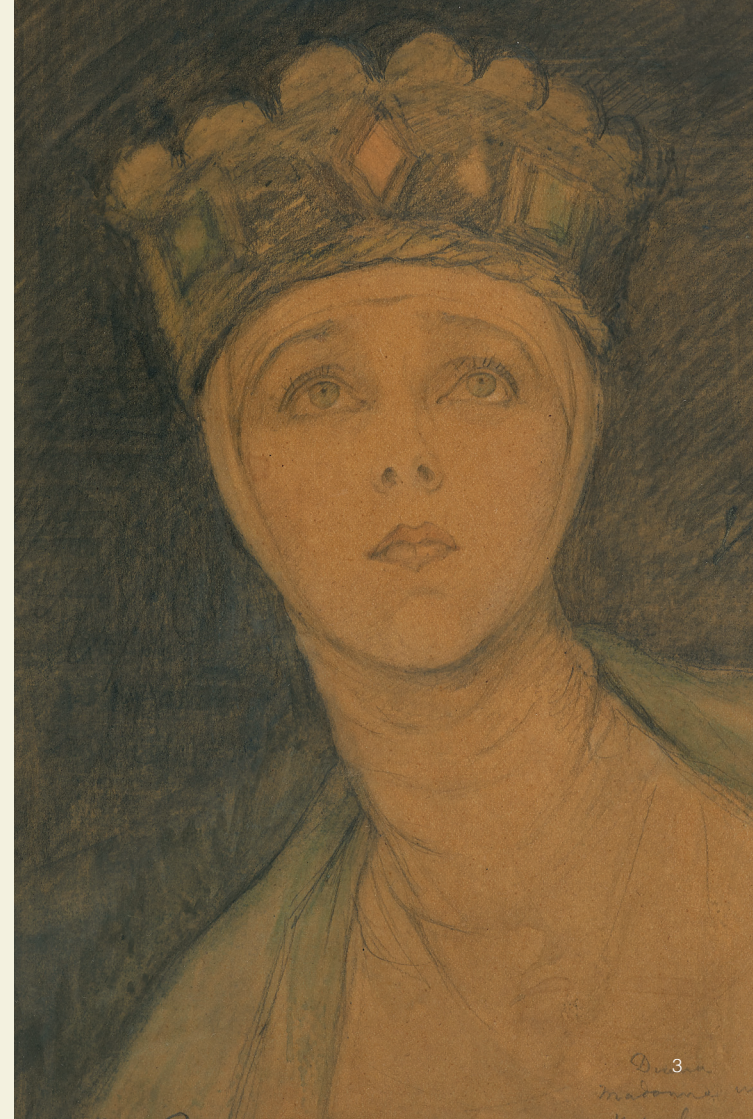
The sitters in Violet’s early work were the beautiful, Oscar Wildean, people that floated around the ‘Greenery Yallery’ world of the Grosvenor Gallery: the ‘Souls’ - as the arty aristocratic set styled themselves – were so called because according to one of their number, Lord Beresford, “they sat around talking about each other’s souls”.

Despite being surrounded by aesthetes in her youth, Violet married the stolidly conservative John Manners. one of the most eligible men in England, who would become the 8th Duke of Rutland, and produced a large – and extremely beautiful - family that included a daughter, Lady Diana Cooper (as she became) who would go on to be the great society beauty of the next century.

With the onset of marriage, the focus of Violet’s attention predictably became her young family. Although she bore five children, her family life was not without tragedy. Her eldest son and heir, Robert, Lord Haddon, died aged just nine. The portrait of him in the current collection, produced two years before his death, show a pretty but delicate, otherworldly child, almost a Peter Pan. After Haddon’s death in 1894, the Duchess sculpted a tomb memorial at Belvoir Castle, the family seat. The plaster for the work was later acquired by the Tate.

Haddon’s youngest sister, Diana, is also depicted in a drawing evocative for very different reasons. In a tiny but powerful pencil drawing, she stares, with almost brazen self assurance at her mother, brimming with a burgeoning pre-pubescence that would later flower into the most amazing beauty – as Lady Diana Cooper, she would become the pre-eminent beauty of her generation.

Diana (Cooper) as ‘Madonna of the Miracles’
Watercolour monogrammed and inscribed





Lady Diana Cooper
Silver-point etching with added watercolour, signed and dated 1926

Unusually, after the death of her husband in 1925, as a 69 year old Dowager Duchess, Violet continued to work, in a newly-built studio at Belgrave Square, with seemingly undimmed enthusiasm, recording the world of her glamorous daughter's era – the Bright Young Things of the 1920s – with as much grace and delicacy as she'd displayed in her youth.

Her beautiful daughter was the epicentre of this world. In 1926, Diana took to the stage in Broadway – apparently to help finance her husband political career - to play the central role of the Madonna in Max Reinhardt's revival of the mime play 'The Miracle'. The Duchess sailed on the Queen Mary to see her daughter perform and depicted her in full costume here. Her performance was a sensation and she was mobbed in the street. One paper described her as "the most beautiful girl in the world".

The Duchess also drew the singer and actress, Gertrude Lawrence at the very height of her fame in 1925. The image is reminiscent of some of Violet's early work but is also quintessentially 'twenties' in style. Lawrence, who was perkily pretty and vivacious rather than beautiful, never looked so icily cool.

Violet's attention was also drawn to another beautiful subject, the legendary Danish ballerina, Ulla Paulsen. Paulsen was the muse of another artist Gerda Wegener, whose relationship with her



Sleeping Child - Lady Elizabeth Hester Mary Paget
Pencil, monogrammed and dated 1917



transgender partner, Lili Elbe, was the focus of the recent film ‘*The Danish Girl*’, starring Eddie Redmayne. Violet seems to have been drawn to Paulsen’s indeterminate beauty in much the same way as Wegener, emphasizing the androgyny of her looks, a characteristic that is common to most of Violet’s drawings throughout her long career; they appear to have a beauty that, although undeniably rooted in the very corporeal milieu of aristocracy and fashion, are nevertheless not quite of this world.

Andrew Sim 2018

Portrait of a boy
Pencil, monogrammed, inscribed and dated 1912



Robert Charles John Manners, Lord Haddon (1885-1894)
Pencil, monogrammed and dated 1892



Diana
Pencil monogrammed 'V.R.'

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Gertrude Lawrence
Pencil and watercolour, signed with monogram and dated 1925

With thanks to John Julius Norwich and Duncan Walker, curator of the Russell-Cotes Gallery.

If you would like to read more about Violet Manners, Duchess of Rutland and her work, the following sites are useful sources.

The Tate Gallery

www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/violet-duchess-of-rutland-467

Art Uk

<https://artuk.org/discover/stories/violet-manners-aristocrat-and-portraitist-to-the-souls/>

and **Kirsty Stonell Walker's** excellent site

<http://fannycornforth.blogspot.co.uk/2012/03/beautiful-souls.html>



Portrait of Lady Violet, Duchess of Rutland

By James Jebusa Shannon

Oil on canvas

Private Collection (not for sale)

Violet's attention was also drawn to another beautiful subject, the legendary Danish ballerina, Ulla Paulsen. Paulsen was the muse of another artist Gerda Wegener, whose relationship with her transgender partner, Lili Elbe, was the focus of the recent film *'The Danish Girl'*.



Ulla Paulsen, Ballerina

Pencil and watercolour, signed and dated 1926



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