

Shakespeare's 'man of the sonnets' revealed



[left] Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton by an Unknown artist, circa 1620. [right] X-Ray of Elizabeth Vernon, Countess of Southampton by an Unknown artist, circa 1620. Photo by © National Portrait Gallery, London

Bristol University students researching for a new display of Tudor portraits in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery have uncovered a ghost figure which may be Shakespeare's only known patron Henry Wriothesley, 3rd Earl of Southampton, which had been subsequently painted over with a portrait of Elizabeth Vernon, Southampton's wife.

The discovery was made when the portrait was X-rayed for the display of portraits to be opened on 29 April, at Montacute House, Somerset, a National Trust property and a regional partner of the National Portrait Gallery. The display *On the Nature of Women: Tudor and Jacobean Portraiture 1535-1620* was curated by students from the University's Department of History of Art.

The portrait shows Elizabeth Vernon, a maid of honour to Elizabeth I, who was involved in an intrigue with Henry Wriothesley in 1595. She married him in secret three years later. Here she is shown in her forties after several decades of marriage. She wears a black dress slashed to reveal scarlet fabric, a white lace coif adorned with pearls and a scarlet flower to match. Her jewels include ruby earrings and a ring on the little finger of her right hand. The 'S' on her chain presumably stands for 'Southampton' and suggests that the miniature locket which she wears on her chest may contain a portrait of her husband.

An X-ray photograph following radiography – a technique which reveals the appearance of wood beneath the surface of paint – shows that a portrait of a man was painted beneath this image of Elizabeth Vernon. The figure, which can be seen slightly lower and to the right of the existing portrait, closely resembles the composition of portraits of her husband made around the same time, some of which have been attributed to the Dutch artist Paul van Somer (c.1576–1621).

It is thought that the unknown artist of this portrait painted over the image, possibly because a commission for a double portrait of husband and wife was abandoned in favour of the single portrait seen today. Another very similar version of this portrait, attributed to van Somer, exists at Sherborne Castle, Dorset, very close to Montacute House, where this portrait can now be seen.

A favourite of Elizabeth I, Henry Wriothesley, (1573 –1624), was the only known patron of Shakespeare, who dedicated *Venus and Adonis* to him (1593). Southampton's tempestuous relationship with the Queen culminated in his involvement in Essex's rebellion in 1601. Condemned to death when the rebellion failed, his punishment was commuted to life imprisonment and he was released by James I. Southampton was known at court for his flamboyant appearance, particularly his auburn hair which he wore long. Some hold the theory that Shakespeare's sonnets were addressed to him.

The portrait is one of 12 to be seen in the display *On the Nature of Women: Tudor and Jacobean Portraits of Women 1535-1620* which includes some portraits seen publicly for the first time in living memory. Shedding new light on the role of women in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, it is the first display for the National Trust and the National Portrait Gallery to have been curated by university students.

Visitors to the display at Montacute House, an Elizabethan mansion, will be able to see portraits of women praised as virtuous mothers as well as those tainted by scandal, such as Frances Howard, Countess of Somerset.

Among other discoveries revealed in the display are a portrait thought to be of Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox, who was Mary Queen of Scots's mother-in-law and one thought to be of Lady Jane Grey, both of which have not been seen in public for over 70 years.

New research on the portrait attributed to be of Margaret Douglas, Countess of Lennox shows that its wooden panel has been recycled from an early 15th-century painted interior. Dendrochronology - analysis by tree ring dating of the painted panel - shows the wood comes from a tree that was felled shortly after 1432. The x-ray shows that the panel was originally painted with large scale roses in red and white. This design was probably used in the mid 1400s for decorative wall panelling, much in the same way we wall paper is used today.

Source: Bristol University

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