

Violet MANNERS (London 1856 - London 1937)

The Artist James Jebusa Shannon Painting a Portrait of the Young John Manners, later 9th Duke of Rutland

Pencil, with touches of pen and brown ink, on paper washed a pale grey.
Inscribed John sitting to Shannon at the lower centre.
Further inscribed in pencil on the verso.
239 x 292 mm. (9 3/8 x 11 1/2 in.)

ACQUIRED BY THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON, DC.

This drawing depicts the artist's young son John Manners being painted by the Anglo-American artist James Jebusa Shannon (1862-1923), one of the leading society portrait painters in London, at his studio in Holland Park in 1897. The second son of the Marquess and Marchioness of Granby, John Henry Montagu Manners, Lord Roos (1886-1940) was ten or eleven years old at the time this drawing was made. His elder brother Robert, Lord Haddon, had died three years earlier, at the age of nine, and John was the heir to the dukedom.

Educated at Eton and Trinity College, Cambridge, John Manners joined the Diplomatic Service and was posted to the British Embassy in Rome in 1909. The following year he was commissioned into the 4th Battalion Leicestershire Regiment as a 2nd Lieutenant. Although he was sent to the Western Front in 1915, Manners was kept away from the front lines by his superiors - much against his wishes and to his great shame later in life - largely due to the efforts and influence of his mother, the Duchess of Rutland, who was determined to keep her only surviving son well away from the fighting. John Manners married Kathleen Tennant in 1916, and became the 9th Duke of Rutland on the death of his father in 1925. He died of pneumonia at Belvoir Castle, the Leicestershire seat of the Dukes of Rutland, in April 1940.

Violet Manners was to be among Shannon's most loyal patrons. Beginning in 1888 and extending over a period of some three decades, the artist painted several portraits of her, as well as of her husband and children. Derived from the example of Sir Anthony Van Dyck, Shannon's finished painting of John Manners, standing and accompanied by a dog, was exhibited at the New Gallery in 1897, and remains at Belvoir Castle today. A later portrait of John Manners by Shannon, painted in 1908, is also at Belvoir Castle.

In her manuscript inventory, The record of about 607 Pencil Portraits, Some tinted by Violet Duchess of Rutland, presented by her to the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum two months before her death,

she noted that she had drawings of 'My Son John 9th Earl of Rutland. / many many as a child / & later - also a life size Marble head 8 years old / 1894 / big head of him as aged 21 from Memory / drawn with a soft pencil life size Jan. 1937.' A portrait drawing of John Manners by his mother Violet, also executed in 1897, was reproduced as a lithograph, of which an impression is in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery in London.

Artist description:

A gifted amateur artist, Marion Margaret Violet Manners was born into an aristocratic family, as the youngest child of the Hon. Charles Lindsay, son of the 24th Earl of Crawford and 7th Earl of Balcarres. She was privately educated, and an early interest in art was encouraged by her parents. In 1882, at the age of twenty-six, she married Henry Manners, the only son and heir of the Duke of Rutland. The two were, however, very different in character, with Henry Manners lacking the artistic and intellectual interests and cultural sophistication of his bohemian wife. In 1888 her husband became the Marquess of Granby, and in 1906 he succeeded his father as the 8th Duke of Rutland. Violet Manners was a prominent member of the Souls, an artistocratic social circle at the end of the 19th century that favoured avant-garde art and intellecual pursuits, and whose members included Arthur Balfour, George Wyndham and the Tennant sisters. A famous beauty, Violet was painted by several artists, including Jacques-Emile Blanche, William Rothenstein, George Frederic Watts and, most notably, James Jebusa Shannon.

Although she had no formal training as an artist, Violet was an accomplished portraitist, working in pencil or silverpoint on paper. In 1877, at the age of twenty-one, Violet exhibited her drawings at the newly-established Grosvenor Gallery, which had been founded by her cousin, Sir Coutts Lindsay. Among her sitters were statesmen such as Herbert Asquith, Arthur Balfour, Winston Churchill and Cecil Rhodes, the writer Rudyard Kipling, the pianist and composer Ignacy Jan Paderewski and the actresses Mary Pickford and Marion Terry, as well as many of the noblemen and aristocratic women of her social circle. The death of her eldest son, Lord Haddon, in 1894, at the age of nine, was a terrible blow, and Violet channeled her grief into sculpting his tomb memorial. This superb sculpture, which portrayed the young boy reclining on an elaborate base decorated with relief portraits of his family, is today in the chapel at Belvoir Castle in Leicestershire, the seat of the Dukes of Rutland. (A plaster of the work was kept by Lady Granby at her home in London until shortly before her death, when it was acquired by the Tate Gallery.)

Violet maintained a studio at Bute House in Kensington, and showed her work at the New Gallery, the Royal Academy and the Fine Art Society, as well as in France and America. In 1900 she published a book of her drawings entitled Portraits of Men and Women. As one critic noted, in a review of an exhibition of her portrait drawings at a gallery in London in 1925, 'Her style is particularly suited to the interpretation of feminine beauty and elegance, but she usually achieves considerable success in her delineations of men.' Eight years later, a review of another exhibition of her portrait drawings noted that, 'There is no doubt that Her Grace is a charming draughtswoman, intensely feminine and and so passionately devoted to "the beautiful' that she would fain invest even men with its feminine quality; but as she confines herself to the pencil and wields it with real taste one can enjoy the masculine portraiture almost as much as the others.'

After her husband's death in 1925, Violet moved to Belgrave Square, where she built another studio. She continued to exhibit her work regularly, her last exhibition taking place just a month before her death in December 1937. She was buried at Belvoir Castle.