



La Dame aux Perles

Date

1901

Primary Maker

Sir John Lavery

Medium

Oil on canvas

Dimensions

144.8 × 96.5 cm

Description

The sitter for this portrait has been identified by the art critic Walter Shaw Sparrow as Marguerite Von Höllrigl. The painting became known as *La Dame aux Perles*. Lavery did another painting of this woman but there is no explanation as to why Lavery painted her twice. Von Höllrigl, an Austrian Baroness, led an eventful life. She was born as Margit Höllrigl on March 26th 1876 in Budapest, which was part of the Austrian-Hungarian

monarchy. Nothing is known about her youth but from 1895 to 1897 she was engaged as an actress at the theatres in Teplitz (Northern Bohemia and now Czech Republic), Graz and Linz. In 1898 she moved to Berlin where she was still registered as an actress. Around this time she changed her name from Margit to Marguerite and she also added a “von” to her last name, to give the illusion that her family was of noble origin. Given the fact that Lavery had painted portraits of a number of noble women in Berlin, it appears that Margit Höllrigl had become part of these circles and by 1903 she is registered in the Berlin directory as a “privatiere”, a woman who lives from her money. It would seem that by this time she had established a “salon” or high-class brothel which was frequented by high-ranking men. One of her lovers was Adolf Friedrich VI (1882-1918), the heir to the throne of the Grand-Duke of Mecklenburg-Strelitz in the north of Germany. For a time he was deployed at the cavalry regiment in Potsdam and around that time he met Marguerite and they had an affair. Apparently, he agreed to marry Marguerite, a person of a lower rank, which would preclude him from becoming the Grand-Duke. He had an arrangement with his brother Karl Borwin that after the death of his father he would renounce the title and Borwin would take the title instead. This plan never came to fruition as Borwin was killed in a duel and when Adolf Friedrich realised that his arrangement with Marguerite was obsolete he tried to pay her off with 5 million Reichsmark. At first she refused the money because she claimed that he had promised to marry her. After two years of quarrelling she seemed to accept the decision of the Prince and around 1912 or 1913, she married a Count

Bubna-Litic thus becoming a Countess although none of the Bubna-Litic family know anything of this marriage. However, in 1914, after Adolf Friedrich had become Grand-Duke, she pushed the price higher and higher and claimed to have letter which could prove that Adolf Friedrich had sexual relations with men and also that she had an abortion for him in 1909. However, the letters were allegedly stored in a safety deposit box in London and with the outbreak of World War One negotiations came to a standstill. At the end of the war, Adolf Friedrich was due to marry a Princess in Munich but it seems that Marguerite heard about this and some details of the compromising letters were sent to the Royal household in Berlin. On 23 February 1918 at Neustrelitz, Adolphus Frederick committed suicide. Undaunted, Marguerite sued the late Grand-Duke's mother and sisters but without any success and the case was dismissed in 1928 and she was accused of having blackmailed the Grand-Duke. A court ruling of 1928 reveals that Höllrigl ran a "salon" or high-class brothel in her apartment at 2, Altonaer Street in Berlin. In 1935 she left Germany by ship to Southampton but later that year she lived in the hotel "Bristol" in Vienna but then returned to Berlin where she rented a new apartment. In 1937 her name appears for the last time in the directory of Berlin and after that all trace of her disappears. It is a possibility that she was Jewish and was deported and murdered. MC Shaw Sparrow also says that the picture was exhibited at Brussels, and at the New Gallery London. Comparisons were made between 'La Dame aux Perles' and the work of Sargent. It is obvious however, that in his portraiture, Lavery protects the reserve of his sitters more than Sargent. Here there is an elegance and nobility that recalls Lavery's earlier work. A full size replica of the picture exists in a private collection.' The portrait confirms a relaxation of Whistlerian decorum. In a dazzling virtuoso display of pearl grey and pinks, 'the brushwork', in Shaw Sparrow's words seemed 'more evidently adpet and alert that we are accustomed to see in the modest excellence of other good Lavery portraits.' More than in previous works the artist had caught a high style that Sargent expressed in some of his female sitters. Although the Austrian Baroness, the epitome of aristocratic distinction, was 'in repose', she was 'like an actress who listens with patience and yet prepares for instant movement.' This sense of latent urgency is partly conveyed in the modulation of the silver dress and the treatment of the hands, which fall languidly over the sides of the wicker chair, effects that the painter would use in other works and which greatly appealed.