

Girl in a Blue Dress – The Mysterious Lady Selina

By Helen Weller- Archivist

Not much is known about the provenance or history of this portrait, belonging to the Cheshunt Foundation at Westminster College. The painting – by a painter of the English School, but unsigned and undated – is known as ‘Girl in a Blue Dress’, and is of Lady Selina Shirley, wearing a blue dress with a pink rose in the bodice, with flowing lace cuffs and pearls in her hair, and holding a book.



311 years ago today, on the **24th August**, Selina Shirley was born in **1707 at Astwell House in Northamptonshire**. The second daughter of Lord Shirley, Earl Ferrers, in 1728 she married Theophilus Hastings, the ninth Earl of Huntingdon, and became the Countess of Huntingdon. Rather amazingly for a woman of the time, the Countess of Huntingdon went on to found her own College for the training of ministers at Trevecca, in Wales, in 1768; and it is the descendant body of that college – Cheshunt College – which joined together with Westminster College in 1967 and which owns this portrait today.



Girl In A Blue Dress. Reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the Cheshunt Foundation, Westminster College, Cambridge.

But *is* this a portrait of the Selina the Foundress? There's a question raised by the book she is holding.

Detail of Girl In A Blue Dress. Reproduced with the permission of the Trustees of the Cheshunt Foundation, Westminster College, Cambridge.

If you look closely, you can just see the title on the spine: it reads "**Hervey Medita...**", or (presumably) "**Hervey's Meditations**". (The colours in this smaller image have been adjusted to make the writing clearer.) James Hervey, author and clergyman, was a member of 'the Holy Club', a nickname for a small group of students in Oxford in the 1730s, led by John and Charles Wesley (and including, amongst others, George Whitefield and

James Hervey) who met to talk and pray. Hervey's *Meditations Among the Tombs* was published in 1745.

By **1745**, Selina, Countess of Huntingdon (1707-1791) was nearly 40 years old – far older than the subject of this portrait! – and had had seven children. Moreover, if this portrait was painted after the publication of *Meditations* in 1745, she had been married to Theophilus for a good seventeen years and was now, of course, Lady Selina Hastings, rather than Lady Selina Shirley.

Is it a portrait from the 1720s, with the title of the book perhaps added later? The Countess was much influenced by the Wesleys and corresponded with John and Charles; George Whitefield was her personal chaplain; could "Hervey's *Meditations*", written by a fourth member of the Holy Club, have been painted in as a suitable title for her to be holding?

Or might it be a portrait of one of the Countess's daughters, and be 'Lady Selina Hastings' rather than 'Lady Selina Shirley'? Selina's second daughter was called

Selina, too (1737-1767). Perhaps it is her elder daughter, Lady Elizabeth Hastings (1731-1808), later Countess of Moira?

Or maybe it is a painting of a completely different sitter... and if so, who might she be?

–To see more of our paintings, visit the College page on the fantastic **ArtUK** website, which aims to make images available online of all art in public ownership in the UK (and art in the Oxford and Cambridge Colleges too).

–To read more about **Selina, Countess of Huntingdon** and her life,

have a look at **Gilbert W Kirby's biography, *The Elect Lady*.**

–To find out more about the **Countess of Huntingdon** and her work with **Thomas Coram**,

visit the **Foundling Museum** website.