

# EMMA HAMILTON: THE LIFE AND ART OF THE FIRST SUPERMODEL

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Detail of fig.2. Portrait enamel of Lady Emma Hamilton (née Emily Lyon) (1765-1815), formerly called 'Ariadne' or 'Absence', 1835, Henry Pierce Bone (1779-1855), after George Romney (1743-1802) – The Limner Company

Emma, Lady Hamilton (1765-1815) was one of the most famous women in the western world during the eighteenth century, and she continues to capture the public imagination today as the subject of plays, exhibitions, novels and history books.[1] So why does her celebrity endure through the ages?

Emma was beautiful and charming, but there was no shortage of such women in the late Georgian age, and as many beautiful portraits. Perhaps one of the reasons she stands out was her powers as a model: where her contemporaries often appear prim and proper, she is expressive and was an active participant in what appears to have often been artistic partnerships. She was painted, drawn or sculpted by more than 30 different artists in her lifetime (including 10 miniaturists), many of whom she sat to multiple times.[2]

Hers is also an intriguing story of rags to riches (and \*SPOILER ALERT\* rags again). Her social mountaineering saw her gain considerable status and fame. Yet Emma's life was far from a fairy tale, which is testament to another of quality that endears her to the modern audience: formidable resilience.

In this blog article, I attempt to explain what makes Emma so captivating with a potted history of her life and artistic achievements.

Emma was born 26th April 1765 in the small, poor village of Ness, Cheshire, which has been described as a rural slum. Her parents were an illiterate blacksmith, Henry Lyon and his wife, Mary (née Kidd, later called 'Mrs Cadogan'). She was baptized 'Emy'[3] (perhaps Emily, sometimes called Amy) in May 1765, and just one month later, her father died. Left to fend for themselves, mother and child returned to Mary's family home in Flintshire. It was an impoverished upbringing with no education, yet her mother and maternal grandmother were resourceful, providing enough for Emy to be a robust and healthy girl by the time she left home for domestic service aged 12.

Emy - whose name would go through several variations before settling on Emma – worked first for a local family before moving to London, on her own at just 13 years of age. Accounts of her early years in London suggest she was enchanted by London, particularly the actresses of Covent Garden. Emma also worked as a nursemaid in the household of music and theatre impresario, Dr Thomas Linley, and may have first discovered her own talents for singing and acting at this time. Her employment with the Linley family came to a tragic end however, when two of their children died.

Emma was sacked from multiple other jobs for venturing out after dark with friends. She came to be living on the streets,

possibly her own behaviour in this way making it impossible for her to hold a job in a respectable household. Alone, adrift and increasingly goodlooking, Emma was pulled to the fringes of society. She found employment with the madame known as 'Mrs Kelly' (real name Charlotte Hayes), who presided over a high-end brothel at King's Place, Covent Garden. There is no solid evidence that Emma worked as a prostitute, as she may have been a maid for Mrs Kelly, but in a letter some years later to artist George Romney (1734-1802), Emma wrote: "for a time I own through distress my virtue was vanquished, but my sense of virtue was not overcome." At this time, Emma also worked as a scantily-dressed attendant at the Temple of Health, a bogus medical establishment set up by quack Dr James Graham, where infertile couples paid to use a 'celestial bed'.

It's at King's Place that Emma is likely to have met the wealthy playboy (and later MP for Portsmouth), Sir Harry Fetherstonhaugh, Bt. (1754 –1846). Desiring to make her his mistress, Fetherstonhaugh plucked her from Covent Garden and installed her at his country house of Uppark, Sussex. Emma was by now quite striking (thought to be around 5ft 10 in adulthood, and very beautiful, with looks that were particularly appealing in the age of neoclassicism) and he fashioned her as the hostess of his country seat. As the playboy's plaything, Emma learnt to read, write and horse ride, as well as develop a taste for bon vivant. The party came to an end however when Emma fell pregnant, and Fetherstonhaugh cast her aside.

Emma returned home to her mother and grandmother, giving birth to a daughter on 12 March 1782, known as 'Little Emma'. Not yet 17, Emma was near destitute with a baby, but, with characteristic resolve, she saw an opportunity in another wealthy gentleman. Emma wrote to the Hon. Charles Francis Greville (1749–1809), a friend of Fetherstonhaugh's whom she must have noticed taking a shine to her at Uppark. Greville agreed to help, housing her as his mistress (and her mother, now going by the name 'Mrs Cadogan') on the agreement that she leave the baby behind. It is possibly also through his coercion that she changed her name, hereafter using the surname Hart.



Fig. 1 Emma Hart (later Lady Hamilton) as Circe, 1782, George Romney, oil on canvas – Waddesdon Manor (accession 104.1995)

Emma settled comfortably with Greville, who introduced her into society, and in April 1782, took her to George Romney to sit for a portrait. Romney was immediately struck by her beauty and vivacity and took her on as a model. It's unclear whether Greville had a deliberate plan for Emma to earn her keep in this way, or whether he commissioned portraits of his mistress for his own enjoyment, only looking to sell them at a later date when he needed funds. Both have been suggested by historians.

As Romney's model and increasingly muse, Emma gained notoriety. Romney was captivated to the point where Emma preoccupied almost his entire painting practice, sitting to him well over 100 times between 1782-86.[4] She was a gifted



actress and posed in a great variety of guises; the resulting images ranking among the most engaging portraits of the age. Thus, in her late teens and early 20s, Emma became a well-known beauty.

Meanwhile, Greville found himself in financial trouble and he sought to set Emma aside and find a suitable bride with a considerable dowry. A solution came to him in the form of his widowed uncle, Sir William Hamilton (1731–1803). Hamilton, British envoy to the Neapolitan court in Italy, had met Emma on a trip to London in 1783 and been immediately taken with her. During his stay, Hamilton had even commissioned both Romney and Sir Joshua Reynolds to paint her and had her portrait sent back to his house in Naples.

Greville negotiated with Hamilton to send Emma to him in Naples, in exchange for being named Hamilton's heir. It was a sordid scheme, with Emma led to believe that she was embarking on an educational sojourn and would return to London. Romney, however, was privy to Greville's plan and started painting her more frenetically than ever. It's from a painting dating to this time that a portrait for sale with The Limner Company by Henry Pierce Bone (1779-1855) [fig.2] derives.



Fig. 2 Portrait enamel of Lady Emma Hamilton (née Emily Lyon) (1765-1815), formerly called 'Ariadne' or 'Absence', 1835, Henry Pierce Bone after George Romney; enamel, 7 ¼ in (185mm) high – The Limner Company

Romney's oil painting, now at the National Maritime Museum (Greenwich, London), depicts Emma seated in front of a seascape with a forbidding sky, her mournful countenance cast down. Probably finished it after Emma left England in April 1786, it has been suggested that the image could be a reflection of the artist's own feelings for her abroad.[5] In the nineteenth century, the painting became known as 'Lady Hamilton as Ariadne' since it was thought to show Emma posing as this daughter of King Minos of Crete, who helped Theseus to escape from the Minotaur's labyrinth only to be abandoned by him on the island of Naxos. It remained in Romney's studio until after his death, when it was listed by one of his assistants as 'Absence'.

Emma learned only after her arrival in Naples that Greville had given her up. She was heartbroken, writing gut-wrenching letters back to London. She soon took to Neapolitan life however and got on well with the Hamilton, who, although 30 years her senior, was kindly to her (and absolutely besotted). Emma learnt to speak Italian and French, and came to be a local society figure, although not necessarily well-liked. By the end of 1786, she had become Hamilton's mistress.

Emma's renown was about to skyrocket with another artistic[6] endeavour. She trained her singing voice and, started performing tableaux vivant for dinner guests. The performances were imitations of classical figures from Sir William's collection of antique Greek vases, and he would oversee the shows acting as master of ceremonies. Scantly-clad in diaphanous, toga-like dresses, and often with her (very long) hair worn loose, it would have been quite a titillating spectacle; Emma perhaps drew on her experience at the Dr Graham's 'Temple of Health' in conceiving the show.

These performances, which became known as her 'Attitudes', were hugely enjoyed by Hamilton's many guests, including the Hanoverian artist, Friedrich Rehberg (1758-1835), who visited Naples in 1791. Rehberg captured her tableaux vivant in a series of 12 drawings, which were published a few years later in Rome, running into many editions of prints and sold widely across the Continent. Already quite famous, Emma became a sensation across Europe and an artistic inspiration, sitting to numerous artists in the 1790s including Angelica Kauffman (1741-1807) [fig.3], Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)[7] and Elizabeth Vigée le brun (1755-1842)[8].



Fig. 3 Portrait of Emma, Lady Hamilton, as Muse of Comedy, 1791, by Angelica Kauffman; oil on canvas, 127 x 101.6 cm - Private Collection (currently on display at The Royal Academy, London, in their [Angelica Kauffman exhibition](#), 1 March – 30 June 2024).

Even prior to this, in 1787, Emma described Hamilton's ambassadorial residence in Naples as being 'full of painters painting me. [Sir William] has now got nine pictures of me, and 2 a painting. Marchant is cutting my head in stone, that is in cameo for a ring [Fig. 4] ... There is another man modeling me in wax, and another in clay. All the artists is come from Rome'.[9]



Fig. 4 Portrait of Emma Hart, Later Lady Hamilton (1765–1803), 1786-87, Nathaniel Marchant (1739–1816); smoky chalcedony, silver-gilt; dimensions of visible cameo 27.3 x 21 mm - The Metropolitan Museum of Art (The Milton Weil Collection, 1940)

Sir William took Emma back to London to marry her in September 1791, making her Lady Hamilton. It was a fleeting visit, but Emma made time to sit for Romney on the day of their wedding, not once but twice: in the morning and again later the same day after the ceremony.

Now Lady Hamilton and a senior diplomat's wife, Emma had gained status, even if she was still considered low-born and her behaviour uncouth[10]. Travelling back via Paris, Emma was summoned to meet Marie-Antoinette while the French queen was under house arrest at the Tuileries Palace. Marie Antoinette asked her to carry a letter to Naples to her sister, Maria Carolina, Queen of Naples. Emma was thereby ingratiated with Maria Carolina and accepted at court. They soon become firm friends and Emma a close confidante of the queen.[11] Thus Emma's celebrity was such that she was virtually unrivalled, yet she was about to collide with one of the few whose notoriety equalled her own...

Emma first met with Horatio Nelson (1758-1805) (then a Captain) in September 1793, but it was not until 1798 that their infamous love affair began. Before their second meeting, Emma had written gushing letters to the now celebrated war hero inviting him to Naples. When he arrived, bruised, battered and feted by the whole of Europe (excluding the French), Emma was immediately theatrical in her displays of affection for him. Their affair began a few months later after Nelson came to the rescue of the Hamiltons (and the Neapolitan royal family) when revolution broke out in Naples.

While Sir William did express concern for the scandal, he more than accepted the relationship, perhaps because he himself was so fond of Nelson. The three of them spent much time together, calling themselves the *triumviratus* in uno ('three joined in one' - the motto of the Order of the Bath, of which Nelson and Hamilton were both members). Emma was pregnant with Nelson's child by the time Sir William was recalled to England by the British government in 1800, and the three returned together.

On their return journey, they stopped in Dresden where Nelson and Hamilton were painted in miniature by court artist, Johann Heinrich Schmidt. Emma's miniature, now at the National Maritime Museum, was treasured by Nelson and it was hanging in his cabin on HMS Victory at his death.

Back in London, Nelson gave up his wife for Emma and moved-in with the Hamiltons in Piccadilly. Emma soon gave birth to twins, only one of whom survived – a daughter to be named Horatia and given the surname Thompson, the same Nelson had used in his first letters to Emma. The trio and the new baby, continued to live together between Piccadilly and Nelson's house, Merton Place (near Wimbledon, London), but they were lambasted by the press and ridiculed at court.

Sir William died in London on 6 April 1803 with Emma and Nelson at his side, leaving the bulk of his estate, as agreed, to Greville. Whereupon, Emma and Nelson took up full time residence at Merton Place. The couple greatly enjoyed entertaining and were extremely generous hosts. Contemporary accounts are disparaging about Emma and Nelson's lifestyle, and Emma in particular was drinking and eating excessively by this time. Descriptions also pour scorn on the décor at Merton, which seems to have been furnished as a lavish shrine to the couple. Lord Minto wrote: 'The whole house, staircase and all, are covered with nothing but pictures of her and him, of all sizes and sorts, and representations of his naval actions, coats of arms, pieces of plate in his honour'.[12]

Emma hoped for Nelson to retire from the Navy, but when war with France resumed in 1803, he was appointed commander-in-chief in the Mediterranean. Emma was left behind raising Horatia at Merton. She may have also given birth again at the end of 1803/early in 1804. This third child was named Little Emma by Nelson but must have died shortly after birth.

In a brief trip home, in August 1805, Nelson and Emma received holy communion together and exchanged rings in what he

believed as a marriage in the eyes of God. This trip was the last time the couple would see each other, and less than two months later, Nelson was killed at the Battle of Trafalgar.

Emma was devastated by his death, and it marked a steep decline in her circumstances. Shunned by society for the impropriety of their relationship, her working-class origins and indecorous ways, Emma was not allowed to attend Nelson's funeral. She had mounting debts but continued to spend lavishly. Emma had grown accustomed to an extravagant lifestyle, but now had only modest funds. Within 3 years of Nelson's death, Emma was over £15,000 in debt.

In desperation, she turned to gambling and even sold mementos of Nelson to support herself and her daughter. Her efforts were to no avail however, and Emma was arrested for debt in 1813 (although permitted to live with Horatia on parole in nearby lodgings rather than debtors' prison). With the help of a friend she was able to extract enough of her annuity from Nelson's brother to free herself. Emma then fled abroad to Calais with Horatia, but she could not out run her health which was increasingly failing. Years of overindulgence and an escalating drinking habit finally caught-up with her, and Emma died in penury on 15th January 1815.

Thus, Emma's vertiginous rise was matched by a swift and cruel downfall. Yet her image and story remain popular, and two centuries after her death, she still has the power to beguile.



Fig. 5 Portrait of Emma Hamilton, 1791, Angelica Kauffmann; Black and white chalk, on gray prepared paper; sheet dimensions 14 3/16 x 16 11/16 in. (36 x 42.4 cm) – The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Purchase, several members of The Chairman's Council Gifts, 2003)

[1] Recent examples include Gillian Lacey-Solymar's production, [Irrepressible](#), at last year's Edinburgh Fringe; the Royal Museum Greenwich's 2017 exhibition, [Emma Hamilton: Seduction and Celebrity](#); Professor Kate Williams's book, [England's Mistress](#); and a work of contemporary fiction by Shappi Khorsandi, [Kissing Emma](#), which was inspired by Emma's story.

[2] A catalogue at the National Portrait Gallery of known works can be accessed online here: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/personExtended/mp01999/emma-nee-lyon-lady-hamilton?tab=iconography>

[3] Oxford Dictionary of National Biography, accessed online 10 April 2024 <https://www-oxforddnb-com.lonlib.idm.oclc.org/display/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-12063?rskey=s0KsKY&result=2>

[4] <https://www.npg.org.uk/whatson/exhibitions/2002/george-romney/emma-hamilton> - accessed 10 April 2024

[5] <https://www.rmg.co.uk/collections/objects/rmgc-object-14210> - accessed 10 April 2024

[6] I use the term ‘artistic’ here as, although these performances would have been conceived as a form of entertainment and not thought of as ‘art’, we might today consider them a form of artistic expression.

[7] Lawrence’s monumental portrait of Emma as La Penserosa, 1791-92 (Duke of Abercorn Collection) was exhibited at the Royal Museum Greenwich’s 2017 exhibition, ‘Emma Hamilton: Seduction and Celebrity’, and can be viewed on their blog [here](#).

[8] Vigée le Brun is recorded as painting Emma multiple times between 1790-1792. One of her portraits of Emma as Bacchante was copied in miniature by Henry Bone (1755 - 1834) in 1803, now at the Wallace Collection, London, [here](#).

[9] J. Ingamells, Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy 1701-1800, compiled from the Brinsley Ford Archive, 1997, p. 456 – quoted [here](#).

[10] Vigée Le Brun wrote in her diaries that, ‘Lady Hamilton was not very intelligent, although she was exceedingly mocking and denigrating, to the point that her faults were her only means of conversation. But she was cunning, and this helped her to snare a husband’.

[11] It was Queen Caroline who introduced Emma to Vigée le Brun, who, having been painter at the French court, had fled the Revolution to Naples.

[12] Life and Letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot, First Earl of Minto, ed. countess of Minto, 3 vols., 1874, 3.242 – quoted in ODNB