THE LIMNER COMPANY



SAMUEL COOPER (1607/8 - 1672)

Portrait miniature of Lady Elizabeth Wriothesley (b. before 1636 - d. 1680), traditionally called 'Countess of Gainsborough'; 1655

Circa: 1655

Signed and dated in gold, 'SC 1655'

Watercolour on velum

Gilt-metal frame with spiral cresting

Oval, 2 ¾ in. (70 mm) high

This portrait miniature has hitherto been identified as 'Countess Gainsborough' and listed as either of the two wives of Edward Noel, 1st Earl of Gainsborough, 4th Viscount Campden's (1641-1689). However, only his second wife Mary Worseley (née Herbert) (1648-1693), could correctly be called the Countess of Gainsborough, as Noel was not given the earldom until 1682, two years after the death of his first wife, Lady Elizabeth Wriothesley. In 1655 when this miniature was painted Mary would have been only seven years old, a fact which eliminates her as the possible sitter. Elizabeth, on the other hand, was born sometime before 1636[1], making her at least 19 in 1655, the date of Cooper's inscription on the miniature. Elizabeth is therefore the only possible candidate, and the present likeness compares favourably to her known iconography, including a pastel portrait by John Greenhill (1649-1676) at The Huntington Library [63.52.90] and a portrait of her with a pageboy by Sir Peter Lely (1618-1680) and studio at Petworth House, National Trust [NT 486278].

A query could be made as to why Elizabeth has here been given the title 'Countess of Gainsborough', but concern in this regard can be overcome when considering that the aforementioned Greenhill portrait, which is signed and dated by the artist 1669, has also traditionally been called 'Elizabeth, Countess of Gainsborough'.[2] It seems Elizabeth is commonly associated with the title, which was likely mistakenly applied by subsequent generations in the knowledge that her husband was the first earl, but forgetting the date the earldom was created.

Sitter Biography

There is scant biographical information available on Elizabeth other than the records of her birth and marriage. She was the eldest surviving child of the politician and courtier, Thomas Wriothesley, 4th Earl of Southampton (1608–1667)[3] and his first wife, Rachel de Massüe de Ruvigny (1603–1640) (her first married name de Beaujeu), a French noblewoman.

Without any surviving sons, Southampton made Elizabeth and her younger sister, Rachel, the joint heirs of his father's estate.[4] Elizabeth inherited a considerable fortune as well as the family seat of Titchfield Abbey, Hampshire, which had been granted to the first Earl of Southampton by Henry VIII in 1537 as a reward for his assistance in the suppression of the monasteries. Once fashioned into a grand house, guests included Edward VI, Elizabeth I and Charles I. Elizabeth's grandfather, the 3rd Earl, had been a patron of William Shakespeare and it is believed that some of Shakespeare's plays were performed here for the first time.

Growing up during the English Civil War, Elizabeth would have been reasonably shielded from the horrors as her father was, by all accounts, loyal yet pragmatic in his support for Charles I. Southampton had become close to Charles in the early 1640s and was made a Gentleman of the Bedchamber and appointed to the Privy Council. On the outbreak of war, he was a steadfast royalist but always advocated for peace (as he would later prior to the Anglo-Dutch War) and promoted peace talks. Throughout the Interregnum, he lived quietly and declined to involve himself in royalist conspiracies. He was appointed Lord Treasurer on the Restoration of the monarchy in 1660, a position he held until his death.

The year following the Restoration, Elizabeth married The Hon. Edward Noel, son of Baptist Noel, 3rd Viscount Campden. The same year, Noel first served as Member of Parliament for Rutland, which he remained until 1678, when he would be appointed Lord Lieutenant of Hampshire - his adopted home after marrying Elizabeth. In 1679, he was elected MP for Hampshire and created 1st Baron Noel of Titchfield in 1680/81. And so, the Titchfield inheritance had created a new title which would pass to the couple's son, Wriothesley Baptist Noel, 2nd Earl of Gainsborough (1665-1690). Elizabeth and Edward also had four daughters: Lady Frances Noel (d.1684), Lady Jane Noel (d.1733), Lady Elizabeth Noel (d.1705) and Lady Juliana (dates unknown). Elizabeth would die in 1680 aged only in her middle 40s.[5]

The Artist

The present portrait is an unusually coquettish composition for Samuel Cooper. He could perhaps be making a nod to Sir Anthony Van Dyck's (1599-1641) sensational portrait of Elizabeth's mother as Fortune [National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne [1246-3]]. A baroque tour de force, measuring nearly 2.25m tall, the picture's infamy meant that it was copied multiple times with 10 known versions still in existence.[6] It was painted not long before Rachel's death in childbirth in 1640, when Elizabeth was still a young girl. As not only a well-known image of the period, but one of the last portraits of her mother, Van Dyck's portrait would have likely been at the forefront in Elizabeth's visual memory as well as the artist's.[7] Many of Cooper's early portraits were influenced by Van Dyck, and a professional alliance between the two master portrait artists has been suggested.[8]

Here, Elizabeth wears an ensemble almost identical to her mother's, including very large pearl drop earrings and necklace, and it's not beyond possibility that the pearls are the same worn by her mother in Van Dyck's portrait (considering the value of such jewels). Both sitters also point their face downwards

towards their right shoulder while gazing alluringly at the viewer from under heavy eyelids. It is also an unusually flirtatious image for the puritan Interregnum period, indicative of the intimate and private function of the miniature. Likely intended for a future husband, it was painted when Elizabeth was on the cusp of womanhood and her family would have been looking to find her a suitable match.

Cooper may also have painted Elizabeth's father in 1661 [Duke of Bedford Collection][9], and a portrait of Elizabeth's future husband dating to 1657, which had previously been attributed to Cooper, survives at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge [accession no. 3832].

[1] Elizabeth is recorded as being the eldest of Wriothesley's two surviving daughters from his first marriage, and her younger sister's birth date is known to be 1636 - See Some account of the life of Rachael Wriothesley Lady Russell, by the editor of Madame du Deffrand's letters, followed by a series of letters from Lady Russell to her husband...et.al, Longman, London, 1820, p.18 – National Archives Online https://archive.org/details/someaccountoflif00russiala/page/14/mode/2up accessed 12 June 2025

[2] See online catalogue note here https://emuseum.huntington.org/objects/2680/countess-of-gainsborough?ctx=46f101d209899d7dafc1697910a6b8c3cc7b9a0c&idx=0

[3] The sitter is not to be confused with her younger half sister, also called Lady Elizabeth Wriothesley (b.1645/6?) (later Elizabeth Percy, Countess of Northumberland, and Elizabeth Montagu on her second marriage) who was the daughter of her father 4th Earl of Southampton and his second wife, Lady Elizabeth Leigh.

[4] Russell, Lady Rachel (1636-1723), Some account of the life of Rachael Wriothesley Lady Russell, by the editor of Madame du Deffrand's letters, followed by a series of letters from Lady Russell to her husband...et.al, Longman, London, 1820, p.15 – National Archives Online https://archive.org/details/someaccountoflif00russiala/page/14/mode/2up accessed 12 June 2025

[5] Elizabeth was born before 1636 but after 1634, the date her parents married.

[6] The prime version is now considered to be that in the collection of the National Gallery of Victoria. Others in public collections include Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge [PD.73-1978], and Osterley Park, London [National Trust, NT 772292.1].

[7] Many of Cooper's portraits of te

[8] Rutherford, E., (ed.) Grosvernor, B., Warts and All: The Portrait Miniatures of Samuel Cooper (1607/8-1672), a catalogue of the exhibition at Philip Mould & Co., London, 13 November – 7 December 2013, p. 30

[9] This miniature is traditionally identified as the 4th Earl of Southampton, and the likeness is generally considered convincing. See Rutherford, cat. no. 47, p.126

Literature:

C. G. Williamson, Catalogue of the Collection of Miniatures, the Property of J. Pierpont Morgan, London 1906-08, Col. I, No. 100, p.92;

Foskett, D., Samuel Cooper 1609-1672, London 1974, p.114 (as whereabouts unknown).