THE LIMNER COMPANY



MIRA EDGERLY KORZYBSKA (1872 - 1954)

Portrait miniature of Lady Mary Cook (née Hood; 1873-1943) wearing green dress, collecting papers from her floor

Circa: 1911

1911

Watercolour on ivory (licence AL5SYPRB)

Oval, 190 mm (7 1⁄2 in) high; frame 35 x 25 cm

Signed and dated ‘MEdgerly 1911’

Set into the original gilded gesso wood frame by H. W. Taylor[1], with gilded doors and a carved Cornish Chough (part of the Hood family crest); inscribed verso ‘Marnie/ Xmas 1911’

This portrait miniature, still housed in its splendid, gilded architectural frame, complete with doors, brings together the lives and work of two important women of the early 20th century, and a surprising link to Leonardo da Vinci’s *Salvator Mundi* painting.[2]

Painted by Mira Edgerly in 1911 when both artist and patron were around 30 years old, this portrait shows the sitter, pencil in hand, annotating what appear to be music scores. By 1911, Mira (or ‘Myra’ in the census) was living in Kensington, London, close enough to the Cook family home at Doughty House, Richmond, Surrey to have met Mary and painted her. It was here at Doughty that Mary and her husband Herbert welcomed high-society figures like Samuel Courtauld and Ramsay MacDonald. In the house’s specially commissioned 125-foot gallery, Herbert’s grandfather Sir Francis Cook (1817-1901) had hung his world-class collection of over 500 major works, featuring masterpieces by Rembrandt, Rubens, Van Dyck, and Velázquez – and including Leonardo da Vinci's *Salvator Mundi*. An avid art collector, Sir Francis Cook had bought the *Salvator Mundi* a year before his death in 1900.

At the time, it had been heavily painted over and was attributed to a follower of Leonardo called

Bernardino Luini. It remained in the Cook family until the dispersal of the Cook collection in 1958. In that year, Mary's son, Sir Francis Cook (1907-1978), 4th Baronet, sold the painting at a Sotheby's auction in London. It was sold as a work by Leonardo's pupil, Giovanni Antonio Boltraffio (circa 1467-1516), for a mere £45. In 2017, the former Cook collection painting made global headlines when it was sold at Christie's in New York for a historic record of $450.3 million.

The artist Mira Edgerly was described by a contemporary as a ‘very tall and very beautiful and very brilliant woman’. Born in Aurora, Illinois, her father was the Director of the Michigan Central Railroad The Metropolitan Museum in New York is just one American Museum to hold two of her works in miniature – ‘Mother Love’, painted in the same year as the present work and ‘The Dodge Children of Detroit’ (1926). Although largely self-taught, her initial artistic growth was further shaped by her friendship with photographer Arnold Genthe (1869-1942), who introduced her to exemplary works of portraiture. She moved to New York around 1900 and then in 1905, at the invitation of the actress Mrs. Patrick Campbell (1865-1940), to London. Having established a studio in Paris, she met important artists such as John Singer Sargent (1856- 1925), who admired her miniatures for their technical virtuosity and departure from conventional sizing. Sargent's endorsement helped elevate her profile, leading to commissions from figures like the Rothschild family and literary notables.

Edgerly was also instrumental in helping other women in their careers – most notably in getting Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) published. In 1912, the year of the publication of ‘Portrait of Mable Dodge at the Villa Curonia’,[3] Edgerly encouraged Alice B. Toklas (1877-1967) to contact certain English publishers who might be interested in Stein's work, including John Lane, who became her first major U.K. publisher.

A year or so after the current portrait of Mary Cook was completed, Edgerly was asked to paint Princess Patricia of Connaught (1886-1974) and earned the reputation of having "miniatured everybody and the royal family".[4] In 1919 she married (as her second husband) Alfred Korzybski, a Polish engineer and intellectual serving as a recruiting officer for Polish forces. The two shared interests in human development and connected quickly, leading to their marriage on 17th January 1919; whereupon Edgerly adopted the title Countess de Korzybska. The couple had no children but supported each other in their pioneering work – he with his publications on general semantics and her with her experimental portraits on large sheets of ivory. They separated in 1937, with Mira continuing to paint until the 1940s, by which time arthritis made it impossible for her to wield a brush.

[1] The frame is by Harry Walter Taylor (1864–1934) who set up his frame-making business, H.W. Taylor & Co., in

1896, located at ‘The Old Golden Palette’ in Bayswater by 1900. The firm was used by American artists including W.

Elmer Schofield (1866/7-1944). The miniature of ‘Mother Love’ in the Met, New York, is possibly also housed in a

frame by H.W. Taylor.

[2] Sold Christie’s, New York, 15 November 2017, lot 9B, for $450,312,500.

[3] A first edition of this book was sold Christie’s, New York, MASTERPIECES OF MODERN LITERATURE:

LIBRARY OF ROGER RECHLER, 11 October 2002 and inscribed "To my friend Miss Edgerly, Gertrude Stein."

[4] Elizabeth Sprigge, *Gertrude Stein: Her Life and Work*, New York, 1957, p. 98.