

A painting of a woman in a yellow dress on a green background. The woman is depicted in a dynamic, almost dancing pose, with her arms raised and her body angled. She wears a bright yellow, textured dress with a ruffled skirt. The background is a vibrant green with various shades and textures, suggesting a lush, outdoor setting. The overall style is expressive and somewhat abstract, with visible brushstrokes and a rich color palette.

# Four women Four centuries

PHILIP MOULD  
& COMPANY

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*"Isn't it enough that our female sex is already kept outside of public dignities without being excluded from language as well?"*

18th  
century



*"The public voice, while it was divested of partiality, must ever be considered the surest criterion whereby to judge of merit. At this tribunal then, with all due deference, I am contented to be tried."*

20th  
century



17th  
century



*"...God gave [Eve] for a friend as well as for a wife. A wife and friend but not a slave; For we find her not in the beginning made subject to Adam, but always of equal dignity & honour with him"*

19th  
century



*"Even today, a female artist is considered more or less a freak, and may either be undervalued or overpraised, and by sole virtue of her rarity and her sex be of better press value."*



Dame Laura Knight, *Dancers of the Ballets Russes*, c. 1914  
Limoges enamel  
2 in. (5 cm) high

## Introduction

The reputation of Britain's women artists has been greatly reconsidered, partly thanks to Tate's landmark exhibition *Now You See Us: Women Artists in Britain*.

Inspired by Tate's exhibition, our London Art Week display furthers the conversation around women artists, highlighting a leading figure from each of the last four centuries: Mary Beale, Maria Verelst, Sarah Biffin, and Dame Laura Knight.

Each artist epitomizes the tastes of her era while asserting her individuality. Mary Beale's portraiture reflects seventeenth-century baroque formality, yet her family paintings reveal rare intimacy. Maria Verelst cultivated influential patrons with her distinctive large-scale compositions. Sarah Biffin achieved international fame for her miniatures, boldly embracing her status as a disabled artist. Dame Laura Knight, known for her vivid

realism, broke barriers as the first woman elected to full Royal Academy membership.

This focused display charts a dynamic progression in British art, celebrating the achievements of four extraordinary painters.

Philip Mould

## Mary Beale (1633–1699)

Mary Beale (1633-1699) was one of Britain's first professional woman artists. She specialised in portraiture, capturing the aristocracy and intellectual elite of Restoration England. Her work stood out for its naturalistic style and intimate portrayal of her sitters, effortlessly blending formality with warmth – this is particularly evident in her portrayals of her close friends and family.

This characteristically sensitive head study of Beale's son Bartholomew was painted in the early 1660s, when the family lived in Hind Court, just off Fleet Street. Beale is not known to have received formal paid commissions at this date, but we do know that she was actively painting portraits of friends and family. This is one of around twelve surviving studies of Bartholomew painted at this date and similar examples can be found in public and private collections worldwide. These works are notable for their immediacy

and rank amongst the most affecting studies in oil in British art of the period.

In Hind Court, Charles maintained an office, while Beale kept a 'paynting room', which, based on their expense records from that time, was amply supplied. Items of note include '*pencills, brushes, goose & swan fitches*' and '*quantities of primed paper to paint on*'. While paper was a cheaper alternative to canvas, it was still expensive, which suggests that Beale was already taking her art seriously and had her husband's full support. Given the fragility of paper, many of her studies from this date have not survived; those that did have been laid onto panel or canvas, as seen here. The present work originally consisted of just the sitter's head and neck set against a dark background; the costume was added by another hand.



Mary Beale, *Portrait of a Gentleman*, 1670s  
 Oil on canvas  
 30 x 25 in. (76.2 x 63.5 cm)  
**£ 18,500**



Mary Beale, *King Charles II (1630–1685)*, c. 1675  
 Oil on canvas  
 18 x 14 ½ in. (45 x 36.5 cm)  
**£ 58,000**

In the 1670s Beale's children, Bartholomew and Charles, assisted their mother in her studio, painting draperies and stone cartouches. The carved stonework design around this portrait of a bewigged gentleman was likely painted by one of Beale's children. This portrait is a good example of Beale's formal portraiture, most likely painted 'for profit' – as opposed to 'for study and improvement' – and shows her distinctive sensitivity in the highlighting of facial features. Between 1671 and 1682 Beale charged £5 for a portrait on this scale, with an additional £1 chargeable for the use of ultramarine. Portraits such as this followed a relatively standard template, with the sitter shown in classical dress and placed against a plain background. The frame around this portrait is original, and of the same design as that seen around other known works by

Beale. They were possibly provided by the framemaker Tobias Flessiers (d.1689), who we know was supplying frames to Charles in 1677.

Another subdivision of Beale's studio practice were her small-scale portraits after the King's Principal Painter, Sir Peter Lely. Beale and Lely maintained a strong friendship, which enabled Beale to visit Lely at his studio to watch him at work. This unprecedented access to London's most sought-after portrait painter had a lasting impact on Beale's own studio practice. She dedicated significant effort to producing small-format works, which she referred to as her works 'in little', painting both original compositions and copies of Lely's portraits.

This portrait of King Charles II in armour was painted after Lely's portrait type of King Charles II, known through several versions after the artist and his studio. In this 'in little' work, Beale reproduces the painting on a smaller scale with ease and demonstrates a degree of versatility possessed by few portraitists of the period. The result is a work of distinct quality and tonal subtlety. These 'in little' works were sometimes commissioned by Lely's sitters and were probably intended as gifts for family members or close friends. This particular branch of her practice provided an additional stream of financial revenue, aiding her overall studio income.

Beale was not afforded the luxury of royal patronage, nor did she receive the protection afforded by a salary, unlike Lely who received

an annual pension of £200 as the King's court painter. Paintings of the King after Lely, such as the present work, were the closest that Beale would get to painting portraits of royalty.



Mary Beale, *A Young Boy Seated in a Landscape*, 1680s  
Oil on canvas  
18 x 14 1/2 in. (45 x 36.5 cm)  
**Price on request**

The majority of surviving works by Beale on a larger scale show a heavy reliance on Lely's compositional designs. Some works, however, reveal her creative independence. This composition depicting a boy dressed in classical robes and seated in a verdant landscape, shows a freedom of expression seldom seen in Beale on this scale. Although the sitter's identity is unknown at present, this young boy was evidently part of Beale's close circle of ecclesiastical patrons. He is shown with a lamb and crook – the attributes of St John the Baptist – and gestures to a steepled church in the distant landscape; the subject is ostensibly secular, albeit with Christian undertones. During a time heavily influenced by religious beliefs, subtle allusions to faith were frequently incorporated into portraiture. It is impossible to overstate the importance of religion in Beale's life and the influence it had on her portraiture. She was born into a well-to-do Puritan household and throughout her life placed a strong emphasis on human

relationships, such as friendship, family and community. Beale's circles of friends included clergymen, intellectuals and artists, and each year she paid ten percent of her income from each portrait into a 'Pious and Charitable Account', which was maintained even when the family was in financial difficulties. Beale's association with influential church figures may have also helped her navigate the gendered constraints of her era, offering social legitimacy and support for her ambitious career.

Thanks to the wealth of primary documentation relating to Beale and her family, she remains one of the best recorded artists of her era. These records provide unique insights into her practice, daily life, and the challenges she faced, offering a vivid picture of a woman who managed to thrive in the male-dominated art world of Restoration England. As such, she paved the way for generations of artists to come.





**MARY BEALE**

*Bartholomen Beale (1656–1709)*, Early 1660s

Oil on paper, laid on canvas

14 1/2 x 11 in. (37 x 28 cm)

Price on request

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## 18th century

### Maria Verelst (1680–1744)

Maria Verelst was the leading female portrait painter in early eighteenth-century Britain. Although comparatively little of her work is currently recorded, her known paintings are consistently handled with exceptional boldness and finesse.

She was born into an established artistic family, benefiting from valuable access to professional studio equipment and training. As an unmarried woman, she seems to have supported herself through her art, building a loyal clientele, many of whom were women. Many of Verelst's portraits have, in the past, been attributed to the hands of her male contemporaries such as Sir Godfrey Kneller and Michael Dahl, but further research and a deeper understanding of her much-neglected oeuvre highlights her nuanced techniques.

Works such as her portrait of Anne Blakett – recently on display in the Tate exhibition – exemplify Verelst's masterful interplay of elegant grandeur and refined composition. She often favoured formats that foregrounded

her sitters' voluminous costumes, as seen in this portrait, where Anne Blakett's blue dress occupies much of the composition and enhances the sitter's connection to the surrounding natural setting. Her sitter seems to be not just sitting in but immersed entirely in the natural setting.

This particular portrait is a newly discovered version of a painting at Wallington Hall, Northumberland, and represents an exciting addition to Verelst's body of work. Female sitters painted by female artists were rare in the eighteenth century, and this portrait exemplifies the unique dynamic created by such interactions. The sitter's dignified yet calm pose, paired with a gaze that is both directed at and detached from the onlooker, conveys an air of quiet confidence.

Verelst was among the first women to consistently maintain full-length portraits as part of her practice, and her regular commissions reflect her status as a sought-after artist.





**MARIA VERELST**

*Portrait of Anne Blckett (d.1783), Mrs John Trenchard, later Mrs Thomas Gordon, c. 1723*

Oil on canvas

47 1/4 x 61 in. (120 x 155 cm)

**On loan from a private collection**



## Sarah Biffin (1784–1850)

Biffin was a remarkably accomplished and entrepreneurial artist. Born without arms, she taught herself to write and sew at a young age using her mouth and shoulder, before mastering the art of watercolour painting. Later in her life, she would proudly sign many of her works “*Painted by Miss Biffin, without hands.*”

Meticulously rendered studies of feathers constitute a substantial, if fleeting, trope within Biffin’s early oeuvre. All her known feather studies were painted between 1811 and 1812; during this period, she was exhibiting at fairs and in regional towns and cities across the length and breadth of Britain, where she would sew, write and paint in front of

paying crowds. She likely adopted feathers as a subject for their visual complexities as well as their availability, as feathers were fashionable adornments in ladies’ hats and accessories of the time. Their small size and portability also made them practical for an itinerant artist. The feather studies showcase her remarkable technical skill, with lifelike details creating a *trompe l’oeil* effect, giving the impression the feathers might float off the page. This level of technical competence and handling of watercolour was a serious achievement for a young artist at the beginning of her training and demonstrates her early propensity for detailed observation.



Sarah Biffin, *Portrait of Thomas Lamb (1789–1841) and Anna Eliza Rausch (1793–1844)*, 1835  
Both: Watercolour on ivory  
Both: Rectangular, 4  $\frac{3}{8}$  in. (11 cm) high  
**Reserved**



Sarah Biffin, *Portrait of Miss Ames, music teacher*, 1844  
Oil on canvas  
Watercolour on card  
Rectangular, 9  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. (24.5 cm) high  
**Reserved**

In 1821, Biffin acquired a studio in London and submitted work to the annual exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts. In May of 1821, she received a silver medal from The Royal Society of Arts. The award was announced by Prince Augustus Frederick, the Duke of Sussex who proclaimed that her work deserved the greatest honour and urged all attendees to patronise her. Later that year she travelled abroad to Brussels where she became the miniature painter to Willem Frederik, Prince of Orange and future king of the Netherlands. Her growing reputation attracted commissions from a variety of sitters, including notable figures such as Anna Eliza Lamb and Thomas Lamb, a wealthy Bristol

couple. The rarity of intact paired portraits like theirs underscores Biffin's importance as a sought-after portraitist. By this time, she had also been appointed miniature painter to Princess Augusta Sophia, second daughter of King George III, a title she held from 1830 until the Princess's death in 1840.

After Princess Augusta Sophia's death, Biffin continued to work as a portrait artist despite the declining popularity of portrait miniatures. She adapted her style to suit changing tastes, as seen in works such as *Portrait of Miss Ames*. This idiosyncratic portrait, painted on card, reflects a more playful and informal approach compared to many of

her earlier works; having previously worked predominantly on ivory, by this date she was painting almost exclusively on card and paper, possibly on account of the more affordable price point attached to paper as a medium. The sitter peers out through her round spectacles and holds a sheet of music in her right hand. This work was painted the same year as her exhibition at The Mechanics' Institution, Liverpool, and a year after her exhibition at The Liverpool Collegiate School in Shaw Street; her exhibitions at both institutions were likely assisted by Joseph Meyer, an established arts and antiquities collector. Her frequent correspondence with Mayer, from 1842 until her death, provides insight into her

final years, marked by health complications and dwindling commissions. Her remarkable talent, entrepreneurial spirit, and adaptability allowed her to thrive in an evolving art world, leaving a legacy of extraordinary skill and determination.



**SARAH BIFFIN**

*A Study of Feathers*, 1812

Signed and dated 'Drawn by Miss Beffin 1812' lower margin

Pencil and watercolour on paper

4 x 6 in. (10.1 x 15.2 cm)

£ 95,000

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## Dame Laura Knight (1877–1970)

Laura Knight was one of the foremost British artists of the twentieth century and was the first woman to be elected a full Royal Academician. Her life was defined by a number of ‘firsts’; she was the first woman artist to be made Dame Commander of the Order of the British Empire in 1929, and she was the first woman elected to full membership at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1936, where she also became the first woman to have a solo exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1965.

She became renowned for her vibrant, large-scale outdoor paintings. Her enamels – of which only a small number survive – are a surprising departure from her painted works. They are miniature in scale but grand in ambition, requiring a sharp level of precision and patience. She had turned to

enamel work under the watchful eye of her friend Ella Naper, who guided her through the challenging, almost alchemical process. Naper, working from her studio above Cornwall’s Lamorna Valley, became Knight’s collaborator and muse; she modelled for Knight’s notable 1913 *Self Portrait with Model* and several of her celebrated coastal scenes, including *Spring in Cornwall*. The outbreak of the First World War brought constraints that restricted landscape painting along the coast, perhaps prompting Knight to turn her creativity inward. Together with Naper, she produced a series of dazzling enamels depicting ballet dancers and scenes of the Ballets Russes, now held in both private and public collections.



Ella and Charles Naper at Trewoofe, Cornwall, with an enamel hanging (lower left)

Knight had been mesmerised by the Ballets Russes when they performed in London during the years before the War. In particular, she became enamoured with the dancer Anna Pavlova. In her autobiography 'The Magic of a Line', Knight wrote: *'The whole look of Pavlova had perfection of finish ... But whatever the beauty of form may have been, she possessed an attraction all her own ... a something not of this world.'* With her keen eye for the spectacular, Knight captured Pavlova in mid-performance with her dance partner Michael Mordkin, rendered here in vibrant detail. The present work was owned by Naper; another, related enamel was given by Knight to her friend and collector Marjorie Averill in 1958. In an accompanying letter to Averill, Knight wrote: *'The enamel is Limoges, it is one of about eight I did in the year 1914 with the help of the jeweller, Mrs Ella Naper.'* In an amusing nod to the durable nature of the enamel medium, she added *'You can't injure this enamel except with a hammer or dropping it on a stone floor or treading on it.'*

For Knight, enamelling was a meticulous, intense departure from the spontaneous sketches she was known to capture directly from the theatre stalls. The process required precise firing of powdered glass onto metal, demanding near-clinical cleanliness to avoid the risk of cracking. Other examples from this series testify to the ambition and mastery Knight brought to this challenging medium. In June 1915, Knight exhibited her series of enamels at the Fine Art Society, London, some encased in Naper's jewelled frames. John Branfield, author of 'Ella and Charles Naper: Art and Life at Lamorna', summarises the vivacious exhibition thoughtfully: *'The mood of the show was meant to be sunny, to counteract the gloom about the war, and Ella's jewellery sparkled.'*





**DAME LAURA KNIGHT DBE, RA, RWS**

*Dancers of the Ballets Russes*, c.1914; and *Pavlova and Mordkin*, 1914

Limoges enamel

Both: 2 in. (5 cm) high

£ 25,000 (each) + ARR

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