

## News Release

Tuesday 18 October 2011

# REDISCOVERED PORTRAIT OF A NUDE NELL GWYN ON SHOW IN NATIONAL PORTRAIT GALLERY'S NEW *FIRST ACTRESSES* EXHIBITION

A daringly erotic painting of Nell Gwyn has been rediscovered in the making of the National Portrait Gallery's new exhibition *The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons*, opening this Thursday, 20 October 2011.

Rarely seen, it shows a pale skinned Gwyn, slightly reclining with a seductive, tilted gaze, flushed cheeks and breasts exposed.

The provocative portrait of the seventeenth-century actress has not been seen in public for almost fifty years. Since then its whereabouts have been unknown until research by Gallery curators led to its rediscovery in a private collection.

From today it will be seen on the Gallery's exhibition posters on the London Underground and on one of two large banners at the museum's entrance.

Painted by the artist Simon Verelst between 1680-5, the portrait has been in the possession of the same family since the 1940s when it was bought, probably for its frame, without knowing it depicted Nell Gwyn. At that time, the slightly-reclining sitter appeared fully dressed, due to alterations probably added in the nineteenth century - it was not until conservation after purchase that it became clear she was Nell Gwyn. Sadly no photographs exist to show the clothed version.

The painting is one of the few surviving portraits that can be securely identified as Gwyn. The revealing pose with open chemise contrasts with the more formal and modest composition of the National Portrait Gallery's picture of Gwyn by the same artist displayed next to it in the new exhibition. In this other Verelst portrait, a feigned oval of c1680, Gwyn's costume coyly reveals one nipple. This was a visual code that often marked the late seventeenth-century subject as a courtesan as well as indicating her status as an actress, and wholly or partially bared breasts typify images of Gwyn.

Eleanor ('Nell') Gwyn (1651?- 87) was one of the first actresses to perform on the English stage. She debuted at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden in 1664 aged only 14 and soon found success in the London theatre. The glamour and notoriety of some of the parts she played influenced her off-stage persona, and she became a mistress of King Charles II in 1669. The diarist Samuel Pepys was a keen follower of her performances and praised her comic roles. Many of the Gwyn portraits, at least one of which Pepys owned as a print, contribute to popular fantasies of her by showing her *décolletée*.

Professor Gill Perry, curator of *The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons*, says: 'Images such as this rarely seen portrait have contributed to the idea of Nell Gwyn as an early celebrity, whose life story and appearance are known through biographies and salacious gossip. But she was a shrewd manipulator of her own public image, known not just for her affairs and outspoken views, but also for her acting abilities and famous wit'.



**Eleanor ('Nell') Gwyn** by Simon Verelst, c.1680–5. Private Collection

The portrait is one of 53 in an exhibition that shows the remarkable popularity of actress-portraits. *The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons* is the first exhibition to explore the relationship of art and theatre in eighteenth-century England through portraits of its leading female performers. It brings together works by artists such as Reynolds, Gainsborough, Hoppner, Lawrence, Zoffany and Gillray. Actresses featured include Nell Gwyn, Kitty Clive, Hester Booth, Lavinia Fenton, Susannah Cibber, Sarah Siddons, Mary Robinson, Dorothy Jordan, Elizabeth Farren and Elizabeth Linley.

Highlights include a little known version of Reynolds's famous portrait of Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse, Hogarth's *The Beggar's Opera*, Gainsborough's portraits of Giovanna Baccelli and Elizabeth Linley. Important loans include works from the Garrick Club, the Royal Shakespeare Company, the National Gallery of Art, Washington, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, Tate Britain, the V&A, as well as Petworth, Kenwood and Longleat Houses.

*The First Actresses: Nell Gwyn to Sarah Siddons* is curated by Professor Gill Perry, supported by Dr Lucy Peltz. Professor Gill Perry is Professor of Art History and Head of External Collaborations at the Open University. She is the author of *Spectacular Flirtations* (shortlisted for the 2008 Theatre Book Prize) that explores issues of gender, spectatorship and femininity in eighteenth-century theatrical portraits.

Dr Lucy Peltz is the National Portrait Gallery's Curator of 18<sup>th</sup> Century Portraits, and co-curator of the Gallery's recent exhibitions *Thomas Lawrence: Regency Power and Brilliance* and *Brilliant Women: 18<sup>th</sup> Century Bluestockings*.

## **EXHIBITION**

### **THE FIRST ACTRESSES: NELL GWYN TO SARAH SIDDONS**

From 20 October 2011 until 8 January 2012

National Portrait Gallery, London, Admission: £11 (£10/£9 concessions)

With Gift Aid (includes voluntary Gift Aid donation of 10% above standard price): Admission £12.10. Concessions £11 / £9.90

Tickets [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk) or telephone 0844 248 5033 (transaction fee applies). Can be purchased up to 18.00 on the day before your visit.

**For further Press information and image requests please contact:** Neil Evans, Press Office, National Portrait Gallery Tel: 020 7312 2452 (not for publication) Email: [nevans@npg.org.uk](mailto:nevans@npg.org.uk) **To download Press images visit:** [www.npg.org.uk/press](http://www.npg.org.uk/press)

**National Portrait Gallery, St Martin's Place WC2H 0HE, opening hours** Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Saturday, Sunday: 10am – 6pm (Gallery closure commences at 5.50pm) **Late Opening:** Thursday, Friday: 10am – 9pm (Gallery closure commences at 8.50pm) **Nearest Underground:** Leicester Square/Charing Cross **General information:** 0207 306 0055 **Recorded information:** 020 7312 2463 **Website/Tickets:** [www.npg.org.uk](http://www.npg.org.uk)

**NOTES TO EDITORS:** Eleanor ('Nell') Gwyn by Simon Verelst. Oil on canvas, c.1680–5. Private Collection