

....we do not mean that his popularity has been achieved by compliments dexterously conveyed in paint. His success rests on more serious grounds ...⁸

By 1895 Lavery was the leading international representative of the Glasgow School. In that year his paintings were shown in Glasgow, Edinburgh, London and Paris, and with a touring exhibition of 'Glasgow Boys' paintings in the United States. As a rising star he had secured a gold medal at the Paris Salon in 1888 – the first of his contemporaries, and it was claimed, the first 'Scottish' artist to do so.⁹ And when in that year he was commissioned paint the State Visit of Queen Victoria by Glasgow Corporation, his future was secured. Thereafter his clientele was drawn from wealthy Scots industrialists and ship-owners who included the families of wool and yarn manufacturers, the Fultons, the McKeanes and the Clarks, as well as the renowned collector, William Burrell and the adventurer-laird of Gartmore, RB Cunninghame Graham. Now in 1895, he was admitted to the ranks of the Royal Scottish Academy with a portrait of Mrs Christie Smith, entitled *The Rocking Chair*, as his Diploma piece.¹⁰ At this point, at the height of his fame in Scotland, Lavery's magisterial *Lady in White*, thought to represent Mrs Park Lyle, a member of the Abram Lyle dynasty, took its place in the cavalcade of dignitaries associated with 'the second city of the empire'.¹¹



Fig 2 John Lavery, *A Lady in White* (Portrait of Lady Lyle), 1895, from *Royal Academy Pictures*, 1895, (Cassell and Co), p. 140

Deliberating on Lavery's achievement at the end of that important year, Moore's avant-garde comrade, D. S. MacColl pressed the painter to extend himself further:

When he paints a pretty woman, he seizes upon one or two obvious points of likeness, fixes the general allure of the figure, and makes a striking assertion of the *éclat* of fair flesh ... A painter who can imagine the beautiful harmony of colour in the draperies of one of those portraits, and whose appreciation of the principles of picture making is evidently so high, owes it to his talent to try for other virtues.¹²

MacColl was looking for more and so too was the painter. Glasgow was no longer enough for him. Rome, Berlin, Paris and London were calling. The international success of the Glasgow group continued and while there were 'Glasgow Boys' exhibitions in St Louis and Chicago, its members, Lavery among them, were defecting. In March 1895 *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* carried an article chauvinistically declaring the new Scottish painting 'the most vital art movement' of the day, conveniently neglecting the fact that Lavery, its most ambitious member, did not hail from the Glasgow hinterland. He was nevertheless singled out for praise and 'elegance of arrangement and style' were regarded as the chief characteristics of his work.¹³ The writer could indeed have been thinking about the picture then in his studio and nearing completion - *A Lady in White*.

Prof. Kenneth McConkey
January 2014

⁹ Charles M Kurtz, 'The Glasgow School, The Men and their Work', *Modern Art*, vol 4, no. 1, 1896, p. 8.

¹⁰ McConkey, 2010, p. 68.

¹¹ Walter Shaw Sparrow, *John Lavery and His Art*, n.d., [1912], (Kegan Paul, Trubner, Trench and Co), p. 177. Abram Lyle, the Greenock sugar refiner and ship-owner, merged his company with that of Henry Tate, founder of the Tate Gallery, London, to form the world famous Tate and Lyle sugar manufacturer. The Lyle company specialised in syrup and its motto, taken from the Old Testament story of Samson, remains 'Out of the strong cometh forth sweetness'. Mrs Park Lyle is thought to be either of Abram Lyle's daughters-in-law, Grace Eleanor Moir (1855-1918), who married his son, Sir Alexander Park Lyle (1849-1933), in 1880 or Agnes Jaimeson (d 1943) the wife of Alexander's elder brother, Robert, 1st Baron Lyle of Greenock. A further complication arises from the fact that Harrington Mann, a successful portrait painter and one of Lavery's Glasgow associates, produced a portrait of Mrs Park Lyle c. 1910 (National Trust, Barrington Court), this time, the wife of William Park Lyle, also of the sugar refining dynasty.

¹² *The Spectator*, 23 November 1895, p. 725.

¹³ Anon., 'The Scottish School of Painting', *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine*, vol CLVII, March 1895, pp. 339, 344.