

By the 1890s, there was an element of risk involved in having one's portrait painted. As Oscar Wilde infers in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*, (1890) a mystical exchange was believed to occur between the image and the living reality, and the painter's role in this transfer was that of aesthetic alchemist. It was a common conceit that an international elite – a select band of portrait painters – brought life to their beautiful sitters and writers toyed amusingly with the idea that when the visitors were gone, the portraits in an exhibition actually stepped from their frames to say scandalous things about them.¹

So it was that in 1895 when he considered John Lavery's portraits of *A Lady in White*, *Mrs Park Lyle* and *A Lady in Black*, (*Miss Esther McLaren*), the Pygmalion myth was not far from George Moore's thoughts. He wanted nevertheless; to separate the artist's pictures in that year's Royal Academy from the ego-inflation that was such an obvious feature of John Singer Sargent's and James Jebusa Shannon's bloodless bravura. Their 'white satin duchesses' were now being produced to order and he hoped, by contrast that the 'fashionable lady' would be 'induced to go to Mr Lavery', that she would 'refrain from advising him regarding the dress she should be painted in', and recognise that with this artist, her opinion was of no consequence.² It was up to the painter to arrive at a 'harmony' or 'arrangement' that lifted mere face painting and flashy couture into the realm of art. James Stanley Little was quite explicit on this point, noting that Lavery had learned from Velázquez and Whistler the abstract elements that go to make a great portrait,³ and recording the artist's views on his craft, he noted that,

He holds that the artist has license and prerogative to treat his sitter as he would treat a model, to this extent: he is entitled to seize upon and give prominence to those points which in form and colour suggest to him an attractive and interesting pictorial idea, and that, while the essential facts and characteristics which would enable a third person to recognise immediately the sitter in the picture must be preserved, the painter is entirely justified – further that no portrait can be a work of art otherwise – in treating his sitter subjectively, and infusing into his presentment his own artistic individuality.⁴

It was this quest for an interesting 'pictorial idea' that led to the refinement of Lavery's portraits, and there is clear evidence of constant correction and adjustment of colour and tone in *The Lady in White*. If we study the sketch for instance, we can see that the artist had some difficulty in establishing the pose (fig 1). If we look at the image used for reproduction in *Royal Academy Pictures* (fig 2) we see that a posy of flowers, harmonising with the delicate pinks and mauves of the background, has been substituted for a visually distracting black fan.⁵ Lady Lyle's aesthetic integrity was at first emphasised by a blue-and-white Nankin vase of flowers, placed on a side table, but this, as the picture developed, was lowered in tone.⁶ The normally hostile critic of *The Athenaeum* approved these changes commenting that while he found the picture 'stiff', *The Lady in White* 'possesses character' and it was 'to be praised for its tones'.⁷ Faint praise of this kind drove a later writer to affirm that Lavery was no flatterer, and he remarked that,



Fig 1 John Lavery, *Sketch for 'A Lady in White'*, 1895, 45.7 by 35.5, unlocated, formerly The Fine Art Society, London

¹ See for instance, *Two Art Critics, Pictures at Play*, 1888 (Longmans, Green & Co); also William Sharp, *Fair Women in Painting and Poetry*, 1894 (Seeley and Co), quoted in Kenneth McConkey, *Memory and Desire*, 2002 (Ashgate), pp. 90-94.

² George Moore, 'The Royal Academy', *The Speaker*, 11 May 1895, p. 516.

³ Kenneth McConkey, *John Lavery: A Painter and his World*, 2010 (Atelier Books), pp. 63-8. Having painted Mrs JJ Cowan and her daughter, Laura, Lavery recommended Whistler to her husband for a small full-length portrait (National Galleries of Scotland).

⁴ JS Little, 'A Cosmopolitan Painter: John Lavery', *The Studio*, vol xxvii, 1902-3, p. 118.

⁵ McConkey, 2010, p. 68. It was not unusual for paintings to be photographed for *Royal Academy Pictures*, while still in progress. Although there is no evidence to suggest that changes to the picture were made prior to, or shortly after its showing, this is likely to have been the case.

⁶ Lavery had used a similar motif in the portrait of *Miss Mary Burrell*, in the previous year and for this reason as much as any, he may have sought to reduce its effect in the present composition.

⁷ 'The Royal Academy, Fourth Notice', *The Athenaeum*, 22 June 1895, p. 811.

⁸ Anon, 'The Glasgow School of Painting', *The Edinburgh Review*, no. 398, 1901, p. 498.