



ELEANOR FORTESCUE-BRICKDALE, R.W.S. (1871-1945)

*"The pale complexion of true love
And the red glow of scorn and proud disdain."
As You Like It, Act III, scene 4*

Signed and dated 'Eleanor F. Brickdale/1899' (lower right)

Oil on canvas

28 x 36 in. (71.4 x 91.8 cm.)

42 x 46 ½ in. (106.5 x 118 cm.) (framed)

Provenance

Purchased by Mr Powell of Godalming, 1899.

By family descent.

Messenger, May & Baverstock, 1977.

Whitford & Hughes, London, purchased from the above.

Private collection.

Christie's, London, 11 June 1993, lot 106.

Private collection.



Exhibited

London, Royal Academy, 1899, no. 44 (price: £42).

Liverpool, Walker Art Gallery, *Autumn Exhibition*, 1899, no. 1085.

Manchester, Manchester City Art Galleries, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, 22 November 1997 - 22 February 1998; Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery, 7 March - 25 May 1998; Southampton City Art Gallery, 6 June - 2 August 1998, no. 80.

Literature

Henry Blackburn (ed.), *Academy Notes*, 1899, pp. 10, 38 (illustrated).

M. H. Spielmann, 'Royal Academy II', *The Magazine of Art*, 1899, vol. 23, p. 387.

Marion Hepworth Dixon, 'Our Rising Artists: Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale', *The Magazine of Art*, 1902, vol. 26, p. 257.

Jan Marsh and Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists*, exhibition catalogue, 1997, Manchester City Art Galleries, illustrated p. 35, no. 80; pp. 152-156.

Pamela Gerrish Nunn, *A Pre-Raphaelite Journey: The Art of Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale*, Liverpool, 2012, p. 16.

Amanda B. Waterman (2016), *Neo-Pre-Raphaelitism: The Final Generations* (unpublished doctoral dissertation), University of Washington, Seattle, p. 171; illustrated fig. 80.

Christin Neubauer, 'New Woman in Disguise: The Art of Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale and the Woman Question at the Fin de Siècle', in Glenda Youde and Robert Wilkes eds, *Pre-Raphaelite Sisters: Art, Poetry and Female Agency in Victorian Britain*, Oxford, 2022, pp. 51-70, 81; illustrated p. 52.

The Pale Complexion of True Love was the first major oil painting exhibited at the Royal Academy by Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale in 1899. In her article, 'Our Rising Artists: Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale' in *The Magazine of Art*, 1902, Marion Hepworth Dixon describes the 'somewhat ambitious' painting:

**“The pale complexion of true love and the red glow of scorn and proud disdain”
showed us a lady exceedingly fair, a lady *sans merci*, who, habited in scarlet,
submits with scant grace to the solicitations of an adorer, who, in his love-lorn subjection
kneels to kiss the hem of her sumptuous garment.’**

Hung in Gallery No. I at the Royal Academy, the picture was the artist's first significant success and was sold from the Academy exhibition, together with another of her exhibits, *That Which Overcometh the World* (unlocated). It was also shown at the *Autumn Exhibition* held at the Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool, the same year (a printed label: 'Dicksee & Co., Liverpool, 1899', the fine art agents and packers, is on the back of the frame). Although, rather surprisingly, the picture appears to have attracted little immediate critical notice, it was, however, illustrated in Henry Blackburn's *Academy Notes* (1899, p. 38). An adherent of the Pre-Raphaelite tradition, Fortescue-Brickdale's composition has a freshness of vision and freedom in the handling of the paint surface marking it in contrast to her later more familiar watercolours.

The quotation (despite the inscription on the frame) is not from Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* but from his pastoral comedy *As You Like It*, Act III, scene 4. The lines come from Corin, an elderly shepherd, who is speaking to the two heroines, Rosalind and Celia, about his fellow shepherd, Silvius and his unrequited love for Phebe, the shepherdess. Corin offers to them a love-passage between Silvius and Phebe:

*If you will see a pageant truly play'd,
Between the pale complexion of true love
And the red glow of scorn and proud disdain,
Go hence a little, and I shall conduct you,
If you will mark it.*

Painted when the artist was 27, it is an arresting composition with great attention to detail in the treatment of sumptuous fabrics rendered in a luminous palette. Of course, Fortescue-Brickdale has diverged from Shakespeare's text, reinterpreting his dramatic 'pageant' and creating a scene more evocative of Renaissance Italy than Elizabethan England and elevating the shepherd and shepherdess from peasants to the nobility. The aloof young noblewoman takes, with some disdain, a necklace offered as a gift from her suitor and conveys no intention of returning his affection, as he stoops to kiss the hem of her scarlet gown, although the artist alludes to Shakespeare's phrase 'the red glow of scorn and proud disdain' in the girl's vibrant red dress.

Mary Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale was born in the prosperous south London suburb of Upper Norwood in 1872. Her father was a successful barrister in Lincoln's Inn and her mother was the daughter of judge from Bristol. Eleanor, as she was known, had two older brothers, Charles and John, who had distinguished careers in law and medicine respectively, and an older sister Kate, with whom she lived for a number of years, as neither of them married. Her family had an association with John Ruskin as her father was a fellow student at Oxford and later her brother Charles, an amateur artist, attended Ruskin's school of drawing in Oxford. At the age of 17 she attended the local school of art, science and literature at Crystal Palace. Armed with a basic knowledge of art and techniques, Fortescue-Brickdale sought more professional instruction and enrolled in the St John's Wood Art School in the mid-1890s.

St John's had a fine reputation, most notably as a feeder school for the Royal Academy Schools. Indeed, by January 1895 she had become a probationer at the R.A. where she trained for the next five years. Her illustrious teachers were John Singer Sargent, George Clausen and Arthur Hacker and although these three were of widely different artistic leanings, they proved particularly helpful in encouraging her original style and technique harking back to Pre-Raphaelite practices yet reinventing them with her own skill and artistic flair.

In December 1897 Fortescue-Brickdale won a £40 prize for *Spring*, a decorative design for a lunette for one of the refreshment rooms at the Royal Academy, Burlington House. The prize money enabled her to launch her artistic career in earnest and in 1898 she began the present work, *The Pale Complexion of True Love*, her first major oil painting.

Although in his review of the 1899 Royal Academy exhibition in *The Magazine of Art* the editor M. H. Spielmann wrote: '...*The Pale Complexion of True Love* by Miss Eleanor Brickdale based apparently on Mr [Edwin Austin] Abbey diluted with Mr Byam Shaw.', clearly her painting was strikingly bold and original. The American-born illustrator and painter Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A. (1852-1911) was a great admirer of the Pre-Raphaelites. On the death of his friend John Everett Millais in 1896, it was Abbey who provided the link from the older generation to the new. Widely read with a vast knowledge of the ancient world and the Middle Ages, he was a major influence on the young Royal Academy students. Abbey was working on Shakespearean subjects towards the end of the 1880s and painted several major compositions in the mid-1890s. Certainly *The Pale Complexion of True Love* pays homage to Abbey's monumental Royal Academy exhibit of 1896, *Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the Lady Anne* (Yale University Art Gallery, fig. 1) from Shakespeare's *Richard III*. Abbey portrays the villainous duke, in a red cloak and hat, shamelessly wooing Lady Anne, the widow of a man he has recently murdered, as she walks in the funeral procession of King Henry VI, her father-in-law, also one of Richard's victims.



Fig. 1

Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A.

Richard, Duke of Gloucester, and the Lady Anne

Oil on canvas

52 7/8 x 104 3/8 in. (133.7 x 265.1 cm.)

1896

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

Abbey's Royal Academy exhibit the following year, in 1897, was also a Shakespearean subject and undoubtedly Fortescue-Brickdale would have admired the boldness and intensity of *The Play Scene in Hamlet, Act III, scene 2* (Yale University Art Gallery, fig. 2).



Fig. 2

Edwin Austin Abbey, R.A.

The Play Scene from Hamlet, Act III, scene 2

Oil on canvas

61 ¼ x 96 ½ in. (155.6 x 245.1 cm.)

1897

Yale University Art Gallery, New Haven

Fortescue-Brickdale's work has long been linked with that of her close friend and contemporary John Byam Shaw (1872-1919). Known as Byam Shaw, he was a follower of John Everett Millais, influenced by John William Waterhouse (1849-1917), and in common with Fortescue-Brickdale he was a torch bearer of the ideals of the Pre-Raphaelite movement. Byam Shaw attended the Royal Academy Schools from 1890-1895 and in 1910 together with Rex Vicat Cole established his own art school, the Byam Shaw School of Art where Fortescue-Brickdale was one of the founding instructors. Byam Shaw's *Queen of Hearts* (fig. 3) painted in 1896 and his large watercolour *Queen of Spades* (fig. 4) of 1898 show their exchange of ideas and parallel creative compositions as fellow Neo-Pre-Raphaelites, harking back to references from medieval and Renaissance Italy. Of Byam Shaw's *Queen of Hearts*, Fortescue-Brickdale remarked that it was '... the first picture in which he sprang suddenly out of his own extraordinarily brilliant and original style.' (Rex Vicat Cole, *The Art and Life of Byam Shaw*, London, 1932, p. 68.) The imaginative composition alluding to the children's nursery rhyme, shows the Queen of Hearts (the model was Shaw's fiancée) stepping out from a pack of playing cards. It was a productive time for both artists working on parallel themes at the same period, with a dominant central female figure painted with great detail in vibrant colours. The floor is strewn with playing cards similar to the foreground in *The Pale Complexion of True Love* scattered with small white daisies, symbolising innocence and pure love as personified in the youthful beauty of Phebe.



Fig. 3
John Byam Liston Shaw
The Queen of Hearts
 Oil on canvas
 36 x 28 in. (91.4 x 71.1 cm.)
 1896
 Christie's, London
 10 December 2020, lot 5



Fig. 4
John Byam Liston Shaw
The Queen of Spades
 Pencil, watercolour and bodycolour
 70 1/8 x 36 in. (178 x 91.5 cm.)
 1898
 Christie's, London,
 10 December 2020, lot 9



Fig. 5
Rogier van der Weyden
Portrait of a Young Woman
 Oil on panel
 19 3/8 x 13 in. (49.3 x 32.9 cm.)
 c.1440
 Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

In the eyes of the critics as a woman artist Fortescue-Brickdale ranked in second place behind Byam Shaw, although given their close friendship both personally and professionally, there is an argument to suggest that the synergy and creative collaboration placed them on equal footing. It is evident from these pictures that Fortescue-Brickdale and Byam Shaw shared a fascination with costume and textiles. In *The Pale Complexion of True Love* the central figure of Phebe is portrayed in a remarkable headdress or elaborate wimple reminiscent of the 15th century Netherlandish painter Rogier van der Weyden's *Portrait of a Young Woman*, c. 1440 (Gemäldegalerie, Berlin, fig. 5). Yet the high-collared creation in Fortescue-Brickdale's picture is even more elaborate and it serves to act as a physical barrier to deter to her adoring suitor.

Fortescue-Brickdale's preferred medium was watercolour, although she painted at least one oil a year, as the Royal Academy regulations stipulated. Notwithstanding, she was the first lady to be elected a member of the Institute of Painters in Oils in 1902. The previous year she was elected an associate of the Royal Society of Painters in Water Colours, where was to exhibit regularly for the rest of her career. In 1919 she became a full

member. Her annual oils painted in her particular eye-catching style, as exemplified in the present work, frequently held a sharp, almost satirical comment on conventionally romantic themes, recalling the early compositions of John Everett Millais and William Holman Hunt.

Fortescue-Brickdale's bold picture references the vigorous figure compositions painted by Millais in the early years of Pre-Raphaelitism and may indeed represent a conscious acknowledgement to the Pre-Raphaelite involvement with English literature as a source of subject matter in conveying social drama. A work such as *Lorenzo and Isabella*, 1849 (Walker Art Gallery, fig. 6), shown in the Millais retrospective at the Royal Academy in 1898, may have reminded Brickdale of the specific strengths of the tradition she was resolved to emulate.



Fig. 6
Sir John Everett Millais
Lorenzo and Isabella
40 ½ x 56 ¼ in. (103 x 142.8 cm.)
1849
Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool

Fortescue-Brickdale's career went from strength to strength following the exhibition and sale of *The Pale Complexion of True Love* in 1899. It was not long before she became one of the most successful artists of the day. She was popular with the burgeoning professional class who had an interest in the arts and the necessary financial wherewithal. She had a series of successful exhibitions of watercolours at Dowdeswell Galleries, the Leicester Galleries and solo exhibitions at Leighton House in 1902 and again 1904, during which time she had a studio virtually opposite at 11 Holland Park Road. Throughout this period, she was living in Shepherd's Bush with her elder sister Kate. Not confining herself to the shores of the British Isles, Fortescue-Brickdale made trips to the Continent notably to France and Italy where she was inspired by the art of the Renaissance. In 1911 two editions of Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* were published with

illustrations from her watercolours, with the original works for sale in one of her one-woman exhibitions at the Leicester Galleries. During the First World War she turned her hand to designing posters for various government departments, and after the war designed over twenty commemorative stained-glass windows as well as an impressive bronze memorial to the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry unveiled in 1921 in York Minster.

The allegorical element of the Pre-Raphaelites appealed to Fortescue-Brickdale and *The Deceitfulness of Riches* (fig. 7) of 1902 is a particularly fine example of her imaginative compositions bursting with colour and detail of patterned garments, flowers and fruit trees. As the title suggests, there was often a moral of symbolic meaning in her pictures.



Fig. 7
Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale
The Deceitfulness of Riches
Oil on canvas
33 ½ x 43 ¼ in. (85 x 110 cm.)
1902
Private collection

She enjoyed considerable patronage and throughout her life was a successful illustrator. In addition to literary and historical subjects, Fortescue-Brickdale delved into the romantic and magical world of fairy painting. A devout Christian, as well as designs for stained-glass, she painted a splendid triptych for All Saints, Newland in Gloucestershire. Towards the end of her life, she suffered from recurring ill health and failing eyesight. Her professional career was curtailed by a stroke in 1938, and she died in London in 1945 - thus extinguishing the flame of the artist who so successfully carried on the Pre-Raphaelite tradition.

Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, a true Pre-Raphaelite revivalist, was one of the most admired painters of the day. No small achievement for any artist, much less a woman in this era. She was highly talented and ambitious and her unmarried status enabled her to focus on her career in what was then very much a male dominated world of fellow artists, dealers, clients and critics. *The Pale Complexion of True Love* is certainly an early masterpiece and an outstanding example of Fortescue-Brickdale's work in oils. The painting was included in the major exhibition *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* held at Manchester City Art Gallery in 1997, travelling to Birmingham and Southampton in 1998.

We would like to thank Dr. Pamela Gerrish Nunn for her contribution to this note.

Dr. Pamela Gerrish Nunn

Pamela Gerrish Nunn began her career as an art historian in her native country of England, teaching in Bristol from 1976 and publishing in the field of 19th-century women artists from 1978. She moved to New Zealand in 1989 to teach at the University of Canterbury (Christchurch), where she worked for 20 years. After the 2011 earthquake in Christchurch, she moved north to the Wellington area, where she works as a freelance lecturer, curator and researcher. She has written numerous publications including *Eleanor Fortescue-Brickdale, a Pre-Raphaelite Journey*, (Liverpool University Press, 2012.), *From Victorian to Modern* (Philip Wilson/Djanogly Art Gallery, 2006) and *Pre-Raphaelite Women Artists* (Manchester City Art Galleries, 1997, reprinted Thames and Hudson, 1998, with Jan Marsh).