

Lily Among the Artists

by Catharine Arnold

*Lillie Langtry (1853-1929) is remembered today as one of the first 'professional beauties', a mistress of the Prince of Wales and a successful stage actress. But it was to London's artists that Lillie owed her career in the public eye. In an extract from her forthcoming book *King of Hearts, Edward VII and the Women in his Life*, Catharine Arnold explains how Lillie Langtry's stunning pre-Raphaelite held irresistible appeal for the painters of the day.*

Born Lillie Le Breton in Jersey in 1853, Lillie had an idyllic childhood, racing horses along the beach with her four brothers and running wild. Despite being the children of the Dean of Jersey, Lillie and her siblings terrorized the Island with their pranks. By twenty, Lillie was an acknowledged beauty with no agreeable suitor in sight, and desperate to leave Jersey. Eager to enter London society, Lillie married Ned Langtry, a widower from Belfast ten years her senior. The match proved to be a disaster. By 1875, the Langtry marriage was becalmed near Southampton Water, with Ned drinking away his dwindling income and Lillie friendless and alone. Following a near-fatal bout of typhoid, Lillie knew she had to escape. Despite protests from her doctor, Lillie insisted on moving to London.

The Langtrys rented a small house in fashionable Eaton Place, Belgravia, and Lillie embarked on her campaign to enter Society. But her acquaintances extended no further than three raffish peers - friends of the Prince of Wales - whom she had been introduced to when they were wintering on Jersey: Lord Suffield, (Charles Harbord, 5th Baron Suffield) Lord Thellusson, 5th Baron Rendlesham, and Lord Ranelagh, (Thomas Jones, 7th Viscount Ranelagh). Lillie believed that if she could only see them again, these individuals would prove invaluable. So she adopted a strategy of celebrity spotting, patrolling Hyde Park and waiting for royalty to drive past, lingering in museums and picture galleries. Eventually, in April 1877, this tactic paid off, and Lillie spotted Lord Ranelagh and his two daughters at the Westminster Aquarium.

Ranelagh was a noted lover of art and artists' models. Holman Hunt, who lost a woman to Ranelagh, described him as a 'notorious rake.' Lord Ranelagh invited the Langtrys to his house in Fulham, filled with 'interesting' people: dancers, artists' models and amateur actors. Among them was Lady Georgina Sebright, who invited the Langtrys to one of her Sunday 'at-homes' at Lowndes Square.

Lillie arrived at the Sebrights' modestly attired in a simple black dress, for she was in mourning for her brother Reggie who had died only months earlier. Her hair was twisted into a knot at the nape of her neck, and she wore no jewellery beyond her wedding ring, as she possessed none. Feeling 'very un-smart and countrified,' Lillie went and sat in a corner. But she was not alone for long. Lady Sebright led one distinguished guest after another to meet her. The artists John Everett Millais and James McNeill Whistler, Frank Miles, a young illustrator, who sketched Lillie's portrait that very night; the great actor, Henry Irving, and the Earl of Wharnccliffe, a millionaire art collector, all competed to take Lillie in to supper. Victory went to Millais, who would soon immortalise Lillie as 'the Jersey Lily.' Lillie returned to Eaton Place in a state of euphoria, her first night in



'The Jersey Lily' by Millais

London society a triumph. The following afternoon, the Langtrys came in from a walk to find the hallstand heaped with invitations.

Lillie's next engagement was dinner with the Earl and Countess of Wharnccliffe, a lively, bohemian couple, at their house in Curzon Street. Lillie was shocked to discover that Lady Wharnccliffe had dyed blonde hair and chain-smoked all through dinner. Lillie's fellow guests included Sir Edward Poynter, later President of the Royal Academy, and Lord Randolph Churchill, who wrote to his wife, Jennie, that 'I took in to dinner a Mrs Langtry, a most beautiful creature, quite unknown, very poor, and they say has but one black dress.' These three guests prefigure the significant elements of Lillie's world: the art world; the stage, and the aristocracy. But at this point of Lillie's life, it was the artists who would be the making of her.

Concepts of physical attractiveness change from decade to decade, but Lillie arrived in London at a time when her features represented the apotheosis of female beauty. Her violet eyes and corn-coloured hair, 'pillared throat and nobly chiselled mouth' appealed to the Pre-Raphaelites, while Oscar Wilde and his fellow aesthetes detected a hint of decadence in this pale distraught lady with eyes full of love-lorn languor. Over the following year, Lillie would sit to Millais, Whistler, Lord Leighton, Burne-Jones and G.F. Watts. For the time

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Lillie Among the Artists (cont)



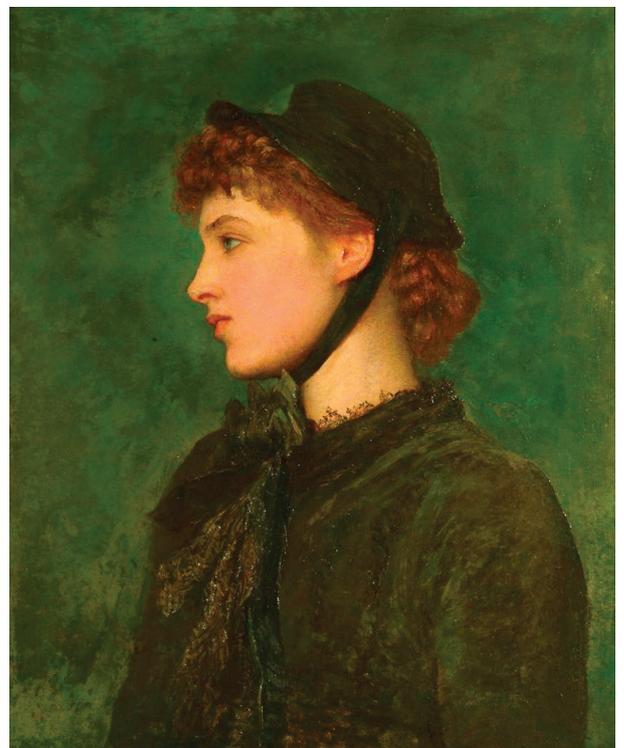
Lillie by Sir Edward Poynter.

being, Lillie remained steadfastly devoted to her dowdy black dress. She had already learned the importance of making an impression. The simple black gown defined Lillie; she was clearly identifiable across a room, surrounded by a sea of colourful silks and satins. The black dress also indicated bereavement, lending Lillie the air of a beautiful young widow. This despite the presence of the increasingly wretched Ned Langtry, skewered with precision by Daisy Maynard, future Countess of Warwick, as 'an uninteresting fat man whose unnecessary presence took nothing from his wife's social triumph.'

Sitting to artists provided the ideal opportunity for effortless self-promotion. At the studio of Frank Miles, who lived in a 'ghostly mansion, with antique staircases and twisting passages' off the Strand, Lillie was introduced to an impressive cross section of higher bohemia. Among those dropping by were Ellen Terry, Dante Gabriel Rossetti, William Morris, and the young Oscar Wilde, who was immediately smitten with Lillie. While these individuals proved wonderful contacts for the upwardly mobile beauty, it was the painters who made her reputation. Within months, as events conspired to make Lillie famous, their canvases would be admired in the capital and reproductions circulated around the world. The new craze for photography would increase Lillie's visibility, as she became one of the 'professional beauties,' - attractive society women whose images appeared on postcards and within the pages of popular magazines.

After Lillie had dined with the Earl of Rosslyn and his young stepdaughter, the heiress Daisy Maynard at their Grafton Street mansion, the snowstorm of invitations intensified to a blizzard and Lillie appeared at two or three functions every evening. The tributes of besotted aristocrats reached their zenith on the evening the Langtrys attended a political reception given by 'Harty-Tarty,' the Marquis of Hartington at Devonshire House in Piccadilly. Harty-Tarty, heir to the Duke of Devonshire, took Lillie on a tour of the house which culminated in an extraordinary scene after Lillie admired the water-lilies growing in marble pools in the conservatory. Disregarding his white tie and tails, Harty-Tarty plunged into the pools and dragged out bunches of lilies, which he thrust dripping into the liveried arms of his footmen, telling them to fill Lillie's carriage with the soaking wet flowers. Less than impressed, Ned spent the short journey home throwing the lilies out of the window.

On 19 May 1877, gossip magazine, *Vanity Fair* murmured 'All male London is going wild about the Beautiful Lady who has come to us from the Channel Islands . . . and [has] risen, like Aphrodite, from the sea. She has a husband to make her happy, but still awaits a poet to make her known.' Despite that husband, who did not make Lillie happy and served as little more than window-dressing, Lillie had begun to acquire a reputation. The word in the gentlemen's clubs was that Lillie, who, after all, was an artists' model, and therefore presumably no better than she ought to be, was a coquette. On



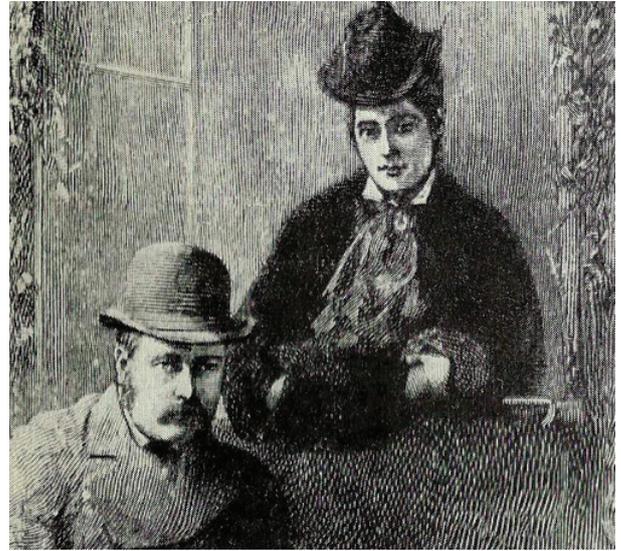
Lillie by George Frederic Watts.

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Lillie Among the Artists (cont)

inviting a gentleman into her drawing room, it was claimed, Lillie would gaze at him with her ravishing violet eyes and fall in a faint, forcing the visitor to catch her in his arms. It was rumoured that Lillie entertained 'gentleman callers', although no man could precisely be identified as her lover. Inevitably, a young son of the Royal Family began to take an interest. In fact, he had been interested for some time. When Frank Miles' portrait of Lillie - sketched on that first night at Lady Sebright's - was put up for sale, it was Prince Leopold, younger brother of the Prince of Wales, who purchased it and hung it above his bed at Buckingham Palace. Queen Victoria disapproved: she took the sketch down the minute she set eyes on it, standing on a chair to do so.

Regardless of the Queen's opinion, Prince Leopold's interest in Lillie was the seal of royal approval. Lillie's introduction to Leopold was the start of a process which would result in her becoming mistress of his older brother, 'Bertie', the Prince of Wales. And this was in no small part due to the artists of London, who had captured Lillie's beauty and put it on public display.



A rare depiction of Lillie and Ned Langtry together.

Catharine Arnold is a historian and author, best known for her 'London' series of popular history books: *Necropolis: London and Its Dead*; *Bedlam: London and its Mad*; *City of Sin: London and its Vices*; *Underworld London: Crime and Punishment in the Capital City* and most recently: *Globe: Life in Shakespeare's London*. Catharine read English at Girton College Cambridge and holds a post-graduate degree in psychology. She is a Member of London Historians.