



John Evelyn by Robert Walker, 1648 - c.1656. © National Portrait Gallery. 87.9 x 64.1 cms

UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara*

What a strange composition John Evelyn has chosen for his portrait! Stranger still is his

reason for commissioning it – as a wedding present for his pubescent fiancée, Mary

Browne. In the original version, he had been holding a miniature of her face, perhaps a medallion from the gold chain round his neck. But some time later, he changed his mind, recording in his diary that 'I sate for my picture, in which there is a Death's head.' Browne was barely 13 when her father committed her into the care of this melancholy 26-year old, who is resting his head on his hand as if too weary to continue through life unassisted.

Perhaps thinking these visual admonitions were insufficiently powerful, Evelyn reinforced them with words. Across the top of the canvas runs a motto from Plato in Greek: 'Repentance is the beginning of wisdom.' Meanwhile, the paper on the table in front of him carries a quotation about preparing for death taken from a famous book by the Roman philosopher Seneca called *On the Shortness of Life*. And just in case his teenage bride had still failed to understand that a tough future lay ahead, he presented her with a second gift that he had written himself – a marriage manual on good housekeeping called 'Instructions Œconomiques' that would teach her how to become a 'Help-meet for me.'

Skulls were among the standard props used in seventeenth-century paintings, where they functioned as a *memento mori*, a reminder of death. In portraits of physicians, they were sometimes covered with moss, a cure for epilepsy as well as an additional reference to inevitable decay and the dangers of frivolity. Either with or without Father Time carrying his scythe, such pictures also featured sundials and hour-glasses, often accompanied by a snuffed-out candle, dead flower or broken lute string to emphasise that life is short, that the clock cannot be wound back, that worldly happiness can be destroyed in an instant like an iridescent soap bubble destined to burst. This time-obsessed vanitas tradition was named after a well-known verse from Ecclesiastes: 'Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities, all is vanity.'

Unfortunately, Evelyn's marital portrait proved prescient. Although their life together was not short – the marriage lasted for almost forty years – it did indeed turn out to be gloomy, constantly blighted by their children's deaths and their own anxieties. By his fifties, that skull must have seemed even more ominous, since he reported that he had

prematurely grown 'so severe and stoical as it had even twisted my very countenance, and given me a peruq of grey haire, before I was of Age to Countenance the Decays of Nature.'

As John Evelyn's eminence mounted, he became increasingly absorbed in his political and scientific career, retreating back home for spiritual refreshment, and only rarely entertaining visitors. In Mary Browne, he rejoiced that he had 'made this creature my wife and found a pearl,' but right from the beginning, his human pearl fretted about the constraints that domesticity imposed on her intellectual freedom and development.

Confined to the house by repeated pregnancies, Mary Evelyn struck her husband's friends as the unhappiest woman in the world. In a letter to her cousin, Sir Samuel Tuke, she explained that apart from a brief period each day, the couple observed such a monastic silence that 'neither dog nor cat dares transgress it, the crackling of the ice and whistling winds are our music.' Tuke wrote to her regularly, but complained that she had come to despise ordinary mortals such as him because she had 'layen soe long with a Philosopher'.

The only portrait of Mary Browne shows a blond-haired young woman standing in front of some trees and wearing a low-cut, luxurious pink dress. In her right hand, she holds a small but flourishing plant, perhaps a reference to her future fertility. If she had known in advance that her husband would replace her likeness with a skull in his portrait, perhaps she would have pleaded more strongly with her father to keep looking after her for a few more years.

Main source: Frances Harris, 'Living in the neighbourhood of science,' in Lynette Hunter and Sarah Hutton (eds), *Women, Science and Medicine 1500-1700* (Stroud: Sutton Publishing, 1997), pp. 198-217.

*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is the sixth in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.