

# Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media

24 January - 26 April 2020



The Foundling Museum is proud to present the first major exhibition to explore representations of the pregnant female body through portraits from the past 500 years, *Portraying Pregnancy*, which opens on 24 January 2020.

Until the twentieth century, many women spent most of their adult years pregnant. Despite this, pregnancies are seldom made apparent in surviving portraits. This exhibition brings together images of women – mainly British – who were depicted at a time when they were with child (whether visibly so or not). Through paintings, prints, photographs, objects and clothing from the fifteenth century to the present day, it explores the different ways in which pregnancy was, or was not, represented; how shifting social attitudes have impacted on depictions of pregnant women; how the possibility of death in childbirth brought additional tension to such representations; and how more recent images, which often reflect increased female agency and empowerment, still remain highly charged.

Marcus Gheeraerts II  
*Portrait of a Woman in Red*, 1620 © Tate

The earliest portrait featured in the exhibition – and a major highlight – is Hans Holbein II's beautiful drawing of Sir Thomas More's daughter, Cicely Heron, made in 1526-7, lent by Her Majesty The Queen from the

Royal Collection. Sketched from life, it is a rare, clear-eyed, observation of a pregnant woman in elite clothing. In many pre-twentieth-century works in the exhibition, however, the sitter's pregnancy has been edited out. The mezzotint made after Sir Joshua Reynolds's full-length portrait of Theresa Parker, for example, shows no visible sign of her pregnancy, in line with conventions of the time, despite rich documentary evidence that by her second sitting in February 1772, Theresa was heavily with child.

Today, women with access to birth control can expect to plan if, or when, they become pregnant. Prior to the 1960s, many women would have experienced, from marriage to menopause, a number of pregnancies – and their daily lives might alter little for most of the gestation period. This is exemplified in a portrait of the celebrated eighteenth-century actress, Sarah Siddons, shown in the role of Lady Macbeth, which she famously played until the final weeks of pregnancy.

Fear of dying in childbirth was very real, and often justified. Until the early twentieth century, most births took place at home, often attended by family members, and thus many women witnessed death in childbirth. Elizabethan and Jacobean portraits of visibly pregnant women, such as Marcus Gheeraerts II's portrait of a heavily-pregnant *Unknown Woman*, dated 1620, appeared in the same era as the 'mother's legacy' text – in which a woman wrote a 'letter' for the benefit of her unborn child, in case she should not survive her confinement. An example is the manuscript that the well-educated Elizabeth Joscelyn wrote in 1622 for the child that she was carrying. Maternal mortality is also powerfully represented by George Dawe's 1817 portrait of the pregnant Princess Charlotte, the heir to the British throne, wearing a fashionable loose 'sarafan' dress, as well as by the actual surviving garment, lent by Her Majesty The Queen from the Royal Collection, which will be displayed alongside it. Charlotte died in childbirth, in November that year.

While Christianity played a central role in everyday life, conceiving a baby (or not), was seen as a gift from God. Historically, the New Testament story of The Visitation – the meeting of the pregnant Virgin Mary and her cousin, Elizabeth – was a particularly inspiring and comforting one for pregnant women. Images of it had been widespread in England prior to the sixteenth-century Reformation, and reappeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The Pre-Raphaelite artists' doctrine of absolute realism saw them model their depictions of it on pregnant women among their own social circle.

Augustus John's c.1901 full-length portrait of his wife, Ida, must have seemed astonishingly transgressive to viewers at the time, as it clearly depicts her as pregnant. It was not until the later twentieth century that pregnancy stopped being 'airbrushed out' of portraits. In 1984, the British painter, Ghislaine Howard, produced a powerful self-portrait of herself as heavily pregnant. However, the watershed moment occurred internationally in August 1991, when Annie Leibovitz's photographic portrait of the actress, Demi Moore, naked and seven months pregnant, appeared on the cover of Vanity Fair magazine. This image was considered so shocking that some retailers refused to stock the issue. Nevertheless, it marked a culture shift and initiated the trend for more visible celebrations of pregnant bodies – especially nude ones. In 2017, Leibovitz returned to the theme, photographing the pregnant tennis champion, Serena Williams, naked, for Vanity Fair's August cover.

The final photograph in the exhibition, by Awol Erizku, was commissioned by the singer, Beyoncé Knowles, who posted it on Instagram on 1 February 2017. Erizku's iconographically complex portrait of Beyoncé, pregnant with twins, veiled and kneeling in front of a screen of flowers, became the most liked Instagram post of that year. Beyoncé's image powerfully demonstrates how some women have succeeded in taking ownership not just of representations of their pregnant bodies, but also the distribution of their portraits.

This exhibition, curated by Professor Karen Hearn FSA, previously the curator of sixteenth and seventeenth century British art at Tate Britain (1992-2012) and now Honorary Professor at University College London, is the first of its kind and provides an exceptional opportunity to situate contemporary issues of women's equality and autonomy in a 500-year context; it forms part of the Foundling Museum's ongoing programme of exhibiting art that reflects its mission to celebrate the power of individuals and the arts to change lives.

#### **Press enquiries**

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#### **Notes to editors**

**The Foundling Museum** explores the history of the Foundling Hospital, the UK's first children's charity and first public art gallery, and through a dynamic programme of exhibitions and events celebrates the ways in which artists of all disciplines have helped improve children's lives for over 275 years.

The Foundling Hospital, which continues today as the children's charity Coram, was established in 1739 by the philanthropist Captain Thomas Coram, as 'a hospital for the maintenance and education of exposed and deserted young children'. Instrumental in helping Coram realise his vision were the artist William Hogarth, who encouraged leading artists of the day to donate work, and the composer George Frideric Handel, who gave annual benefit concerts of his *Messiah*. In doing so, they created London's first public art gallery and set the template for the way in which the arts can support philanthropy.

**Coram** has been creating better chances for children since 1739. They help children and young people today through their pioneering work in adoption, parenting support, housing support, alcohol and drug education, creative therapies and championing legal rights in the UK and overseas. [coram.org.uk](http://coram.org.uk)

**Professor Karen Hearn FSA** was the curator of sixteenth and seventeenth century British art at Tate Britain from 1992 to 2012. Now an Honorary Professor at University College London, she specialises in art produced in Britain between 1500 and 1710, and also in British-Netherlandish cultural links during that period. She lectures and publishes widely and has made various television appearances. In 1995, she curated the major Tate exhibition *Dynasties: Painting in Tudor & Jacobean England 1530–1630*, for which she received a European Woman of Achievement Award. Her other Tate Britain exhibitions have included *Marcus Gheeraerts II* (2002), *Nathaniel Bacon: Artist, Gentleman and Gardener* (2004), *Van Dyck & Britain* (2009) and *Rubens & Britain* (2011–12). For the National Portrait Gallery, she curated *Cornelius Johnson: Charles I's Forgotten Painter* (2015), and she is currently working on a full-scale monograph on this seventeenth-century portrait-painter. Her new book, *Portraying Pregnancy: From Holbein to Social Media* (Paul Holberton Publishing) accompanies the present exhibition.

**Royal Collection Trust**, a department of the Royal Household, is responsible for the care of the Royal Collection and manages the public opening of the official residences of The Queen. Income generated from admissions and from associated commercial activities contributes directly to The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity. The aims of The Trust are the care and conservation of the Royal Collection, and the promotion of access and enjoyment through exhibitions, publications, loans and educational programmes. Royal Collection Trust's work is undertaken without public funding of any kind. [www.rct.uk](http://www.rct.uk)

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commitment to public access and to show the Collection in new contexts.  
Explore the Royal Collection at [www.rct.uk/collection](http://www.rct.uk/collection)

## **Visitor Information**

The Foundling Museum, 40 Brunswick Square, London WC1N 1AZ

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Open: Tuesday - Saturday 10:00-17:00, Sunday 11:00-17:00, Monday closed

Admission: Adults £13.20 with donation, Concessions £9.90 with donation.