

Found: how Nelson's spurned wife took love for him to the grave

By Hannah Furness
ARTS CORRESPONDENT

SHE WAS humiliated by her husband in the most public of ways, endured the scandal of one of history's best-documented affairs and weathered the indignity of being estranged.

But Viscountess Nelson, known as Fanny, was so devoted to Lord Nelson she wore a miniature of him until she died, a newly found work suggests.

The painting, the first new portrait of the Viscountess identified in a century and believed to be only the fourth in existence, shows her in old age, still resplendent in her robes.

She wears two mourning bands, thought to mark the loss of Lord Nelson at the Battle of Trafalgar in 1805, and her only child Josiah in 1830. A cameo of Nelson is on a gold bangle on her wrist, designed as the Star of the Order of Bath and decorated by gem carver William Tassie.

The portrait, by JB Beech and dated 1831 – the year Fanny died aged 70 – was identified by Martyn Downer, an author, dealer and specialist in identifying items relating to Nelson. He spotted it on eBay, advertised as a portrait of an unknown woman, and traced it through the history books.

He hopes it will help restore her reputation, showing her with dignity, warmth and “no little humour”.

Mr Downer is due to present his full findings to The Nelson Society in the autumn edition of *The Nelson Dispatch*, saying Fanny “has not been treated



Lord Nelson's affair with Lady Emma Hamilton was a humiliation for his wife

well by posterity”, and “suffered badly at the hands of her attention-seeking usurper Emma Hamilton”.

He claims she was not the “icy” wife as depicted but a woman of “deep and highly charged emotion. The miniature offers a vivid impression of Fanny Nelson at the end of her life and how she wished to be remembered: mourning her beloved son and commemorating her famous husband.

“It is a dutiful image, slightly old-fashioned and yes ‘prosy’ in style but one which betrays warmth, patience, kindness, intelligence and no little humour. A fitting tribute for a most maligned and misunderstood woman.”

There were previously three portraits accepted as the Viscountess: a three-quarter-length oil of her young, one 1798 watercolour by Daniel Orne and another by Henry Edridge. In contrast, Emma – Lady Hamilton,

Nelson's mistress – features in dozens of paintings, plays, operas and novels.

Biographies had mentioned a portrait of an older Fanny but no image was found. A 1939 book by E M Keate said one was owned by a granddaughter of Josiah Nisbet, her first husband. It could have been passed down to cousins living around the Gwynedd area; this year a miniature of a woman was bought at a flea market 50 miles away in Malvern.

A local collector put the portrait on eBay where it was seen and bought by Mr Downer for a few hundred pounds – and he is now confident it is the fourth portrait of Viscountess Nelson.

He previously discovered the silk purse Lord Nelson had when he was shot and 72 letters from Fanny which were auctioned for £2 million in 2002.

Mr Downer told the *Telegraph*: “She obviously retained affection for her husband, as she is wearing a miniature to honour him. She retained her dignity, as shown by her Viscountess robes. She's always come off very badly compared with her rival, and I hope this, the first portrait of her discovered in 100 years, will help redress the balance.”

Emma Rutherford, a miniature portrait specialist, said the work is of “national importance” as the “summation” of the Viscountess' life.

A detailed description of the discovery and its importance will be published in the autumn edition of quarterly magazine, *The Nelson Dispatch*.

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News



A newly identified portrait of Viscountess Fanny, with a cameo (circled) said to be of her late husband Lord Nelson

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