

RICHARD GREEN

SIR WILLIAM RUSSELL FLINT RA PRWS

Edinburgh 1880 - 1969 London

Ref: CC 235

Cecilia in her gold coat



Signed lower right: *W RUSSELL FLINT*;
signed, dated and inscribed on the reverse:
Cecilia in her Gold Coat - / W Russell Flint / Dec 1959
Circular watercolour: 9 ½ in / 24.1 cm diameter
Frame size: 15 ¼ in / 38.7 cm diameter
In its original gilded composition frame



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Provenance:

Fine Art Society, London
Richard Green, London, 1993, as *The Golden Coat*;
Richard Green, London;
private collection, UK, 1994

Exhibited:

World Refugee Year Exhibition of Treasures, 1960, no.468 (untraced)

As Flint's fame grew he painted many of the most famous beauties of the day, including a number of important actresses and dancers such as Rosalie Crutchley, Vivien Leigh, Elizabeth Webb (now Lady Guy Campbell), Consuelito Carmona, Tani Morena and Moira Shearer. Flint was acutely aware of the centrality of the artist's relationship with his model, stating: 'no man knows better than I the need for comradely collaboration between model and artist...on her side there must be patience sustained by at least a modicum of vanity: on his side industry and pride in using all his skill to depict her, to weave what attracts him in her personality in his theme.'¹ Flint was so interested in this essential collaboration that he hoped to write a book about the complex relationship between an artist and his or her model, 'not a prosaic but a romantic book; about Praxiteles with his impertinent Phryne; Botticelli with his Simonetta; Raphael and his baker's plump daughter; Tiepolo with his gondolier's girl – titans all of them, with their indispensable handmaids.'²

It was not until 1953 that the seventy-three year-old Russell Flint met a young and beautiful former ballet dancer, who turned up at his London studio offering to model despite his polite refusal on the telephone. Dressed in his favourite colours, white and blue, Cecilia Green embodied his ideal of feminine beauty and would become his favourite model and muse for the next fifteen years. 'I had in fact adapted faces to make them like hers years and years before I met her...Thrice blest is he who has a good model. It is an elementary ordinance of nature that the more attractive a model is the oftener she must be painted or drawn.'³ Cecilia would become not only Flint's model and inspiration, but also his close friend and assistant, dealing with art dealers on the artist's behalf and hosting his parties, as well as a trusted critic (the only one he allowed to watch while he painted). What followed was arguably the most productive and successful period of Flint's career.

The main character and subject of the majority of Flint's works after their meeting, Cecilia's striking beauty, with high cheekbones, dark, feline eyes, natural grace and sensuality infuse and enliven her various roles as gypsy and flamenco dancer, washerwoman and aristocratic lady in sumptuous gowns of silk and satin. Born in Hackney in 1931 to Russian parents who escaped to England during the Revolution, Cecilia grew up in extreme poverty, suffering from malnutrition and ill health. Despite this inauspicious start, she developed a love of music, opera and literature from the age six and at the age of thirteen decided to become a ballet dancer, joining the London Festival Ballet after raising the money through various

¹ The artist cited in 'Sir William Russell Flint's Figure drawings', *An exhibition of drawings by Sir William Russell Flint, RA, PRWS, 1880-1969*, exh cat by Amanda Cavanagh, Richard Green, London, 1991.

² The artist cited in 'Sir William Russell Flint RA, PRWAS (1880-1969)', *An exhibition of the work of Sir William Russell Flint, RA, 1880-1969*, exh cat by Amanda Cavanagh, Richard Green, London, 1990

³ The artist cited in 'Sir William Russell Flint RA, PRWAS (1880-1969)', *ibid.*

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jobs. A recurrence of tuberculosis weakened Cecilia to such an extent that her dancing career was tragically short, but nevertheless provided her with the skills of a successful artist's model; suppleness, natural grace and poise and the ability to endure long and difficult poses. Having worked at art schools previously, in 1953 she was persuaded to contact Russell Flint.⁴ The artist was heart-broken in 1966 when his muse decided to stop modelling. Sadly they did not part on good terms and never saw each other again, though Cecilia always remembered their time together fondly.

Flint painted a large oil on canvas in 1960, entitled *Barefoot girl in a gold coat*, which was included in his retrospective exhibition at the Royal Academy of Arts in 1962, about which he wrote the following:

'Any artist aware of his own devices can entertain himself by analysing the works of his brethren, great or small, Renaissance or Edwardian. Most figure painters have studio garments and oddments which observant eyes detect over and over again in their pictures. This coat of rich gold has already appeared several times though it will be long before Cecilia, its proud owner, allows it to become a mere studio property. Gold, I once boasted, is easy to paint – it's just sepia and yellow ochre! (I have given Cecilia's husband a water-colour of her in this same coat and he wanted to know how I got the effect of gold). For that foolish flash of pride I have paid the traditional penalty: gold is now difficult to paint! My simple recipe of sepia and yellow ochre no longer works. Perhaps after a period of contrition I may again be cunning enough to make them glitter' (the artist referring to *Barefoot girl in a gold coat* in *Pictures from the Artist's Studio, Works by Sir William Russell Flint RA*, exhibition catalogue, Royal Academy of Arts, Diploma Gallery, London, 1962, p.26).

Famed as a watercolourist of remarkable technical skill, William Russell Flint also painted in oil and tempera and produced many etchings and drypoints. It was as an artist of feminine grace that he won universal acclaim, for his picturesque gypsies, flamenco dancers and languorous nudes and half draped beauties. For many years he also painted the landscapes and seascapes of England and Scotland, and travelled abroad, where he painted in Switzerland, Italy, Spain and France. Born in Edinburgh in 1880, Flint was the eldest son of a commercial designer and watercolourist. He was educated at Daniel Stewart's College, and at the age of fourteen he took up a six year apprenticeship as a lithographic artist and designer with a firm of printers. He also attended evening classes at the Royal Institute School of Art. Between 1902 and 1903 he worked as a commercial designer and magazine illustrator, and from 1902 to 1907 he was employed as a staff artist at Heatherley's Art School. He married Sybille Sueter in 1905. Already a successful black and white draughtsman, he now turned to colour illustration and was commissioned by the Medici Society to make illustrations for several of their *de luxe* editions.

During the First World War, Flint served as a lieutenant in the RNVR and later as a captain in the RAF. He was attached to the RNAS Airship section from 1916 to 1918 and was Admirably Assistant Overseer on HM Airship R34 from 1918 to 1919. After the war, Flint established his reputation as a painter, and became one of the most sought after artists of the day. Whilst his work won immediate favour with amateurs and connoisseurs alike, the exhibiting societies were also quick to give him official recognition. He was elected a member of the Royal Institute of Oil Painters in 1912, a member of the Royal Society of

⁴ See 'Cecilia Green', *The Telegraph*, London, 4th November 2003. In 1958 Cecilia married the fine art consultant John Simmons and would later become a painter of watercolours herself.

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Painters in Watercolours in 1917, and President of the latter from 1936-56. He was knighted in 1947, and accorded a one-man exhibition at the Royal Academy in 1962, the highest distinction that an artist can achieve during his lifetime.