

RICHARD GREEN

SIR WILLIAM RUSSELL FLINT RA PRWS

Edinburgh 1880 - 1969 London

Ref: CD 219

Her first ball dress



Signed lower left: *W RUSSELL FLINT*; inscribed on the reverse:

Her First Ball Dress / c. April - June 1958.

Also signed and titled on the backboard

Watercolour: 10 ¼ x 6 ¾ in / 26 x 17.1 cm

Frame size: 17 x 13 ½ in / 43.2 x 34.3 cm



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Provenance:

The Fine Art Society, August 1958
Private collection, West Sussex

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 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

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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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

In *Her first ball dress*, Flint steps away from his grand set-piece paintings and semi-nude Mediterranean figures, and turns his interest towards this quiet and intimate subject. Delicate brushstrokes record each fold of the subject's voluminous white dress, with the unpainted paper left to carry light into the watercolour and make each swathe glisten. Flint's experienced hands foreground the beautiful figure with broad washes of rich mauve and blue layered into purple, creating texture and depth in the background while highlighting the luminous woman. The fine details in the model's décolletage, flowers in her hair and her striking gaze recall Flint's early career as a draughtsman and anchor the composition. Above all, *Her first ball dress* highlights Flint's mastery of the watercolour technique.

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.