

THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

Mrs Fothergill by George Richmond

Title:	Mrs William Fothergill Robinson
Maker:	George Richmond (1809-1896)
Medium:	Oil on panel
Date:	1870
Dimensions:	h. 94.0 cm x w. 70.5 cm
Museum Number:	1204
Gallery:	2

The Sitter

The painter of this work, George Richmond, and his wife Julia had fifteen children, ten of whom survived infancy. One of those children, Julia, married William Fothergill Robinson, and this is a portrait of his mother. William was said to have adored his mother, and paid his father-in-law 200 guineas to paint her portrait, an expensive fee which hardly represent a family discount.

By 1870 the fashion was for brighter colours and an enthusiasm for decoration. The sombre tone set by Mrs Robinson's costume suggests that she is in deep mourning. According to Victorian etiquette, a bereaved woman who was closely related to the deceased was expected to dress in deep mourning for a full year. During this time her clothing could only be made of fabrics which lacked colour or shine. Only black crape trim was allowed while feathers, beads and hat flowers were forbidden. Mrs Robinson's costume obeys all these rules, and is complemented by the indoor white bonnet often worn by elderly women. Her jewellery is limited to a cameo brooch at her neck, which appears to show someone's face, and the prominent ring shown on her wedding finger. These clues, together with her wistful gaze as she sits distracted from her book, suggest that she is in mourning for her dead husband.

The Artist

George Richmond was born in 1809 and trained at the Royal Academy. William Blake influenced his early career, and he formed lifelong associations with some of Blake's followers, notably Samuel Palmer and Edward Calvert. This visionary phase in his work saw Richmond painting in an archaic style depicting Christian and literary themes. However a trip to Paris in 1828 to draw in the Louvre, and his marriage to Julia in 1831, with all its financial responsibility, made him rethink the direction in which he was going. He became known as a portrait painter from this date onwards, well known not just for society portraits but also for sitters from the academic and clerical worlds. Periods spent in Italy in the late 1830s and early 1840s provided Richmond with many contacts, including his life-long friend John Ruskin. It also gave him the chance to study the Old Masters at first hand and a Venetian richness of colour and grand composition are ways in which this influence can be seen in his work. George Richmond's self-portrait, also hanging in Gallery 2, dates from this period. Like many portrait painters, notably Thomas Gainsborough, he enjoyed escaping portraiture and painting landscapes for his own pleasure. Landscape is often introduced into Richmond's portraits, and here we can see an idealised landscape introduced into the painting through the window behind Mrs Robinson, which brings a sense of perspective and light into the painting.

