“Mary Beale” by Mary Beale, oil on canvas, circa 1665, 43 in. × 34½ in., NPG 1687, © National Portrait Gallery, London.
Mary Beale and Art’s Lost Laborers: Women Painter Stainers

Helen Draper

Histories of seventeenth-century British art suggest that one, two, possibly three women were painters.\(^1\) Of those, only Mary Beale (1633–99) established an independent commercial studio, maintaining it successfully for more than twenty years without formal training, court patronage, or guild affiliation.\(^2\) Fellow portraitist Joan Carlile (d.1679) and miniaturist Susannah-Penelope Rosse (d.1700) painted professionally, enjoying some renown, but few of their paintings survive. Can this possibly represent the entire contribution of women to the artistic life of the metropolis? No, dozens of women were members of or apprenticed to the Company of Painter Stainers and their story will be explored herein.

Although other women painters earned money, only Beale is now represented by a large, attributed body of work including several self-portraits, printed poetry, and two manuscripts, one of which, Observations by MB in her painting of Apricots, is the first known text in English about the act of painting written

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by a female artist. Her earliest surviving painting, and first known self-portrait, includes likenesses of her husband and son — creating a sophisticated, highly original female subversion of an accepted autobiographical portrait form — that of the (male) artist at home. One of Beale’s three adult homes still survives, making it the oldest known artist’s workplace in Britain, and hers is the only female self-portrait of the period on permanent display in a public institution, the National Portrait Gallery in London. There she sits, alone in her painted room, physically and historically on a par with a self-likeness by Sir Peter Lely (d.1680), the most influential portraitist of the Restoration. Experience shows, however, that public consciousness of Beale’s place in the history of British art and women’s work is still slight, the vast majority of her paintings remaining inaccessible in private collections and museum storage. What hope does Mary’s hitherto stubbornly low profile give us about the prospects for tracing fellow, but now hidden, female painters? It is a familiar cry — “Where are the women?” And back comes the familiar answer — “Not there”, “Too few”, “Insignificant” — implying that the recovery of women’s history is a numbers game or, perhaps worse, a subjective question of fame and the “quality” of their contribution. I suggest that our understanding of significance in relation to women’s working lives should be redefined to acknowledge, nay embrace, the small numbers of still visible practitioners as the tip of a once large but melting iceberg of early modern female achievement.

Thanks to an invaluable digitization of Cliff Webb’s transcription of the Register of Apprenticeship Bindings of the Worshipful Company of Painter Stainers, it is possible to glimpse at least some of the Company’s women during what could be termed the “long seventeenth century.” What emerges is — to the student of women’s history — a significant number of female apprentices indentured between 1666 and 1740. I have also identified in the same period at least forty-

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3 “Observations by MB in her painting of Apricots in August 1663,” in Charles Beale, _Experimental Seacrets found out in the way of painting_, (1647/8–1663), Glasgow, University Library, Special Collections, MS Ferguson 134. See Draper, “her painting of Apricots.”

4 Mary Beale, _Self-portrait with Husband and Son_, oil on canvas, c.1660, London, Geffrye Museum. See also, for example, Rubens, _The Artist, His Wife Helena Fourment, and Their Son Frans_, c.1635, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.

5 Allbrook Farmhouse, Hampshire, built in the mid-1650s.

three Painter Stainer “mistresses,” members of the guild who contracted apprentices. Ironically, these statistics may not include women who, like Beale and Sarah her later assistant, were involved in painterly work, fine, applied, or decorative, in Westminster and Middlesex, or outside the guild system. These newly quantified if unavoidably limited findings will be discussed in the second part of the essay. First I will summarize Mary Beale’s career and something of the context in which female mistresses and apprentices worked in Restoration London.

Mary Cradock was a city immigrant. She was born at Barrow, Suffolk, four miles west of Bury St Edmunds, the daughter of Dorothie (d.1644) and John Cradock (d.1652), minister of All Saints, the village church. John Cradock enjoyed a university education, admitted to Gonville and Caius College, Cambridge, as sizer to the Master, and leaving as Bachelor of Divinity in 1628. Left motherless at age ten, little is known of Mary’s early life, but the scholarship she later displayed suggests that she benefited from a humanist education. Her father is most likely to have provided it and, as an amateur artist and lay freeman of the Painter Stainers, almost certainly gave her tuition in drawing and painting. Father and daughter, suggested Mary Edmond, were part of an informal “seventeenth-century art centre” at Bury St Edmunds that included amateurs and professionals.

Mary Cradock married Charles Beale (d.1705) in 1652 and soon after moved to Covent Garden, part of a mixed community of aristocrats, speculators, painters, framers and colormen, an area selected surely because it was a center of art and patronage. By 1658, Charles was Deputy Clerk for the Patents Office and he, Mary, and their son Bartholomew “Batt” Beale moved eastwards to the parish of St Dunstan in the West. Their friend the poet-artist-lawyer Thomas Flatman (d.1688) took fellow lawyer Samuel Woodforde (d.1700) with him on a visit where the latter met Alice (d.1664), Charles’ cousin. They married and for a year became the Beales’s lodgers while Samuel, in keeping a diary, inadvertently became Mary’s earliest biographer. Also in 1658, Beale and Joan Carlile were included in a list of female painters in Sir William Sanderson’s Graphice: Or . . . The Excellent Art of PAINTING:

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7 Mary Beale, Discourse on Friendship, British Library, Harley MS 6828 f.510–23.
pick me out one equall to Madam Caris, a Brabanne; Judgment and Art mixed together in her rare pieces of Limning, since they came into England. And in Oyl Colours we have a virtuous example in that worthy Artist Mrs. Carlile and of others Mr. [sic] Beale, Mrs. Brooman, and to Mrs. Weimes:  

Carlile’s rare surviving paintings include two group portraits, Stag Hunt, a self-likeness with her husband and two children; and Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart with her first husband, and sister. The other women in Sanderson’s list remain largely unidentified.

Graphice demonstrates that Mary was painting in the 1650s, but she did not become fully professional until 1670 when her work largely supported the family. Charles Beale became her studio assistant, managed their household, and kept the accounts. In the 1660s Mary apparently concentrated on self-portraits and those of family and friends painted for love not cash, or in exchange for kindnesses. Carlile’s experience reminds us that Beale became a painter in the face of apparently intractable social obstacles to women’s exercise of their creativity and authority, personal and economic. In 1654 Joan and her husband moved to Covent Garden for her to paint professionally and create a “fortune” for their children, but returned home to Richmond within two years. Why did Joan’s plan falter while Mary’s flourished? Evidence suggests that Beale prospered, in part, because in the 1650s and 60s she prepared society to accept her work by cementing a personal reputation as virtuous domestic gentlewoman, accomplished amateur writer, and artist. I have argued elsewhere that for Mary to work at a public profession, with Charles as her assistant, each fostered a creditable persona with which to protect themselves from social disapproval. Their circle of friends promoted each other using the exchange of gifts, texts, money, and food as well as their contacts and influence. Mary eventually created a respectable, deceptively domestic studio.

9 Sir William Sanderson, Graphice: Or, The use of the Pen and Pensil; In the most Excellent Art of PAINTING (London, 1658), 20.

10 Joan Carlile, Group of Figures at a Stag Hunt (c.1649–50; Lamport Hall Trust, Northamptonshire); and Elizabeth Murray, Countess of Dysart, with Her First Husband, Sir Lionel Tollemache, and Her Sister, Margaret Murray, Lady Maynard (c.1648, National Trust, Ham House, Richmond-upon-Thames).

where the seemingly conflicting interests of commerce, friendship, and family life could coincide.\textsuperscript{12}

In 1670/1 Beale’s professional Pall Mall studio opened just yards from the royal court at St James’s Palace. Astoundingly prolific, Mary quickly established herself and made considerable sums of money. Ultimately though, she struggled to produce enough work as a sole practitioner to compete with the stables of apprentices and assistants employed by her male contemporaries. Beale’s substantial achievements were due to her talent and labor but also depended a great deal on the practical support she derived from her husband — just as male artists depended on their wives to help in the workshop, keep house, and care for the children. Some of the 122 women recorded by the Painter Stainers’ Company may have enjoyed similar support, but others did not. Of the forty-three Painter Stainer mistresses who indentured apprentices from 1666 to the 1740s, each took one or more (and in one case nine) apprentices, male or female, for seven years apiece, entering into a legal and financial contract to train them. Whether they themselves or a freeman painter in the workshop provided the training cannot be demonstrated, but the same is true for masters taking apprentices. Nor is the term “painter” necessarily synonymous with the modern concept of the artist — the royal Serjeant Painter turned his hand to coach and barge painting, while a humble apprentice could work on anything from tavern signs to the faux marbling of decorative interiors. Most Company members of both sexes remain shadowy, with little or no evidence to elucidate their careers or workshop practices. Generally speaking, however, the benefit of the doubt usually favors men as being active participants in trade, while women, and especially wives and widows, are seen as fulfilling a supportive or at best administrative role in supervising apprentices.\textsuperscript{13}

It is difficult to see how Mary Harrison, who indentured at least nine (male) apprentices from 1677 to 1700, can have been engaged in anything other


\textsuperscript{13} Robert Tittler, Portraits, Painters and Publics in Provincial England (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 80–83. However, Erickson found with husband and wife collaboration that at “middling levels it was more common . . . but no more than half of couples worked together or in related occupations.” Amy Erickson, “Married Women’s Occupations in Eighteenth-Century London,” Continuity and Change 23.2 (2008): 267–307.
than the management of a workshop of painters. Harrison emerges largely in the
documentary evidence of the indentures, but as her apprentices all came from
Hampshire she was probably the Mary Harrison (b. c.1656–57) of Portsmouth,
daughter of Painter Stainer Thomas (d.1675) and Mary Harrison. She inherited
£100 and some “plate” in her father’s will, enough perhaps to set up her own work-
shop. By 1677 she was free of the London Company, engaged her first apprentice,
and thereafter ran her workshop for twenty-three years.

Another mistress, Elizabeth Deane (fl.1674–1708), widow of Edward Day
(who served an apprenticeship in 1668), married Samuel Kingsley (d.1689),
also a painter, in 1674. Widowed a second time, Elizabeth Kingsley took three
apprentices between 1690 and 1703, two of them her own sons. Unusually,
there is documentary evidence of Elizabeth’s work, as in 1702 “Widow Kingsley
painter” was among the “artificers and tradesmen employed in fitting up &c. a
house adjoining to the Customs House”; and in 1708 she was paid £9 18s 10d
“for painters’ work.”¹⁴ Other tantalizing references to women painters require fur-
ther research, including one who in 1718 received payment for her work from the
Crown as, “Judith Mills, coach painter . . . [£]147 14[s] 6[d].”¹⁵

One of the most complete biographies to emerge is that of Martha Beard
(fl.1665–73; d. by 1748) who married three times and, over twenty-six years,
took four apprentices under two different names. Martha may have come from
the Beard family of artist-sculptors of Holborn, but in 1691 our Martha Beard
married John Godfrey (d.1696), a Painter Stainer (apprenticed in 1682). In 1693
Martha Godfrey had her only child, Edward (d.1741), and John died three years
later. In his 1696 will Godfrey bequeathed a life interest in his properties and
their rental income in Kent, and absolute ownership of all his goods and chattels,
to his wife who was also sole executrix. On her death the property was to go to
Edward and his heirs. Martha Godfrey became herself a Painter Stainer tak-
ing Edward Lovett as her first seven-year apprentice in 1699 alongside Edward
Cornish, apprenticed to her husband six years earlier.

¹⁴ “Treasury Warrants: February 1702, 1–5,” in Calendar of Treasury Books, Volume 17, 1702,
ed. William A. Shaw (London, HMSO 1939), 135–52; and “Declared Accounts 1707: Customs,
General Account,” in Calendar of Treasury Books, Volume 22, 1708, ed. William A Shaw (London,
HMSO 1952), cccxiii–ccclx.
¹⁵ “Declared Accounts: Civil List: Master of the Horse”, in Calendar of Treasury Books, Volume
In April 1702 Martha married William Hewett (d. by 1706 or 1718), another Painter Stainer, probably of St Bride's parish. In 1704 William took his own apprentice, but proved as short-lived as John Godfrey because in 1706 an Edward Tomlyn was indentured by "Martha Hewett." That Martha's son Edward also went into the family business was later confirmed by his will (1718), where he styled himself as "Painter Stainer." In 1712, Martha took on Thomas Mascall (b.c.1695–8) as apprentice and, in 1722, married his uncle Thomas Mascall (d.1753), a third Painter Stainer. This Thomas had been apprenticed to another mistress, Elizabeth Chaire (fl.1690–91) in 1690, and was the son of Edward Mascall (fl.1627–76) a "limner" (painter of miniatures) now known for a few surviving oil portraits.16 The couple's London business address was in St Bride's parish, while the Mascall family also had manorial property in Middlesex.17

Edward Godfrey died in 1741 and in his will left the title to and rental from the property in Kent he had inherited from his father, and all his own worldly goods, to Martha his sole executrix, a role she fulfilled to the Probate Court's satisfaction. The Mascall workshop's next two apprentices were both engaged by Thomas in 1723 and 1742, and Martha never appears to have taken any others. In fact this is where we lose sight of Martha Mascall née Beard altogether because she died some time between 1741 and Thomas Mascall's next wedding in 1747, although her death went unrecorded and she left no will.18

Martha Beard worked in the painter's trade; contributed to the training of seven or eight apprentices over a period of around fifty years and was legally responsible for four of them; chose to marry only Painter Stainers; and brought up her only son to that profession. At least three of her apprentices served their full terms and were made free of the Company. While it cannot yet be proved that Martha was a painter it would be pedantic to deny her active involvement in running a workshop all of her adult life. In fact, her first husband bequeathed her all his "real and personal goods," including the tools of their trade.19 During gaps between her marriages — seven years between the first and second and

17 "Release-1.Thomas Mascall of St. Bride's London, painter-stainer" [06.06.1746] Pennington and Sons (Solicitors) [collection], LMA ACC/0969/109.
18 Martha Mascall/Godfrey/Hewett's death is not recorded in the registers of St Bride's or St Mary the Virgin at Norwood, Middlesex.
probably sixteen years between it and the third — she was solely responsible for apprentices’ training; maintaining a workshop; educating her son; and managing the family property in Kent. And, I suggest, she painted.

Mary Beale and Martha Beard are not the only examples of women working collaboratively with their husbands. Rebecca Knight (b.1618) and Company man Arthur Blackmore (d.1664) were both heraldic arms painters, as were their son Arthur (b.1647) and daughter-in-law Elizabeth (d.1692). In November 1686, however, an entry in the Treasury Book demonstrates how financially precarious a painter’s life could be:

Reference by Treasurer Rochester to Visct. Preston [Master of the Great Wardrobe] of the petition of Rebecca Blackmore arms painter, and Elizabeth her daughter [sic.], praying payment of 68l. 10s. 0d. due to them for work done in the Great Wardrobe in the years 1666 and 1667.\(^{20}\)

And what of the origins and fate of our dozens of female apprentices, the obstacles they negotiated, and who they were? Some indenture documents state their parents’ profession as, among others, wood monger, glover, mason, clerk, vintner, and “Doctor in Physic.” There was no preponderance of apprentices from Painter Stainer families — but artists, like Beale, might often be expected to train their own children especially, perhaps, their female offspring. In more than 40% of cases the apprentice’s parent was described as “gentleman,” “esquire,” or “B.A.”\(^{21}\) It is clear, therefore, that a Painter Stainer apprenticeship was socially acceptable and not compromising for the reputation and prospects of a daughter of the gentry, professions, and prosperous yeomanry. Neither can apprenticeship, an expensive undertaking, be easily dismissed as an example of “life-cycle” service for young women — it was a commitment, financial and legal, with a particular objective. It is remarkable, in that context, that just under 70% of the young women who started a new life in the metropolis came from outside London, many


\(^{21}\) Only four of the 79 documents fail to provide any clue as to the occupation or status of the apprentice’s parent.
travelling considerable distances away from their families in York, Cornwall, and Herefordshire.

From 1666 to 1740 at least seventy-nine female apprentice Painter Stainers were indentured, a very small proportion of the total number, some 3%. To look at these figures in terms of proportion is, however, to miss the point. What is important is that there were female apprentices and mistresses at all. Recent ground-breaking research by Amy Erickson and Laura Gowing warns that we should treat such labor statistics with caution. Apprentices taken on under the auspices of one trade guild, for example, often undertook quite different work in practice.22 At least one Painter Stainer mistress, Ann Dewell (fl.1725–35), was engaged in other types of work and took apprentices for that purpose, an increasingly common practice within and between many guilds by the end of the seventeenth century.23 Nevertheless, I argue that in any case these women were all operating within the established, lawful business world of Restoration London. During Beale’s career, and afterwards, around 122 other women were working either as Painter Stainers, or under the auspices of that company. Some of those women were painters, and some of those painters we would now define as artists, just as we do Mary Beale. That their names are not recognized, their work unidentified, is immaterial; the significance is that Rosse, Beale, Carlile, and the three other gentlewomen painters listed by Sir William Sanderson were not the only ones working in Restoration London, and the presence of those others should be taken into account when thinking about the early modern art world, and the nature of women’s work.

There are many obstacles to tracing the biographies of seventeenth-century female artists, some as commonplace as the paucity of primary sources and, of course, marriage in which they could lose not only the requirement or ability to work, but the credit for it, becoming subsumed into the personal or economic identity of their husbands. More subtle obstacles relate to the individual’s ability to create a professional reputation or “brand” on which both her livelihood and artistic legacy depended. This is a process that hinges as much on logistical factors, including time, capital, and a reliable support network, as on creative

23 Erickson, “Eleanor Mosley,” 152.
or technical considerations. An enduring reputation is inevitably predicated on the survival and availability of works to be seen, and on subjective ideas of their value. These things aside, there is even now a reluctance to accept that there were other women painters—in part, perhaps, because their existence runs counter to preconceptions of early modern society. We know about Beale because she was so prolific, signed some of her paintings, and wrote things down. Charles Beale left more than thirty notebooks detailing life in Mary’s studio and Samuel Woodforde’s diaries recorded her early sittings.24

Yet no contemporary criticism of Mary Beale has ever come to light. Even Pepys, whose outrage over the physical appearance, public behavior and works of Margaret Cavendish, the Duchess of Newcastle, was made all too clear in his diaries, was silent on the subject of Beale. Just forty years after Mary’s death George Vertue (1684–1756), researching a history of British art, noted that “Mrs. Mary Beal painted in oil very well” and “work’d with a wonderfull body of Colours,” but voiced no opprobrium over her domestic role-reversal as breadwinner.25 Beale was careful to create a virtuous personal reputation and—coupled with a more conventional appearance than Cavendish—used it to make her public work respectable. We can deduce, therefore, that unconventional behavior, even that which went counter to religious and social prescription and proscription, could be made acceptable. I suggest that women’s work, unless blatantly subversive, like that of Restoration actresses and courtesans, was, on the whole, taken for granted as their contribution to the domestic and national commonweal. At most levels of society many women worked, unmarried and married, and some engaged in business activities independently from their husbands.26 The questions asked in regard to them, and female artists in particular, have all too often been “How many?” and “How important?” rather than “Who were they?” Martha Beard, Rebecca and Elizabeth Blackmore, Mrs. Brooman, Madam Caris, Elizabeth Chaire, Mary Harrison, Anne Killigrew, Elizabeth Kingsley, Judith Mills, Mary

More, Susannah-Penelope Rosse, Mrs. Weimes and others were painters. Ann Carpenter, Mary Delamott, Ann Dewell, Sarah Freeman, Ann Gardner, Anna Gerrard, Dorothy Haughton, Martha Hicks, Martha Hunlock, Elizabeth Kingsland, Mary Moor, Rhoda Morland, Mary Pratt, and Mary Swinfield and others were Painter Stainers. The search for art’s lost laborers has barely begun.