

MARIA COSWAY

(1760-1838)

By: Hillory Bingham



Maria Louisa Catherine Cecilia Cosway, Baroness Cosway in the nobility of the Austrian empire (1760–1838)
by Valentine Green, pubd 1787 (after self-portrait)

Early Life

- Maria Louisa Catherine Cecilia Hadfield was born in Florence, Italy on July 17, 1760 to Charles Hadfield and Isabella Pocock.
- Cosway had four older siblings, which she and her parents claimed were smothered by a Catholic nursemaid and murdered before they could be baptized into the Protestant faith.
 - She cited this traumatic experience as the cause for her emotional development as a woman and mother.
- Her early life entailed a lot of traveling through Italy, meeting highly respected artists and enjoying extended stays with the Banks family in Rome.
- Her father's death in 1776 led the family to move to England in 1779.

Adult Life

- After moving to England in 1779, Cosway and her family quickly blew through the money that had been left by her father, and Maria eventually married artist Richard Cosway on January 18, 1781.
- The Cosways thrived both socially and artistically in the 1780s
- From 1781 to 1789, Cosway distanced herself from copy painting and began to exhibit her historical and “in-character” paintings at the Royal Academy.
 - This new style of art was heavily influenced by other artists such as Angelica Kauffman, Sir Joshua Reynolds, and Henry Fuseli.
- Cosway met Thomas Jefferson in Paris in 1786, and they stayed in contact until Cosway's death in 1838.
- On May 4, 1790, Cosway gave birth to her daughter, Louisa Paolina Angelica.
- On July 29, 1796, Louisa died of a fever, and both Richard and Maria Cosway were devastated.

Life after Louisa: Girls' Education

- After Louisa's death, Maria immersed herself even deeper into Catholicism and became an advocate for girls' education.
- In 1803, Joseph Fesch became Archbishop of Lyons and established a college for girls based on Cosway's dedication to women's education.
- The school remained open until Cosway left in 1809, and in 1812 she re-established the school as the Collegio delle Grazie at Lodi.
- Cosway's college was a prestigious and coveted school, with many respected members of the country sending their daughters there to be educated.
- Between 1817-1824, she left the college to care for her husband until his death but returned to the school upon his death.
- In 1834, Cosway was named a baroness to the Austrian empire by Francis I for her educational endeavors.
- Cosway died on the grounds of the college on January 5, 1838.



Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire as 'Cynthia'
by Maria Cosway (1781-1782)

Background and Criticism:

- Painted between 1781 and 1782, this artwork is Cosway's most famous piece.
- This portrait depicts the Duchess of Devonshire as Cynthia, a character from the popular 16th century epic poem *The Faerie Queene* by Spenser
 - In *The Faerie Queene*, Spenser analyzes holiness and chastity, which are what he believes to be the most important Christian virtues.
- Cosway called the Duchess, "the Reigning beauty and fashion"
- *The Morning Herald*, when evaluating the artwork, stated "the fair artist has unquestionably a claim to a poetic fancy...The sprightly art which distinguishes that Beauty is admirably hit off in the advancing step of the regent of the night."



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Analysis:

- This painting takes on a mythological and biblical style, styles that Cosway often gravitated to in many of her artworks.
- Cosway abandons the common classical and renaissance interpretation of Cynthia as the goddess Diana, and instead mirrors Raphael's painting of Mercury descending from the sky.
- By drawing from both *The Faerie Queene* and Raphael's painting, Cosway combines Christianity and mythology in a way that highlights the beauty, strength, and holiness of the Duchess.



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Mercury descending from the sky a
trumpet in his right hand after
Raphael's fresco in the Chigi Gallery of
the Villa Farnesina in Rome, 1517–20

Works Cited

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