

Countess Golovine is the People's CHOICE

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A public poll has revealed that the iconic painting of a beautiful Russian aristocrat, Portrait of Countess Golovine (above), by the French female artist Élizabéth Vigée-Lebrun, is the most popular work of art in the Barber Institute's galleries. However, she was nearly pipped to the post by another firm favourite, Johan Christian Dahl's moving Mother and Child by the Sea.



Countess Golovine

The CHOICE poll, launched at the University of Birmingham-based gallery in September this year, was organised to mark the publication of a brand-new book in the Scala Director's Choice series, written by the Barber's Director, Professor Ann Sumner and sponsored by the Henry Barber Trust and the Friends of the Barber Institute. The book features more than 30 works of art Professor Sumner believes to be the highlights of the gallery's fine collection, and to echo the selection process, members of the public, visiting school groups, students, University staff and Friends of the Barber Institute were asked to choose their personal favourite from a shortlist of ten works in a bid to find out the most popular work of art at the Barber.

The poll proved very popular and was a closely fought contest. In third place, with 13%* of overall votes, was a silver denarius coin minted in the name of Brutus in around 43 BC – commemorating the murder of Julius Caesar on the Ides of March – taken from our world-class collection of antique coinage. Second, with 18%* of votes was Dahl's Mother and Child by the Sea, 1840 (left), championed by Professor David Eastwood – Vice-Chancellor of the University of Birmingham – which depicts an emotional homecoming scene set against an enchanting moonlit seascape. This painting was voted as the favourite amongst students and school visitors, and joint favourite amongst Friends of the Barber, along with Vigée-Lebrun's Portrait of Countess Golovine, (painted in around 1797). The latter topped the poll with 20%* of overall votes, and was favourite among University staff and members of the general public.

In this charming painting, championed by Radio 4 Arts Correspondent Rebecca Jones, the beautiful Countess Golovine looks at the viewer with startling candour and directness. Vigée-Lebrun met and befriended Varvara Nikolaevna Golovine (1766 - 1821) in Russia in the late 1790s, during the artist's exile from revolutionary France. She described the Countess as a 'charming woman' who was a talented musician and artist, and a lover of literature. The spontaneous and informal pose and the Countess's complicit smile convey her lively intelligence and an intimacy between the two women.

Rebecca Jones said, 'The first time I saw the Portrait of Countess Golovine, I was captivated. It's those eyes, the colour of Bournville chocolate, gazing directly at you – and yet that enigmatic smile. You feel you know the Countess, and yet she conceals as much as she reveals. It is a picture that lingers long in the memory and more than justifies its place as one of the Barber's best-loved works of art.'

Rebecca's thoughts were echoed by many of the people who voted for Countess Golovine. Noelle Cormalt of Knightlow Road in Harborne, Birmingham, wrote: 'I love the subject and, as I come here often, it is like an old friend. The painting is full of life and feeling.'

Professor Ann Sumner said: "Finding out the most popular work of art in our collection has been a long-running ambition here at the Barber. Lebrun's magnificent painting has always been well liked, so it is no great surprise to see that it has topped the poll. It is also included in the new Director's Choice guidebook as one of my very favourite works."

The publication of Director's Choice is marked by a new self-guided trail around the gallery, sponsored by the Patrons of the Barber Institute, which focuses on ten of Professor Sumner's favourite works from the collection. These leaflets are available free to gallery visitors.

- For more information about all of the works featured in the CHOICE poll, and to read the comments by all of our champions, visit www.barber.org.uk/choice.html
- Director's Choice, by Ann Sumner, is now on sale at the Barber Institute at £7.95 and makes an ideal stocking-filler.

*Choice vote: 1st Place: Élisabéth Vigée-Lebrun, Portrait of Countess Golovine, c. 1797 (20%), 2nd Place: Johan Christian Dahl, Mother and Child by the Sea, 1840 (18%), 3rd Place: Silver denarius minted in the name of Brutus, c. 43 BC (13%), 4th Place: Vincent van Gogh, A Peasant Woman Digging, 1885 (10%), 5th Place: Dante Gabriel Rossetti, The Blue Bower, 1865 (9%), 6th Place: Irish Torc, 11th/6th century BC (9%), 7th Place: Edgar Degas, Jockeys Before the Race, 1878-9 (7%), 8th Place: Claude Monet, The Church at Varengeville, 1882 (6%), 9th Place: Peter Paul Rubens, Landscape in Flanders, 1616 (5%), 10th Place: Louis-Francois Roubiliac, Bust of Alexander Pope, (3%).

For further information, or to arrange an interview with Professor Sumner, contact the Barber's Press and Marketing Officer, Andrew Davies, on 0121 414 2946, 07769 958114 or andrewdavies@barber.org.uk (<mailto:andrewdavies@barber.org.uk>).

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