

## 2016 WSG Trip to Geffrye Museum with Helen Draper talk on Mary Beale

*During the WSG's recent trip to the [Geffrye Museum](#), member [Helen Draper](#) gave a talk about the seventeenth-century artist Mary Beale. She writes more below.*

As already [described](#) so beautifully by Miriam Al Jamil, members of the WSG met for this year's annual outing at East London's [Geffrye Museum](#), an institution devoted mainly to the study and representation of England's middle classes from 1600 the present day. A particularly interesting example of a middling family of the mid- to late-seventeenth century, that of artist Mary Beale, is represented in the collection by a very novel object. Beale's [Self-portrait with her husband and son](#) (c.1660, oil on canvas, 63.5 x 76.2 cm) is the earliest of her firmly attributed works, and in it she put a daring new slant on a well established male genre – that of the artist's self-portrait with *his* family. At first glance this slightly sombre yet affecting portrait appears too small and unassuming to be of revolutionary importance in the canon of British art history, yet in it Mary very purposefully placed herself, a virtuous Christian wife and mother, in the role of creator, the author of her own and her family's painted biography.

Mary Cradock (1633-99), born the daughter of a clergyman in the hamlet of Barrow in Suffolk, married Charles Beale (1632-1705) in 1652 just days before her father's untimely death left her an orphan. By 1654 the couple and their newborn son, Bartholomew 'Batt' Beale, were living in Covent Garden, the centre of metropolitan art production and patronage during the Interregnum. Mary's near neighbours included fellow artists Peter Lely (d.1680), who prospered and went on to become Court Painter to Charles II, and the innovative Joan Carlile (d.1679) who was engaged in what proved to be an abortive strategy to earn a 'fortune' as a society portraitist. In 1658, when Charles Beale was appointed Deputy Patents Clerk, the family moved eastwards to occupy the Patents Office house in Hind Court, a narrow alley off Fleet St and just 'Without' the London Wall. It was in that house – full of family, lodgers and servants – that Mary made her way upstairs to her top floor studio to paint the triple, perhaps quadruple, [portrait](#) now at the Geffrye Museum. I have suggested [elsewhere](#) that it is entirely possible that the artist was pregnant with her son Charles at the time, and that the space in the portrait between her, her husband and young Batt alludes to the other member of the family who was at once absent and present.

When, in 1665, plague spread through the city the Beales swapped their cramped little street for five years on a smallholding in Allbrook, Hampshire. Although we know little of Mary's painterly activities in the countryside, brief references confirm that she continued to work, while Charles prepared her canvases. During their sojourn Mary Beale painted her second surviving [Self-portrait](#) (c.1666, oil on canvas, 109.2 x 87.6 cm, NPG), this time openly in the guise of an artist with her palette hanging on the wall nearby, and as mother to two young children who appear as the subjects of a small double portrait held at her side. Here Beale is again gently subversive, playing with the concept of likeness and asserting her power to create progeny in paint as well as flesh – an undeniable advantage over her male colleagues, and one shared by many women artists through the centuries.

In 1670/1 the family left their rural idyll and returned to London, this time as householders in a newly built terrace of well-to-do middling homes on the north side of Pall Mall. It was there, a stone's throw from the mansions of St James's Square and Charles II's palace, that Mary Beale established the fully professional portrait studio in which she created fashionable likenesses of patrons who were stalwarts of Court, County and the City. Mary also found time to paint several other self-portraits, and dozens of gradually ageing studies of her husband Charles. Her last known 'selfie' (c.1681, oil on bed ticking, 121.9 x 104.1 cm, private collection) painted when she was almost fifty, shows a self-possessed woman, well, but not opulently dressed, a pet spaniel by her side. Echoing the still, interrogative gaze of the earlier images, her expression in this portrait is again characteristic of the inner three-way visual conversation being conducted between Beale the creator, subject and viewer of her own likeness.

*Helen is a conservator and is currently completing a PhD thesis on Mary Beale part-time at the Courtauld Institute and IHR. You can read more about her work on her very elegant website, [www.draperverconservation.com](http://www.draperverconservation.com).*