

FAVORITE

INDIA HICKS

Founder of her
namesake beauty and
accessories company



Portrait of Lady Louis Mountbatten, 1939–40
SALVADOR DALÍ (1904–1989)
Oil on canvas, 25 x 20 1/2 in.
Private collection
Photo: David Flint Wood



When Edwina Mountbatten (1901–1960) stepped into a Paris hotel's elevator in the late 1930s, her fellow passenger turned out to be the famous artist Salvador Dalí. As the lift brought them to their desired floor, Dalí became captivated by this wealthy, glamorous, and much-photographed socialite. She was also much-discussed due to rumors about the affairs she conducted outside her marriage to Lord Louis Mountbatten, who later became the British Viceroy of India.

"The family story is that Dalí was transfixed by my grandmother's tiny feet and that his very first memory of her was that detail," says India Hicks. As a former model, second cousin to the Prince of Wales, and owner of her namesake brand of beauty products and accessories, she is nearly as recognizable as her late grandmother once was (minus the scandals). "Dalí was fascinating to my grandmother, and he was fascinated by her. Essentially, my grandmother commissioned the portrait and paid for it, though Dalí approached her with the idea."

The resulting oil-on-canvas portrait of Edwina (her feet are not shown, though the orb of a bare shoulder is) resides in the English home of India's mother, Lady Pamela Hicks. "I grew up with that picture, seeing it every day of my life in my mother's bedroom," says India, "and as a child I was also very frightened by it."

Indeed, this work is highly characteristic of Dalí's classic Surrealist works, in which ordinary objects assume nightmarish, often anthropomorphic, forms — think of his melting watches and machines birthing animals. Look closely enough at the spectacles

in the background and they read as the eyes of a lion. Lady Edwina's curly black hair becomes a Medusa-like nest of writhing snakes. Her lovely face, with its piercing blue eyes, has a deathly pallor, staring out at us from a landscape that appears primordial.

"My mother says that it's a very good likeness, that Dalí captured her clearly," says Hicks, who was not born by the time her grandmother died in 1960. Indeed, that ability to capture something real, but rendered in an unreal way, was one of Dalí's greatest talents. Here we see the face and neck of a decidedly attractive woman residing in an otherworldly setting — though Hicks and her mother think she likely posed in Brook House, the grand London mansion Edwina inherited from her father. (Hicks notes that it was the city's first private residence with an elevator — though not the one where the painter and sitter met.) Though Edwina sat for the portrait around 1939, it is signed and dated 1940. (The Gala-Salvador Dalí Foundation insists on dating it to 1939.)

Whenever Hicks, who lives in the Bahamas with her family, visits her mother in England, she gazes at this portrait of her grandmother, at once disturbing and familiar. The work has always remained in the family and has never been loaned. "I think it's a perfect example of Dalí at his best," says Hicks. "It's so deeply imaginative. The colors are incredibly beautiful. I'm fascinated by Dalí," she says, "but I don't think I'd invest in one of his works."