

Leading Lady

A RECENT FILM BRINGS TO MIND AN
18TH-CENTURY PORTRAIT

by Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell

ONE OF THE STARS of The Huntington's art collections has gone Hollywood. In this fall's film *The Duchess*, Keira Knightley starred as Georgiana Spencer, an ancestor of the late Princess Diana, whose arranged marriage to the powerful Duke of Devonshire proved to be just as controversial as Diana's to the Prince of Wales. Based on Amanda Foreman's 1999 biography, the film covers two decades in Georgiana's life, beginning in 1774 with her marriage at age 16.

A rare full-length portrait of Georgiana graces the walls of The Huntington's Thornton Portrait Gallery. Georgiana's mother, Countess Spencer, likely commissioned the portrait in 1775 as a reminder of her recently married daughter. Originally, it hung in the countess's bedroom at Althorp, the Spencer family seat in Northampton (and the childhood home of Princess Diana).

The artist, Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), already had painted Georgiana once, when she was a toddler. Now she was a celebrity, one of the richest and highest-ranking ladies in the kingdom. In addition, she was an author and a noted political hostess who counted among her friends Prime Minister Charles James Fox, the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, the Prince of Wales, and Marie Antoinette. Reynolds depicted her outdoors, descending a staircase, and captured her famous exuberance and charm.

Reynolds also portrays Georgiana's flair for fashion, particularly the tall pink and white ostrich feathers she wears in her hair. Previously associated with actresses, this French style gained respectability in England thanks to the young duchess. Though Georgiana's gown is a fanciful blend of Turkish and classical influences, her exotic head-dress would not be out of place in a genteel English drawing room—or the French court, for that matter. In March 1775, she appeared at Hampton Court wearing two 16-inch plumes. The following month, Lord Stormont, then British ambassador to Paris, presented Georgiana with an ostrich feather four feet long, which she wore proudly despite increasing attacks from moralists and satirists.

The film shows why Georgiana was hailed as London's "Empress of Fashion." In one scene, her feathers catch on fire in a crowded ballroom, creating a minor emergency.



Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Georgiana (Spencer) Cavendish, Duchess of Devonshire*, 1775–76. The Huntington Art Collections.

The London *Morning Post* reported on the ostrich feather: "Many other females of distinction have been made to moult, and rather than be laughed at any longer, left themselves featherless; while her Grace, with all the dignity of a young Duchess is determined to keep the field, for her feathers increase in enormity in proportion to the public intimations she receives of the absurdity."

Kimberly Chrisman-Campbell was the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Curatorial Fellow in French Art at The Huntington from 2003 to 2007. She is currently the Maggie Pexton Murray Research Scholar at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.