

COLNAGHI ELLIOTT

MASTER DRAWINGS

Sir Francis Grant
(Kilgraston 1803 – 1878 Melton Mowbray)

Portrait of Mary Isabella Grant

Inscribed on verso: *Mary Isabella Geary (Lady Geary) / daughter of / Sir Francis Grant,
painted / by him.*

Pencil and charcoal on paper
24.2 x 16.6 cm. (9 ½ x 6 ½ in.)

Provenance:

By descent in the family of the artist;
Simon Dickinson, London, 2025.



This finely observed drawing depicts Mary Isabella Grant (1831–1854), the eldest daughter of Sir Francis Grant, and belongs to a small and particularly intimate group of works in which the artist portrayed members of his own family. Executed in pencil and charcoal around 1850, the sheet presents the sitter in profile, her head gently inclined and her expression calm and introspective. The handling is economical yet sensitive: firm contour lines define the profile, while softly modulated shading models the face and hair, allowing the likeness to emerge with quiet immediacy.

The drawing is closely related to the oil painting *Mary Grant Knitting a Shawl* (fig. 1), now in the Government Art Collection, and is likely a preparatory study for that composition. The essential elements of pose, physiognomy, and mood are already resolved here, before being elaborated in paint through colour, setting and narrative detail. As such, the drawing offers valuable insight into Grant’s working process, revealing how he first established psychological presence and likeness on paper prior to committing to canvas.

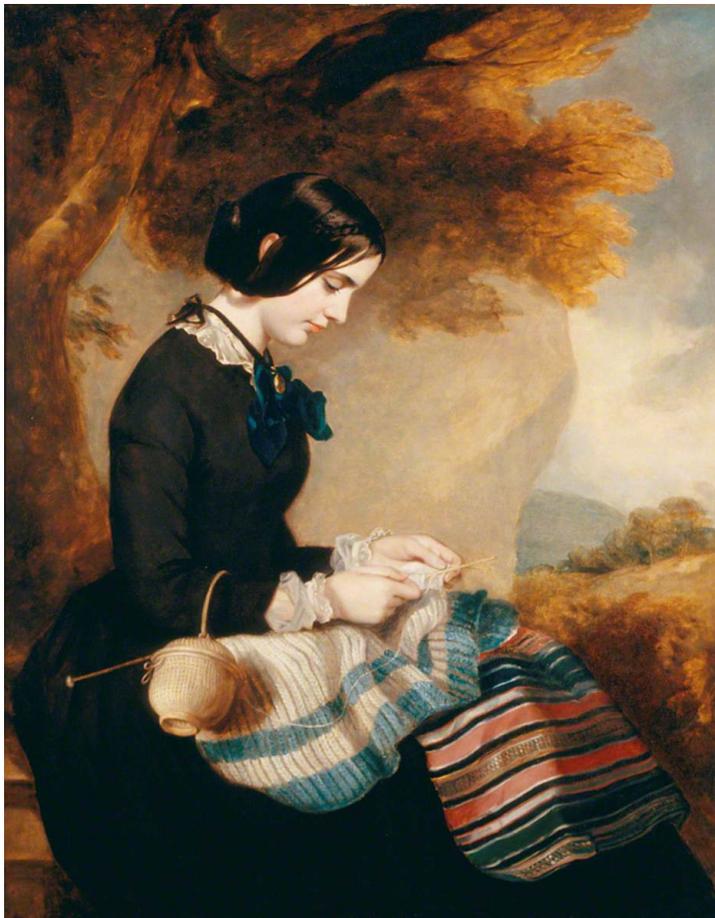


Fig. 1, Sir Francis Grant, *Mary Grant Knitting a Shawl*, c. 1850, 127 x 101.5 cm, oil on canvas, Government Art Collection

Sir Francis Grant occupies a distinctive position within mid-19th-century British art. Unlike many of his contemporaries, he was largely self-trained, and Queen Victoria herself remarked that he “boasts of never having been to Italy nor studied in the old masters.” Rather than academic formation, Grant’s artistic development was shaped by his immersion in aristocratic and sporting society, particularly around Melton Mowbray, where hunting culture and social life were closely intertwined. By the late 1830s he had established a highly successful portrait practice, supported as much by personal connections and social ease as by artistic ability.

Grant's public portraits are typically characterised by breadth of handling, composure, and an ease of presentation inherited from Van Dyck, Gainsborough and Reynolds. By contrast, drawings such as the present sheet possess a markedly private character. Freed from the representational demands of commission and display, they reveal a more exploratory and introspective side of his practice. In these works, Grant's draughtsmanship is direct and perceptive, concerned less with status or finish than with the attentive recording of presence and mood.

Mary Isabella Grant was a recurring subject in her father's work. He painted three known oil portraits of her, one of which was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1850, underscoring the personal importance he attached to these images. In 1852 she married Sir Francis Geary, 4th Baronet of Oxenhoath, but her life was tragically short: she died just two years later, at the age of twenty-two. While the drawing likely predates her marriage, knowledge of her early death lends the image a retrospective poignancy, intensifying its atmosphere of stillness and restraint.

As a work on paper, this drawing holds particular significance within Grant's oeuvre. It stands both as an accomplished portrait study and as a rare document of familial intimacy by an artist best known for his public commissions and his later role as President of the Royal Academy. Closely connected to a finished painting in a major public collection, yet complete and compelling in its own right, the sheet exemplifies Grant's skill as a draughtsman and his capacity to convey psychological presence with minimal means.