

KITTY FISHER, RHYME, BEADS AND LACE.

Written and collected information by Brian Lemin. Dec 2010

INTRODUCTION:

For most of us our first introduction to Kitty Fisher was during our childhood by hearing and learning the nursery rhyme "Lucy Locket"

Lucy Locket lost her pocket,
Kitty Fisher found it;
Not a penny was there in it,
Only ribbon round it.

Our next introduction came via the hobby of lace making, though some historians amongst us may have heard about her from their reading or studies. For us it is the "famous" Kitty Fisher bead.

Here is a picture of one.



Thomas Wright (*Romance of the Lace Pillow* (p 135)) recalls that one of the largest bottom beads made was called "Kitty Fisher's Eyes", a reference to the beautiful 18th century actress.

SOME BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS.

Born **Catherine Marie Fischer**, she was originally a milliner, whom Lieutenant-General (then Ensign) Anthony George Martin (d. 1800) reportedly introduced to the London high life. There is little doubt that the title "courtesan" could accurately describe her at this stage of her life.

She was clearly a fashionable young lady, her hats were highly sought after and when she managed to come into money, her fashion sense and dresses were the envy of London society.

With a flair for publicity, she became best known for her high-profile affairs with men of wealth. Her appearance and dress were scrutinized and copied, scurrilous broadsheets and satires upon her were printed and circulated.

At that time fashionable painters loved to have beautiful ladies pose for them. Sometimes a few of them in a "still life" pose of beauty. Kitty Fisher was among those sought after and her portrait by Reynolds as *Cleopatra Dissolving the Pearl* was engraved.



This is Kitty Fisher and the Parrot by Joshua Reynolds

RIVALRY.

She was not without her rivals and indeed her detractors,

In 1763, Giovanni Casanova (Mmm "the" Casanova!) met Fisher and wrote:

... The illustrious Kitty Fisher, who was just beginning to be fashionable. She was magnificently dressed, and it is no exaggeration to say that she had on diamonds worth five hundred thousand francs. Goudar told me that if I liked I might have her then and there for ten guineas. I did not care to do so, however, for, though charming, she could only speak English, and I liked to have all my senses, including that of hearing, gratified. When she had gone, Mrs. Wells told us that Kitty had eaten a bank-note for a thousand guineas, on a slice of bread and butter, that very day. The note was a present from Sir Akins, brother of the fair Mrs. Pitt. I do not know whether the bank thanked Kitty for the present she had made it.

Giustiniana Wynne visiting London at the time wrote:

"The other day they ran into each other in the park and Lady Coventry asked Kitty the name of the dressmaker who had made her dress. Kitty Fisher answered she had better ask Lord Coventry as he had given her the dress as a gift." The altercation continued with Lady Coventry calling her *an impertinent woman*, and Kitty replying that she would have to accept this insult because Maria became her 'social superior' on marrying Lord Coventry, but she was going to marry a Lord herself just to be able to answer back.

Giustiniana also wrote that

"She lives in the greatest possible splendor, spends twelve thousand pounds a year, and she is the first of her social class to employ liveried servants - she even has liveried chaise porters."

For all of her success and acceptance into London society it was clearly her eyes that fascinated both the men and the women. In general talk they certainly saw how pretty and fashionable she was but they all agreed that her eyes were the most attractive part of her.

It then, would be no surprise that people wanted to take commercial advantage of her and glass bead makers were no different from others, so they created the "Kitty Fisher" bead. Well, that is possibly not correct as it seems that bead may well have been produced before her time, but the lace girls, hearing all the gossip from London wanted a "bit of her" and possibly named this large and pretty bead after her.

THE BEAD.

It comes in all sorts of configurations each with differing interpretations of what they stand for. The traditional bead has blue and red "eyes" within a white circle. The blue I would believe were her true eyes, but there are some (nasty?) people who say the red was her bloodshot eyes!



This is one of the "Black": Kitty Fisher Beads

Really this black bead and the one that follows have nothing to do with Kitty Fisher. The design of Black and blue beads on a white background was a popular bead especially for trading in the colonies.



Here is another version of the black Kitty Fisher bead.

Christine and David Springett in her booklet *Spangles and Superstitions* tells us that Kitty had "grayish blue eyes" and that the spots on the beads are "reminiscent of the sprigged muslin dress which Kitty Fisher wore".

The folklore of the bead is part of the group which is reputedly the "evil eye" beads, or to be more correct, the ownership of such "eye" beads gave you protection from "the evil eye"! I would guess that these associations were born of the West African bead trade and the superstitions that existed there.

Christine and David make a valid story about the lace makers wanting the bead to ward off the eagle eye of the lace dealer so that he would not notice one of her mistakes!

THE NURSERY RHYME:

The rhyme was first recorded by James Orchard Halliwell in 1842, but there is evidence that it was popular in Britain and America at least in the early nineteenth century.

Various persons have been identified with Lucy Locket and Kitty Fisher. Halliwell suggested that they were 'two celebrated courtesans of the time of Charles II', but no supportive evidence has been found. The name Lucy Locket was used by John Gay in *Beggar's Opera* (1728), but may have already have been proverbial. Kitty Fisher may have been Catherine Marie Fischer (d. 1767) a British courtesan who was the subject of three unfinished portraits by Joshua Reynolds and a number of songs, including an air recorded in Thompson's *Country Dances* (1760). (Wikipedia)

Opie in the Oxford Dictionary of Nursery Rhymes embellishes a little on the above but comes to the same conclusion. He records that it was known in a Hampshire girl's school about 1800 and that the lines in the rhyme appeared in many different verses over the year, all sung to the tune of Yankee Doodle Dandy".

CONCLUSION.

Well Kitty Fisher, Milliner, Courtesan, Actress, Beauty and Lady of London Society, certainly existed. She had a great skill in what we would nowadays call public relations. That her name is associated with pretty things, that she was probably talked about by the young lace making girls as the information filtered up from London, would seem to me to ring true. Then the bead, the rhyme and the "evil eye" fits well with me.

I just think it is a great story, and we can choose what we want to believe. As for me I am a romantic and would love to believe that the girls wanted to have "something" Kitty Fisher as the reality was not in their grasp and the added strength of the warding off of the "evil eye" of the lace dealers just "has" to be true 😊



Cleopatra Dissolving the Pearl by Joshua Reynolds.

Kitty Fisher was the model.

Please scroll to the next page for a Newspaper Article. (The last word in the article is "that"... Sorry.

Coffee Break: 1

Courtesan Kitty lives on in a child's ditty



Pretty as a picture: Kitty's painting by Nathaniel Hone, courtesy of the National Portrait Gallery

QUESTION: Is the Catherine 'Kitty' Fisher whose portrait hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, the Kitty Fisher who found Lucy Lockett's pocket in the nursery rhyme?

CATHERINE 'Kitty' Fisher was born around 1738 and died in 1767. She began her working life in a hat shop, was seduced by an army officer nicknamed the 'military Cupid', and progressed up the ranks until she was the lover of both Field Marshal Lord Ligonier and Admiral Augustus Keppel.

By the mid-1750s she was the most famous courtesan in London; fabulously rich, exquisitely dressed and followed by crowds whenever she ventured out in her coach drawn by four fine greys.

She was painted twice by Sir Joshua Reynolds and once by Nathaniel Hone, who included in the picture an image of a kitten fishing in a goldfish bowl as a visual pun on her name. This portrait is in Room Nine of the National Portrait Gallery.

After ten years of public notoriety and many rich and famous clients, she turned respectable and married a Kentish landowner. Kitty revelled in country life, riding dashingly to hounds and treating her tenants with kindness and generosity.

She died in Bath aged 29, possibly as a result of ingesting white lead from her make-up. She is buried at Benenden, Kent.

There were many rhymes and stories about her, some extremely rude. It's highly likely that the nursery rhyme does refer to her: she was a folk heroine and as such passed into street pariance, where she would be quite likely to share a popular rhyme with a fictional character such as Lucy Lockett or Lockett, a name used by John Gay for one of the characters in *The Beggar's Opera* (1728). We cannot be any more certain than that.

John Cooper,
National Portrait Gallery, London.

ANSWERS TO CORRESPONDENTS

CASANOVA SLEPT HERE

MORE than two centuries ago, Casanova lived and loved in London but the most eminent scholars have failed to pinpoint his Soho home base, writes Shaun Usher.

Then Felix Barker and Denise Silvester-Carr matched the career lecher's 1763 diary against faded and forgotten rates books of the local council. Casanova mentioned that he lodged in Greek Street with a certain Suzanne Mercier for £1.35 per week and presto, in that year 5. Mercier paid the rates on today's Number 47.

In Chandlersque style, Felix and Denise combed mean and not-so-mean streets for the most entertainingly scandalous guidebook to the city.

THE BLACK PLAQUE GUIDE TO LON-

DON (Constable, £12.95) tells you everything those staid blue discs dare not mention: Deceptively placid houses linked to rogues, rascals, monsters and madams.

Shepherd Market has always been, well, racy. Back in George III's reign, his brother the Duke of York went there to pretty Kitty Fisher's place, 5 Carrington Street, paying only half her £100 fee. Superbly contemptuous, she put the £50 note between slices of bread and ate it. He never returned.

Calling themselves 'Devil's topographers' actuated by malice and frivolity, the authors spice tamer scholars' London with nearly 200 lewd, lascivious or lethal landmarks.