Artwork of the Month July 2026

J.J. Shannon: Portrait of Miss Chloe Preston

Peter Gibbard, former Chair of the Friends, writes about a portrait which has languished unseen for many decades in the store as a result of its poor condition, but has now been restored with a grant from the Friends. The work has a double interest: the sitter, born near York at Moreby Hall, had a fascinating career as an illustrator of children's books, and the artist was, after Sargent, one of the most successful portrait painters of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Britain and the United States.

Part 1: The Sitter - Miss Chloe Preston (1887-1969)



J.J. Shannon, *Miss Chloe Preston*, 1909, York Art Gallery, oil on canvas 127 x 101.6 cm, credit: York Museums Trust (YORAG: 23). After conservation.

Chloe Preston was 22 years of age in 1909 when she sat for this portrait by the American-born artist James Jebusa Shannon. It was an auspicious year for both of them: she received her first contract for *The Peek-a-Boos,*

a children's book series; he was elected a full academician at the Royal Academy of Arts.

The portrait was donated to the Gallery by the sitter through an intermediary, Mrs J. Rennie, in 1949. It will be on display in the 'Face to Face' exhibition in the Upper North Gallery for the first time in 77 years. Conservation of the portrait and its original frame has been made possible by a grant from the Friends.

Christened Beatrice Zoe Preston, known as Chloe, she was born on the Moreby Hall Estate just south of York on 4th December 1887 to Beatrice Mary Preston, daughter of William Thompson, the 86th Archbishop of York, and his spouse, Zoë Skene. Chloe's father was Henry Edward Preston, a wealthy Yorkshire landowner.

Chloe was a prolific illustrator and one of several British women artists who prospered during what is often called 'the Golden Age of Illustration' (1880–1930). Advances in printing technology, coupled with a greater acceptance of women in commerce, led to a profusion of illustrated media, much of which turned out to be to the talented Chloe's benefit. Best known for children's books, she also illustrated retail advertising, valentines and Christmas greeting cards, humorous holiday postcards, and jigsaw puzzles. She designed soft toys and china patterns, and in her leisure time she painted botanical scenes in watercolour. Her art remains very popular with collectors today. Characters in her illustrations are decidedly affluent in appearance, plump and rosy-cheeked with saucer-like eyes. The *Lady's Pictorial* (December 1917) described them as 'almost grotesque in their quaintness. They are quite original in style and unlike anything that has been done before'. The illustrations reflected her experience of growing up on an estate: riding; hunting; coach trips; garden parties and balls; horse races; motor cars; military service during the First World War. She had publishing contracts with Henry Frowde and Humphrey Milford, both men who had long associations with Oxford University Press, and later with Hodder & Stoughton (now Hachette UK). Unusually for the time, Chloe held trademark and copyright rights to the images for all of her publications which helped to maximise her lifetime earnings. She later inherited the Moreby Hall estate with her brother Thomas.

Educated at home, Chloe worked from Moreby Hall until the 1930s when she relocated to London SW3 with staff. In 1938 she moved to Deal with a companion, Nora Hardy McCaw, also a wealthy heiress and a celebrated enthusiast for Bentleys and Rolls-Royce motoring. They subsequently acquired Trebah Garden in Cornwall (1940-1947) before moving to France, first in Biarritz, and then to reside at Villa Sauber in Monaco (bought by McCaw in 1952). Chloe died in Paris on 12th December 1969 age 82 years while visiting friends.

Part 2: The Artist - Sir James Jebusa Shannon RA (1862 -1923)



Frank Martin Skipworth (1854-1929), *Portrait of J. J. Shannon*, signed and dated 1885, private collection, sold by Christie's 7 July 2016. Skipworth was trained alongside Shannon by Sir Edward Poynter at the South Kensington Art Training Schools.

James was one of seven children born to Irish immigrant parents in New York State. When James was aged eight, the family moved to Canada, where his talent in art was recognised early on by a local artist tutor, and subsequently his parents were persuaded to fund the 16-year-old James for further education in England. He studied at the National Art Training School (now Royal College of Art) under the direction of Sir Edward Poynter (1878-1881), winning the gold medal in his final year for figure drawing in a national competition. His departure from art school was due to his parents' inability to continue to finance his education. He pursued

his art rather than return home, and a combination of talent, determination, a gregarious nature, and 'life of the party' reputation helped him to gain shared studio space in London for several years and, along the way, some much-valued informal tutoring from established fellow-American artists (John Singer Sargent; James McNeill Whistler; George Hitchcock – for the latter see the splendid portrait by Shannon.)

Recommendations from Sir Edward Poynter led to two commissions for portraits of ladies-in-waiting from Queen Victoria, both of which attracted much critical praise and publicity internationally. His growing fame motivated Lady Violet Manners, the future Duchess of Rutland, to seek Shannon out. The friendship between Shannon and Violet, an amateur artist of some skill and a member of the elite and intellectual coterie called the Souls, led to Violet and her husband becoming Shannon's patrons for decades. They thus cemented his reputation among both the aristocracy and the new 'moneyed' in Britain eventually to become the leading portraitist of the day after Sargent (see Shannon's extraordinary portrait of Violet in a Russian headress painted in 1918, on long-term loan to National Trust, Plas Newdydd). He did not hesitate to exhibit these commissioned works at the Royal Academy and other public venues in London, thereby attracting more commissions. In addition positive reviews in the British arts press attracted enquiries from his native USA. Later, he won gold medals at exhibitions in Berlin, Paris, and Vienna for portraiture, and he was equally successful in the USA (1904-8), winning gold medals for portraiture in Pittsburgh and St. Louis, along with a total of 35 commissions (identified to date) from prominent Americans such as John D. Rockefeller. Most of these portraits remain in family collections.

James married Mary Florence Cartright in 1890 (subsequently recorded as 1886 to avoid possible scandal); they had a daughter Katherine ('Kitty', 1887-1974), who became an artist and illustrator. James and Florence met at art school where reportedly she was studying needlework.

As we have seen, Shannon was elected a member of the Royal Academy in 1909, the year he painted the portrait of Chloe Preston. By then he was well established in elite social and artistic circles. In 1892 he had leased a property and plot of land on Holland Park Road next door to Leighton House (the former studio house of Frederic Lord Leighton, PRA), which Shannon remodelled to provide two entrances, one for his studio and the

other for his home. It remains in place today, though it has now been divided into two dwellings. A founding member of the New English Art Club, he also served as President of the Society of Portrait Painters, of which he was also a founding member, and was instrumental in attracting the royal patronage of King George V for the Society.

Severely injured in a riding accident in 1914, Shannon eventually became wheelchair-bound, and as a result was obliged to reduce the canvas size he could utilise. He continued to accept commissions until months before his death in 1923. He was knighted by King George V in 1922 for his services to the arts, renouncing his American citizenship. Unfortunately, his legacy was not long-lastlng, and for many years he was regularly dismissed by art historians as a facile society painter. There has only been one retrospective for his art, which was organised by Barbara Dayer Galati, a former curator at the Brooklyn Museum, in 2014. However, recently there has been a growing interest in his work, alongside the rise of Sargent to global superstar status. Art UK shows 54 of his works in British public collections, of which York's painting, now restored to its former glory so as to be at last suitable for display, is certainly among the finest.

© Peter Gibbard, November 2026

Selected Sources:

- *Chloe Preston and the Peek-a-Boos* by Mary Hillier, published by Richard Dennis (1998)
- www.britishnewspaperarchive.co.uk (search Chloe Preston, Henry Frowde, Humphrey Milford, Hodder & Stoughton)
- Moreby Hall, *Country Life Magazine*, February 16, 1907
- www.trebahgarden.co.uk >Heritage (The War Years)
- First World War Cartoons & Portrait Photographs, www.cartoonscloseup.blog
- www.bridgemanimages.com > preston-chloe
- www.drouot.com (lilium auratum lot 197)

- *Seeking Beauty: Paintings by James Jebusa Shannon* by Barbara Dayer Gallati, Ph.D., published by Debra Force Fine Art (2014), download PDF.