

Neil Jeffares, *Dictionary of pastellists before 1800*

Online edition

ISAACS, Martha, Mrs Alexander Higginson

fl. London 1771; – Great Marlow brd
15.VIII.1840

Miss Isaacs exhibited miniatures, some crayons and other works at the Free Society from her father's ("opposite Marquis Court, Drury Lane" 1771) and other London addresses (7 Bell Savage Inn, 1773; 2 Hind Court, Fleet Street, 1774). Her father was probably the embroiderer recorded in Mortimer's *Universal director* for 1763 as "Levy Isaac, Strand, opposite Durham Yard"; his trade card, "Levi Isaacs Embroiderer/at The Star/in Denmark Court/near Exeter Exchange" is in the Jewish Museum. According to the Westminster rate books, he lived at Stanhope Street or other addresses in the Dury Lane ward throughout this period. Benjamin, son of Levy Isaacs, embroiderer, was apprenticed to Edward Mascal of the Painter's Company, 3.XI.1762 (*London apprenticeship abstracts, 1552–1850*).

Martha was a pupil of (Thomas) Burgess, who himself exhibited portraits of the Jewish priest Isaac Polack (one in chalks). She was probably born c.1755. William Hickey (*Memoirs*, London, 1913–25, II, p. 157f) records that in early 1778 "a young Jewess of the name of Isaacs arrived in Calcutta to exercise the profession of miniature painting. Cleveland [Hickey's companion], having known her family in England, interested himself to promote her success." Here she made numerous miniatures of British subjects, including of Hickey. During the sittings Cleveland commented on his friend's ugliness, whereupon Miss Isaacs observed "with much naiveté" how little business she would have were it confined to the handsome men of Calcutta. After converting, when she received the Christian name of Martha (the baptismal record for 1.VII.1779 noted that she was "a Person of riper Years" but does not specify her parentage), she married Alexander Higginson on 5.VII.1779 in Calcutta. It does not appear that she continued to work.

From an old military family, Higginson's father owned a large timber wharf on the Thames and owned land in Essex and Marlow. Alexander served in the East India Company, as chief of the provincial council at Burdwan, and then as a member of the Board of Trade (later giving evidence at the trial of Warren Hastings). He was a freemason. They returned to England in 1782 with a considerable fortune, which, owing to imprudent investments, was considerably diminished by the time of his early death in 1793. A miniature by John Smart was made in 1783 (London Sotheby's, 4.VII.2019, Lot 60).

Of their sons, Charles Harwood Higginson (1784–1824) became a judge in the Supreme Court of Calcutta; Alexander (1786–1855) served in the Grenadier Guards, as did his brother, George Powell Higginson (1788–1866): he is shown in a double portrait with his mother by John Russell, said to have been executed in 1787 but presumably later. General Higginson married the daughter of an earl, while a younger brother married a Casamajor.

Martha Higginson's 1738 will was proved 25.VIII.1840. She was then a widow living at 46

Wimpole Street and at Townsend Cottage, Great Marlow (where she was buried), and had already given "all the books pictures and prints" to her son Alexander. The family's wealth is evidenced by the settlement Martha made on George Powell Higginson's marriage in 1825 of £7000 to be paid out of her estate, then considered to be one quarter of her personal estate.

Bibliography

Bénézit; Foskett 1987; Foster 1931, p. 55; G. W. A. Higginson, *Seventy-one years of a guardsman's life*, London, 1916; Alfred Rubens, "Early Anglo-Jewish artist", paper read to Jewish Historical Society of England, 13.IV.1937; Waterhouse 1981; India Office records, British Library

GENEALOGIES [Higginson](#)

Pastels

- J.4144.101 Young gentleman, crayons, Free Society 1774, no. 142
- J.4144.102 Boy, crayons, Free Society 1774, no. 146
- J.4144.103 A piece of fruit, from nature, crayons, Free Society 1773, no. 93