The Daily Telegraph

FEATURES

Keeping brilliant women in the frame

ecca Hossack
artist Mary Moser

As an exhibition opens celebrating female pioneers of the 18th century – the Bluestockings – we nominate their modern-day counterparts. **Helen Birch reports**

What do our female icons say about the world today? Our national obsession with the antics of Britney, Amy and Kate might indicate a culture absorbed by image, glamour and spectacular falls from grace. But that is not the whole story.

Today the National Portrait Gallery (NPG) unveils a new exhibition celebrating brilliant women of the 18th century – icons such as early feminist Mary Wollstonecraft, moralist Hannah More and industrialist Elizabeth Montagu, who caused a sensation within their chosen spheres but went on to became symbols of patriotic pride. The Bluestockings – as they became known because one (male) associate turned up to a soirée wearing blue rather than white stockings – were revered for their achievements as writers, historians, philosophers and artists. "They were self-consciously high-minded but most of them were also very fashionable and glamorous," says Elizabeth Eger, one of the curators of the exhibition. "They were interested in pleasure but focused on the life of the mind. Through their correspondence, parties and meetings they rebranded the idea of sociability to embrace women's right to education."

While the term "Bluestocking" was later used as a denigratory term, the NPG is reclaiming it to praise our clever foremothers. And so to mark the exhibition's opening we have brought together some of their contemporary counterparts – intellectuals, communicators, campaigners, educators. Some, like Rebecca Willis and Jemima Khan, want to change the world. Some, like physicist Laura Grant and engineer Shini Somarathne, are passionate about encouraging more women to join their professions. Some, like internet entrepreneur Justine Roberts, gallerist Rebecca Hossack, writer Abi Morgan and TV executive Amanda Ross, are using technology, arts and the media to challenge traditions, exchange ideas and create networks.

What all these women share with their 18th-century predecessors is a commitment to "the life of the mind", and also to a modern version of the principles of support for other women. "My career path has been 90 per cent led and supported by women," says Abi Morgan. "Writers such as Kay Mellor, Paula Milne and Caryl Churchill were brilliant career touchstones."

Patronage was the lifeblood of the Bluestockings. Their power may have been limited by history and circumstance, but their influence was great. At parties hosted by wealthy *salonistes*, notably Montagu, women discussed ideas, politics and culture. They fostered networks and friendships though correspondence, just as naturally as 21st-century women use email and the internet.

At a time when women were not permitted to go to university, vote, make a will or own property after marriage, these 18th-century women managed to earn their own living, pushing the boundaries of what women were expected to do.

But there was a price. "Most of them were unmarried and so never had children," says co-curator Lucy Peltz. "Most of them had to pursue careers to support themselves." The choices for today's women, of course, are not so stark. Most recognise that multi-tasking is a fact of life and all praised the partners, colleagues and role models without whom their lives would falter. But for some, like Amanda Ross, who went "hell for leather" building up her company and then found she had left it too late to have children, sacrifices were still made. "Our bodies are not machines," she says. "I went through heartbreaking years."

The lives of the Bluestockings burned brightly, but all too briefly,

MARTIN POPE

instead, gaining her PhD at the age of 25. She appears on BBC1's *One Show*, and is single. "My father, who came to Britain from Sri Lanka in the 1970s, was an engineer and it seemed natural for me to follow in his footsteps. My mother worked full-time in finance, so I had a working-woman role model, too. It's difficult to engage people with engineering, particularly women, who imagine men striding about in hard hats. I'm passionate about communicating the fun side of science and demystifying it – it's a real buzz when you see the lights switch on in people's minds."

Rebecca Hossack
52, gallery owner

Hossack came to Britain from Australia in the 1980s and became the first gallery owner to showcase Aboriginal art in Europe. She spent several years as the Australian cultural attaché, and is now also a Conservative councillor for Fitzrovia in London. She is married and has no children.

"When I started out, there was real ignorance and elitism in the art world," she says. "Women in the field weren't at all helpful or supportive. I've learned from that and now have great cameraderie with new young female gallerists. I strongly believe that we should be citizens of our culture.

"I loathe politics, but I care about my area of London – that's why I stood as a councillor. It's incredibly hard work, but I don't distinguish between my life and my work. I chose not to have children, because one thing the world doesn't need is more people."