



Carlyle House Docent Dispatch

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Northern Virginia Regional Park Authority

Thomas Gainsborough

Thomas Gainsborough is considered one of the greatest British portrait artists of the eighteenth century. He was born in 1727 in the town of Sudbury in Suffolk, England. He was the youngest of ten children. At age thirteen, Thomas was apprenticed to an engraver named Hubert Francois Gravelot. While in London, Gainsborough mastered the art of engraving and began his painting career at the St. Martin's Lane Academy. There he was probably influenced by the work of William Hogarth, a very popular eighteenth-century satirical artist working in London during this time. Gainsborough opened his own studio in London and in 1746 was married to Margaret Burr. Margaret brought an annuity of two hundred pounds per year to the marriage. It is speculated that Margaret was the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Beaufort, a very wealthy man and that is why he provided so generously for her. This marriage was a very important part of Gainsborough's career because he was not under any financial strains in the early years. As a result, he could divide his time between commissioned portraits that made him an income and the landscapes that were his true passion, but which rarely sold.



where Gainsborough's two daughters Mary and Margaret were born. During these years, Gainsborough completed a number of small-scale portraits of local notables. He spent a great deal of time wandering the countryside and working on landscapes such *Connard Wood*, one of his greatest works. Gainsborough always considered himself a landscape artist. In his lifetime, he painted over two hundred landscapes. Unfortunately, landscapes were not as popular as portraits during this time. So Gainsborough was forced to continue to paint portraits even though his great love was landscapes. He became adept at doing both and he sometimes included magnificent landscapes in the backgrounds of portraits. For example, in the portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Andrews, Gainsborough, notable members of the local gentry, are shown sitting beneath a tree with the property they own stretching behind them. Gainsborough's treatment of the lush and detailed landscape is more interesting than the couple themselves.

(Continued on page 2)

In 1749, the couple moved back to Sudbury

Carlyle House

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Thomas Gainsborough(con't)



Gainsborough was greatly influenced by Dutch landscape artists, who were noted for their accuracy and use of light. He was known to wander the countryside collecting foliage and rocks to bring back to his studio. He would then arrange the natural materials in a pleasing manner and use them to create his landscapes.

Gainsborough also managed to capture what many art historians call a typical “English sky.” These skies reflect a great tension because the viewer can’t tell if it will storm or if the sun will come out.

Many of Gainsborough’s landscapes are considered pastoral in that they show scenes of shepherds and shepherdesses in simple rural bliss. This was a very appropriate genre for the time because according to Deborah Chotner, “the idealization of the ordinary rural life –then threatened by increasing industrialization and controversial agricultural reform – was a prevalent theme in British writing and thought during this era.”

Even though portraiture was not Gainsborough’s favorite thing to paint, his portraits are what he is best known for. Gainsborough had been successful as a portrait artist in the early years of his career, but he became nationally known after he opened up his studio in Bath in

1759. According to William Vaughan, this move to Bath “turned him from a provincial painter into a leader of fashion.” Bath was a highly fashionable city, popular with those seeking good health, social intrigue, and entertainment. In his studio located next to the fashionable pump room, Gainsborough was able to paint some of societies leading individuals. Unlike other notable portrait artist of the time, such as Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough sought to capture the most realistic rendering of the individual. Reynolds captured an idealistic image of the sitter by representing their true spirits which was often different than their actual appearance. Gainsborough, in a fashion similar to his landscapes, presented his subject in the most accurate manner possible. A practice that was not very popular with his less attractive clients.

Gainsborough was particularly adept at painting women, particularly their clothing. While other contemporaries of Gainsborough’s were having their assistants paint the clothing in the portraits, Gainsborough was taking great care in the treatment of the garments. Many art historians attribute his detailed treatment of the clothing and fabric to his relationships with his older sisters, who were both successful milliners.

The themes of his portraits were also very different from other portrait artists of the time. Instead of using classical imagery, Gainsborough chose to place his subjects in relaxed and realistic settings. Sometimes his love of music was displayed through the use of musical instruments being held by many of his friends who were amateur musicians, like Gainsborough himself. For example, the portraits of *Ann Ford* and *William Wollston*, both of whom are amateur musicians and acquaintances of Gainsborough, were depicted in a relaxed pose holding musical instruments.

Thomas Gainsborough’s success in Bath had far reaching effects throughout England. In 1768, the Royal Academy of Arts was established in London and Gainsborough along with 39 other artists were invited to become the original members. The institute was a formal way for artists to be represented. The group was dedicated to uphold the highest standards in exhibitions and in teaching new artists. For Gainsborough, the invitation was an amazing accomplishment because only a few artists who worked outside of London were chosen. Gainsborough had a long and contentious relationship with the Academy because he frequently disagreed with the manner in which paintings were

(Continued on page 3)



hung during the yearly exhibition of works. Gainsborough also disagreed with many of the principles that the president of the Royal Academy of Arts, Joshua Reynolds, espoused. Despite this rocky relationship with the Royal Academy and Joshua Reynolds, Gainsborough maintained a great respect for the institution and the artists. In fact, days before his death in 1788, Gainsborough called Reynolds to his deathbed to show him one of his last works.

It is a testament to Thomas Gainsborough's success as an artist that his professional rival in life, Joshua Reynolds, said in a speech to the Royal Academy after Gainsborough's death, "If ever this nation should produce genius sufficient to acquire to us the honorable distinction of an English School the name of Gainsborough will be transmitted to posterity, in the history of Art among the very first of that rising name."

The Thomas Gainsborough exhibit featuring many of his landscapes and portraits will be at the National Gallery of Art until May 11, 2003.

Works Consulted:

- *Gainsborough*, by William Vaughan
- *The World of Gainsborough*, by Jonathan Norton Leonard
- *Thomas Gainsborough, Exhibit Brochure*, by Deborah Chotner