

Thomas Gainsborough

(Gains-bur-row)

*English Landscape and Portrait Painter
Rococo Period*

B ca 14 May 1727, Sudbury, Suffolk, England

D.2 August 1788 London, England



Tho Gainsborough

Thomas was the youngest of a number of children. His father suffered several professional setbacks, and was unable to provide university for his youngest son.

Thomas's maternal uncle, Humphrey Burroughs, was also Thomas's teacher at the local school, but Thomas was preferred drawing and copying nature. He was so good at copying, he learned to copy his father's signature and wrote notes "from his father" excusing Thomas from class so he could go drawing the countryside!

When his father and Uncle Humphrey figured it out, they confronted Thomas, fearing he was running off doing mischief. When they saw his sketchbook, they realized he was talented and worked hard—just at drawing, not at schoolwork. Sadly, there was no money to get Thomas into an apprenticeship.

Then his namesake, Uncle Thomas Gainsborough (Sr.), (on his father's side), died and left young Thomas enough money to train properly and set up a studio as his trade. At the age of 15, Thomas apprenticed and soon became a great painter...of landscapes, which few wanted to purchase. They wanted portraits.

Gainsborough realized, if he wanted to paint landscapes, he had to convince his sitters to let him paint them outside in the beauty of nature. Many liked his idea, and Gainsborough's signature landscape portraits were born. He married, had three daughters, and moved to Bath, then London, painting portraits in order to make money for his family, and landscapes, whenever he could get away with it.

At this same time, England was spawning a new form of art style and art education. No longer did Englishmen want to import the best painters from the Netherlands or France, they wanted to train the best in England. Gainsborough and a number of other painters, including Sir Joshua Reynolds, founded the Royal Academy of Art, and the first art galleries and exhibitions in England. However, Gainsborough and Reynolds, President of the Academy of Art, soon became rivals, each vying for the best patrons.

It didn't help that Reynolds wanted to paint historical, mythical subjects, so convinced HIS portrait sitters to dress as ancient Greeks, or Robin Hood characters, and sit for his historical-style "Grand Manner" portraits. Everyone wanted a Reynolds and a Gainsborough in their homes, and both men grew frustrated when few could even tell their works apart!

Eventually, Gainsborough, stricken with cancer, wrote a letter to Reynolds, admitting he'd been a jealous admirer of Reynold's work for years. Reynolds visited, the men reconciled, and Reynolds spoke the Eulogy at Gainsborough's funeral.

Vocabulary

Landscape (In Gainsborough's day, he called them "Landskips")

From a Dutch word, (Land + Skip or Ship) a landscape painting is a painting showing natural scenery, such as mountains, seashores, forests, river valleys, ect., with few to no human beings. The focus of the painting is the beauty of the natural world. Until the Romantic movement of art became popular in the early 19th century, landscape paintings were held in low regard by professional artists; the French Academy ranked them fourth in their five-tier hierarchy of paintings. The Romantic movement, inspired in part by Gainsborough's treatment of his landscapes, idealized the natural world, and became a respected form of painting in its own right.



Rococo (ca 1730 – ca. 1760)

Row-coh-coh"



Sometimes called "Late Baroque," Rococo" comes from the French "Rocaille" meaning "pebble-work" or "shell-work." Coined in 1825 as an insult meaning, "old fashioned" and "over-decorated," Rococo art was a rejection of the dark tenebrism of Baroque. In painting, Rococo is defined by its bright, pastel-like colors, natural, more asymmetrical themes and decorations, and undulating, twisting patterns, as well as light, joyous subject matter of everyday fun. (Walks, picnics, games, day-outings; there's hardly a Biblical or moralizing painting in sight!) As you look at Gainsborough's work, note the trees twisting up to the sky, the detailed natural backdrop, and the light colors of the dress of the people in his early portraits. These are characteristics of Rococo work. While the Neoclassical period of visual art rose in the last twenty years of Gainsborough's life (ca. 1760- ca. 1850), his own style is considered to be Rococo by most scholars.

*"The Swing" by Jean-Honore Fragonard, 1767.
This is considered an icon of the Rococo era.*

Thomas Gainsborough Quotes:

“Fools talk of imitation and copying; all is imitation”

-Letter to John Henderson (Scottish nobleman, lawyer and politician), 27 June, 1773



The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly.

Oil on Canvas, 1756.
113.5 cm x 105 cm;
National Gallery, London

Mr. And Mrs. Andrews

*Oil on Canvas, ca. 1750
69.8 cm x 119.4 cm (27 in x 47 in)
National Gallery, London, England*

This painting is an early one in Gainsborough's work, and it has an interesting story behind it. The man is Mr. Robert Andrews and his new wife, Frances (Carter) Andrews. The estates of their parents were next door to each other, and the wedding of their children consolidated their properties into one massive domain. Early on, the Andrews and Carter families supported Gainsborough, and the senior Carters commissioned a double portrait.

However, by the time this painting was commissioned, Gainsborough's father, never a good businessman, had gone into debt and bankrupted. Two of the debt holders were the Andrews and Carter families, and this portrait may have been a debt payment forced from the son, rather than a straight commission. This, some scholars say, accounts for the almost-contemptuous looks on the faces of the pair. There are also some strange symbolism that can be read into the background, or even into the blank canvas on Mrs. Andrews's lap. Some say she was supposed to be holding a newly-shot pheasant (evidence of her husband's provision, given he's in his hunting attire). Others say Gainsborough left it blank, with the understanding the Andrews would have him back to paint their firstborn in Mrs. Andrews's lap. The Andrews had nine children, but Gainsborough was never invited to complete this painting, and delivering any painting with blank canvas on it was virtually unheard of.

Despite these possible slights, Gainsborough did accurately depict the landscape. The location of this painting is well known and visitors to Sudbury can still stand under the shade of this same oak tree, (now grown much larger) to see the same landscape Gainsborough and the Andrews did. The rows of wheat on the right reference the new plowing technique, seed drilling (still used today), implying that Mr. Andrews is a thoroughly modern landowner.

This work was virtually unknown until 1926, when the descendants of the couple allowed the painting to be exhibited in a Gainsborough retrospective for his 200th birthday. It appeared the Robert and Frances Andrews never prominently displayed, catalogued, or boasted of having a genuine Gainsborough, even as he grew famous. But, 200 years later, whatever had, or had not, been between the couple and painter was long-forgotten. The "triple portrait" (husband, wife, and their property) was hailed by 20th century onlookers as a masterpiece, and soon sold to the National Gallery in London where it is displayed today.



“Blue Boy”

Oil on Canvas; 1770

177,8 cm x 112.1 cm (70 in x 44 in)

*Henry E. Huntington Art Gallery, San Marino,
California, USA*

This portrait may be one of Gainsborough’s most famous works.

No one knows for certain who the model is, but most scholars think it was Jonathan Buttle (1752 – 1805) the son of a newly-rich hardware merchant. It was painted for the 1770 Academy of Art show, and possibly painted to annoy Sir Joshua Reynolds personally. Reynolds, the President of the Royal Academy of Art, had, in one of his art lectures, recommended that all light masses in a portrait or person be warm colors, (yellow, red, yellow-white) and cool colors, like blue, green, grey be relegated to the background to set the warm colors up in contrast. He further stated that if someone should create a portrait where the portrait was mostly cool colors and the background warm, then no one, even someone as famous as Peter Paul Reubens (whom most Rococo painters tried to emulate) or Titian (a

renowned Renaissance painter) could create a harmonious or splendid painting.

Challenge accepted! Gainsborough promptly did this life-size painting and submitted it to the annual art show where it proved Reynolds wrong (to the admiration of the public.) The painting remained in England until 1921, when American Henry Huntington bought it for \$720,000, the most expensive painting in the world at that time. The mourning in England over losing this national treasure and the astounding price meant that this was probably the most-well known painting of the 1920’ s – 1940’ s (after the Mona Lisa)

Modern conservation in 2019 revealed that the canvas was recycled: it used to show an unfinished painting of an old man. Gainsborough also painted a small shaggy dog on the right-hand side of the boy before covering it over with the pile of rocks now seen.



Mrs. Richard Brinsley Sheridan

*Oil on Canvas; 1787
219.7 cm x 153.7 cm (86.5 in x 60.5 in)
National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., USA*

This painting depicts Elizabeth Anne Linley after her marriage. Elizabeth's parents were composers and musicians and Elizabeth began performing professionally at the age of nine.

The Linley family was friends with the Gainsboroughs, and Thomas Gainsborough created a number of portraits of Elizabeth and her siblings (all professional musicians) over the years. After Elizabeth eloped with Richeard Sheriden, famous Irish playwright, Gainsborough painted her one more time.

This painting is done in a "Grand Manner" genre, similar to Joshua Reynolds's paintings. The brush strokes of Sheriden's hair are similar to those in the tree leaves, giving her a look similar to the nature she loved. The colors in the sunset sky were also used on her gown, further tying the portriat together.



*On the left,
Gainsborough's
1768's A Beggar
Boy and Girl.
Elizabeth and her
little brother
Thomas were the
models.*

*On the right, "The
Linley Sisters",
painted 1771-
1772. Elizabeth is
standing, her little
sister Mary is
sitting.*



Take Home Ideas:

Video:

“Thomas Gainsborough-Mr. And Mrs. Andrews” by YouTube Channel “One Minute Art”. Literally just over a minute, lovely music, but quick words on video. May need to read some of it to smaller children.

“The Life of Thomas Gainsborough for Kids” by YouTube channel “NowYouKnowAbout” A cute little 12-minute video with cartoon illustrations and real Gainsborough paintings, with the narrator “Gainsborough” telling his own life story. Highly recommend!

Articles and Online:

“Is This Gainsborough’s Paint Set?” Daily Mail, 18 February 2014, written by Sarah Griffiths.

Gainsborough lived before commercial paints and paint tubes, so he had to grind the pigments and mix the paint himself and store and leftovers in pig bladders. A set of these were found in an attic in one of Gainsborough’s old houses, and this article shows photos of the paint bladders. Gainsborough’s or not, the paint bladders show how painters in Gainsborough’s time (and earlier) stored their paint. Very interesting!

“Project Blue Boy”

A website documenting the full conservation of Blue Boy which took place in 2019. See articles about the history, the technique, but also the science behind the conservation (like, what did the conservators see when they X-rayed the painting? Used infrared? Ultraviolet?)

<https://www.huntington.org/project-blue-boy>