

British Painting of the 18th Century

John Steegman

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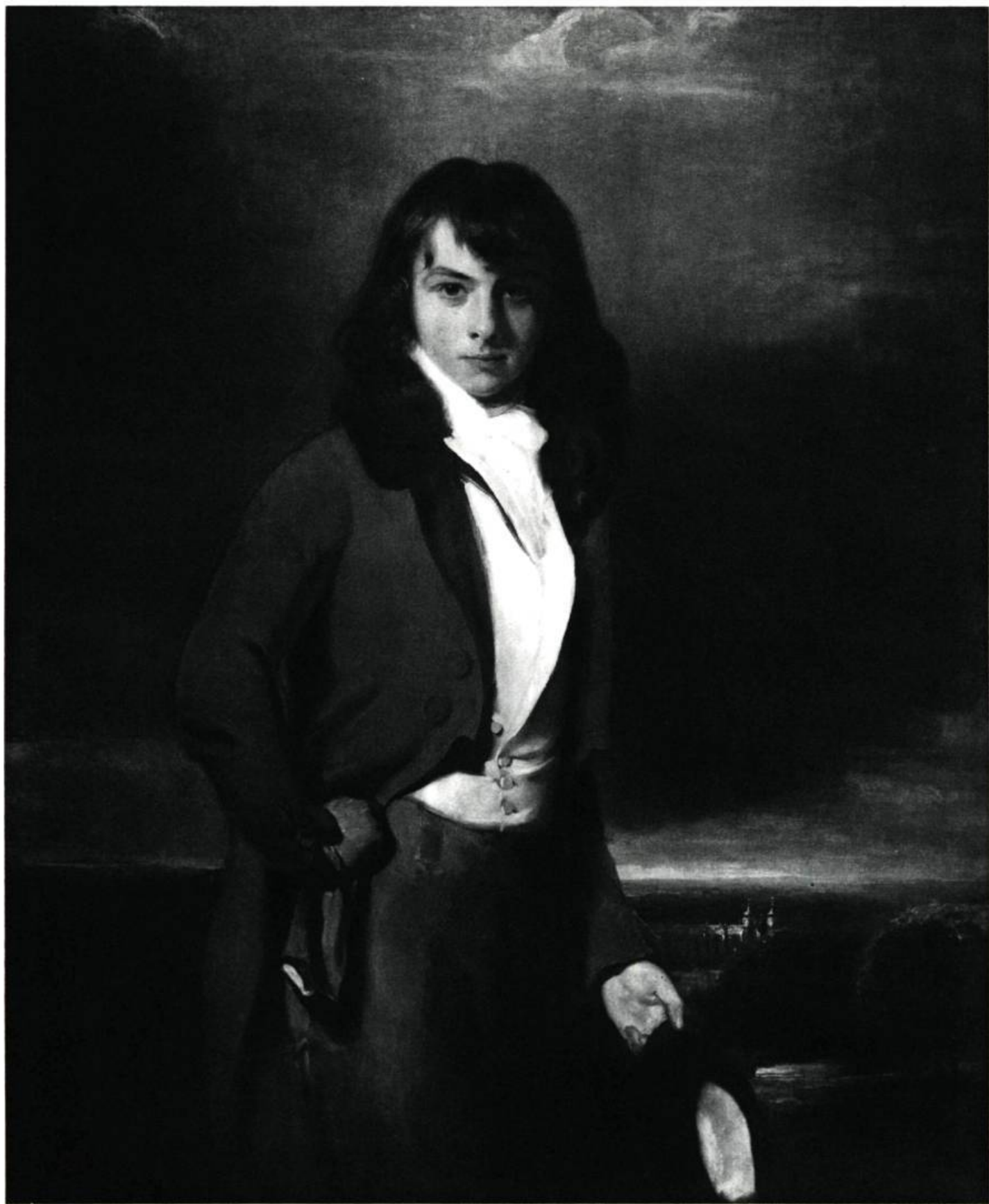
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Sir Thomas Lawrence 1769-1830, PORTRAIT OF ARTHUR ATHERLEY AS AN ETONIAN
huile, H. 55 $\frac{3}{4}$ L. 43 $\frac{1}{2}$ pouces, Los Angeles, Musée.

This exhibition, covering the whole field of British painting between 1700 and 1800 from Kneller and Hogarth to Lawrence and Raeburn is the first of three years' effort by the two working-committees, one in Canada and one in London. It has been widely publicised, both here and in London, as the largest and most distinguished exhibition of British paintings ever seen in North America.

Everybody knows that "promotion" statements are not invariably 100% true. This one, however, is. How is it true? What is the real importance of this show?

To begin with, it lies in the very high quality of the paintings; all are of the first class in their particular *genres*. Secondly, about 50% of them have never before been seen in public, even in England. Thirdly, and most essential, the show was designed from the beginning to demonstrate the full scope and variety of the British 18th century School, as it reflected all aspects of the social and intellectual life of that tremendous century in Britain's history.

The late Duveen, that baron among international art-dealers, successfully created the impression that the art of that period consisted only of aristocratic portraits by Reynolds, Gainsborough and Romney. It was very profitable for Duveen, but very harmful for the reputation of British Art. So we set-out to rectify it, and I think we shall have succeeded.

The scope is surprisingly wide. Landscapes, genre-pictures, conversation-groups, scenes of humble life, marine-pieces and sporting subjects, as well as the great classical compositions. There is no Still-Life; England did not produce a Chardin. Nor is there any religious painting; England is a Protestant country, and religious art does not flourish very vigorously in a Protestant soil.

Undoubtedly it is the revelation of English landscape painting, long before Turner and Constable, that is the real *clou* of this show. The "Landscape with Figures," or "Figures in a Landscape," by Wootton, Devis, and the young Gainsborough, the *veduta* painters in the manner of Canaletto's English period, such as Scott and Marlow; and Stubbs the best of them all. Then there are the six great classical arrangements of Richard Wilson, serene and motionless, which in turn lead on to the seven major landscapes by Gainsborough. These, I think, form one of the great experiences of the exhibition. They are as abstract as music, they are hymns to the pantheistic Nature whom Wordsworth later worshipped in his poetry.

If these wonderful Gainsborough *landscapes* anticipate Wordsworth and, as I feel, late Beethoven, there are two other anticipations to be detected among the *portraits* here by Gainsborough. The "Captain Matthews" forecasts a Goya, and the "Mary Gainsborough" is a Renoir, a hundred years before Renoir.

No exhibition of this nature can be complete without The Horse. The Horse was the god of the English gentry, and his high-priest was Stubbs; no painter, not Delacroix nor Géricault nor Degas, understood that capricious animal better than Stubbs. His masterpiece here, the portrait of the famous stallion "Gimcrack" on Newmarket Heath, all nerves and temperament after winning a big race, is, as Mr. Vincent Massey said to the present writer, "a picture stripped down to its essentials, everything irrelevant is eliminated, to the point of austerity."

Finally, of course, there is Reynolds. Here are nine paintings selected carefully to show him in all his moods. The great compositions, like the dramatic young "Colonel Tarleton" and the ravishing "Mrs. Lloyd" in a sunlit forest; intimate portraits and studies of childhood; the youthful *jeux d'esprit* of his student years in Rome, caricatures of his compatriots. And they include the very famous "Duchess of Devonshire with her Child," probably the most beloved of all English paintings.

The importance, the whole point, of the exhibition is this: it demonstrates that Hogarth, Wilson, Reynolds and Gainsborough are not just isolated phenomena. They are both the inheritors and also the transmitters of the English tradition. Their great fame must not blind us to the achievements of their less-known contemporaries, who works find their honoured place here.

John Steegman

BRITISH

PAINTING OF THE 18th CENTURY



Thomas Gainsborough
MISS GAINSBOROUGH GLEANING. 1760
huile
H. 29", L. 25"
Collection de Madame Louis Fleischmann,
Moreton-in Marsh.



Sir Joshua Reynolds
GEORGIANA,
DUCHESS OF DEVONSHIRE
AND HER DAUGHTER. 1784
huile
H. 43½" L. 55¾"
Collection des
"Trustees of the Chatsworth Settlement".

Sir Joshua Reynolds
LADY CAROLINE SCOTT
huile
H. 55½" L. 44"
Collection du
duc de Buccleuch, K.T., G.C.V.O.,
Bowhill.



Samuel Scott
OLD LONDON BRIDGE
huile
H. 32" L. 59".
Collection du gouverneur et
de la société de la Banque d'Angleterre,
Londres.





Francis Cotes
THE YOUNG CRICKETER, 1768
huile
H. 66½" L. 43½"
Collection de Lord Brouet,
Brouet Hall, Hertfordshire.

George Stubbs
GIMCRACK WITH A GROOM,
JOCKEY AND STABLE LAD
ON NEWMARKET HEATH, 1765
huile
H. 40" L. 76"

