

Thomas Gainsborough: Leaving His Mark

Imagine you're one of the greatest ever portrait painters. You're famous, wealthy, and celebrated as an artistic virtuoso. How would you preserve your legacy?

This was the problem that confronted Thomas Gainsborough. What's more, he was the father of two daughters who as *Gainsborough's Family Album* at the National Portrait Gallery in London recently made clear, he adored. He taught them to paint but such was the position of women in 18th century England, the best Gainsborough could hope for was that his daughters would marry well. In fact, neither did but that's for another article.

Instead take a look at this painting. It's a portrait of Thomas Gainsborough's nephew, Gainsborough Dupont, who became in turn apprentice, studio assistant, collaborator, chief mourner, executor and artistic heir to the great man. Gainsborough Dupont was even buried next to his uncle.

Thomas Gainsborough made five portraits of his nephew in five years as their relationship evolved and grew closer. So take a look at this one. What do you see?



After restoration: Thomas Gainsborough *Gainsborough Dupont, the Artist's Nephew* (1773) Waddesdon (Rothschild Family) Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery

Well, if you see anything clearly at all, it's down to the conservators at the National Portrait Gallery as this painting was specially restored for the recent show. They cleaned off the coats of yellowing varnish that were applied over a century ago.

Restoring it was eye-opening say the gallery, revealing just why a friend of Gainsborough described this portrait as 'more like the work of God than of man'. What strikes you most now about the restored painting are the clarity of the blues. Not just in the youth's satin jacket and his eyes, blue flecks feature in his eyebrows and even in his hair. The painting shimmers with a summery light fitting for Gainsborough the nephew's age and promise.



Before restoration: Thomas Gainsborough *Gainsborough Dupont, the Artist's Nephew* (1773) Waddesdon (Rothschild Family) Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery

Take a look too at Gainsborough Dupont's clothes. This is hard for us to notice now but he's not dressed for 1773; instead, he's wearing clothes from 100 years earlier. Imagine someone now being painted in an Edwardian frock coat and top hat, and that's how out of its time this painting is. In fact, his anachronistic outfit probably contributed to the difficulty in attributing this painting. It was only in the last twenty years that it was confirmed as Gainsborough the nephew.

This all makes the painting of his protégé more complex and interesting than it might seem at first glance as Gainsborough is clearly channelling Anthony Van Dyck, the great Court painter of the previous century. Van Dyck set the standard for English portraiture and here, Thomas Gainsborough is paying homage by taking a common apprentice, albeit a very handsome one, and elevating his portrait to great art as Van Dyck had done before him. Maybe Gainsborough at the height of his creative powers is asking us to compare him with the masterful Van Dyck as well.

And what a virtuoso painter Gainsborough was. He dashed this portrait of his nephew off in an hour! We're used to thinking of painters painstakingly applying paint a dab at a time. Not Gainsborough! Instead imagine him flicking paint around the canvas with a long-handled brush until he'd found the perfect image of his nephew in less than an hour. Not for nothing was Thomas Gainsborough called the 'likeness man'.



Thomas Gainsborough: *Gainsborough Dupont, the Artist's Nephew* (c. 1770-5) Courtesy of National Portrait Gallery

The special relationship between Thomas Gainsborough and Gainsborough Dupont continued to evolve right up to the artist's death. Knowing that he was dying from cancer at the early age of 61,

Gainsborough found the unfinished painting of his nephew above and placed it on his easel. His poignant message is clear – ‘there is much I’m leaving undone’ he seems to be saying. But equally clearly by choosing a painting of his nephew, Thomas Gainsborough is acknowledging Gainsborough Dupont as his true heir.

In our own individualistic age, we tend to think of great artists as lone geniuses but these portraits make us aware of how a painter, even a great one like Thomas Gainsborough, is embedded in family relationships. Many of his other portraits show Gainsborough to be a dutiful husband and doting father. But it’s through the relationship with his nephew that Thomas Gainsborough sought to pass on his material wealth and to secure his place alongside Van Dyck in the pantheon of the great portrait artists.

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