

Thomas Gainsborough: You can choose your friends ...

Gainsborough's Family Album at the National Portrait Gallery, London, 22nd November 2018 to 3rd February 2019

It's easy to take Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788) for granted. A painter best known for landscapes and formal portraits, his works form a decorative backdrop to how we think about late 18th century England. Nor do we now think of Gainsborough as a radical painter. But alongside his more famous works, Gainsborough painted his extended family throughout his life, leaving around 50 portraits of his close relatives and distant cousins, his household staff and even the family pets, that are both intimate and experimental. Most of these portraits are now on show in *Gainsborough's Family Album* at the National Portrait Gallery.

Despite the title though, the narrative woven around these portraits focuses on Gainsborough the Careerist as he progresses from provincial artist in rural Suffolk, first to Ipswich and then to Bath, before achieving acclaim in London. Each move brought the need both to establish Gainsborough's reputation afresh and to generate patronage.

On arriving in Bath in 1758 for instance, Gainsborough painted portraits of himself and his wife elegantly dressed as a beau monde couple to attract custom from that city's affluent residents. The portrait of Gainsborough was intended to appeal to male sitters, while that of Margaret his wife was meant to demonstrate Gainsborough's skill as a portraitist of fashionable women. But such is the accuracy with which Gainsborough depicts his wife's round face and ample proportions, prospective clients were likely to be more impressed by his ability to capture a resemblance than by his ability to flatter!



Self-portrait by Thomas Gainsborough, c. 1758-1759. © National Portrait Gallery, London

But in parallel with the narrative of Gainsborough's career, two other personas emerge. The first is Gainsborough the Artist. Around half of the paintings on display are unfinished, set aside when a paying commission arrived and often never touched again. Some have barely been started, the sitter's face stark against the primed canvas, while in others, only key details of faces and hands have been finished. Collectively, these portraits give a unique sense of Gainsborough the artist in full creative flow.

In the unfinished *The Artist's Daughters Playing with a Cat* (1760-1), Gainsborough has applied two layers of priming – first pink-brown, then darker brown – before drawing the composition in outline and using oils to complete just the heads of the two children. Affectingly, their faces set cheek to cheek seem to float away from the indistinct background caught in a moment of spontaneous intimacy.



Mary and Margaret Gainsborough, the Artist's Daughters with a Cat by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1760-61. The National Gallery, London. Bought, 1923 © The National Gallery, London

The dominant impression this show leaves however is of Gainsborough the Family Man. And what a wonderfully odd bunch his family were! There's the artist's father John, who went bankrupt when his clothing business failed, harshly painted wearing a plain woollen suit and badly fitting wig. There's Gainsborough's older brother, also called John but nicknamed 'Scheming Jack', constantly short of money but forever coming up with ill-fated money-making schemes. Gainsborough has dashed off his brother's image, red eyed and greasy haired against a brown primed canvas, before leaving the painting unfinished when presumably something better turned up. And if the inscription 'Gainsborrow' in the right corner is original, Gainsborough might be punningly telling us what he really thought of his older brother.

Younger brother Humphrey, a Congregational minister, is painted looking skyward with all the exaggerated piety of an Old Master saint, while Gainsborough's sister Sarah Dupont and her husband Philip make an oddly mismatched couple. The portrait of Philip, a rough-and-ready carpenter, shows him in the modest clothes of a working man, while in her portrait, Sarah is decked out in the finery of a duchess. What's more, when hung together, Philip looks dutifully towards his wife, but Sarah gazes sternly away from him. We suspect Gainsborough knew who wore the trousers in that marriage.

But it is really in the portraits of Margaret, Gainsborough's wife, and those of Margaret and Mary, his daughters, that Gainsborough's love of family shines through. Gainsborough's portraits of his wife chart their life together; she the business manager, him the creative genius, a loving and well-suited couple ageing happily together. His portrait of Margaret painted for her fiftieth birthday in 1777 is striking both for its emotional intimacy and its ambition. And again, we get a sense of Gainsborough's sly humour as he gently alludes to Margaret's irascibility by posing her as Juno the quick-tempered wife of Jupiter.



Margaret Gainsborough, the Artist's Wife by Thomas Gainsborough c. 1777. The Samuel Courtauld Trust. The Courtauld Gallery, London

The real stars of the show though are Gainsborough's daughters, Margaret and Mary. Has a father ever painted his daughters with such tenderness and warmth, so doting and yet so conscious of life's vagaries? They appear first in the celebrated double portrait. Margaret the younger daughter is reaching out to touch a butterfly that has settled on a thistle, while Mary the older child holds her sister back in case she pricks herself. This motif suggest innocence is short-lived and life's course uncertain. What makes the painting even more poignant is our knowledge that in adult life, Margaret's mental health proved as fragile as the butterfly. After a bad marriage, she was cared for by her sister until Mary's death and then entered an asylum where she spent the rest of her life.



Mary and Margaret Gainsborough, the Artist's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1756. The National Gallery, London. Henry Vaughan Bequest, 1900 © The National Gallery, London

The last time they appear, Margaret and Mary are now young women. The largest and most formal of all their portraits as well as entirely finished, Gainsborough shows his daughters as fashionable beauties, presenting them to society like debutantes. My work is done, he seems to be saying, now you must make your own way in the world. As conventionally impersonal as any of his paying commissions, Gainsborough nevertheless finds room for a dog, a symbol of fidelity usually associated with married couples but here surely a sign of Gainsborough acknowledging the lifelong bond between the two sisters.



Mary and Margaret Gainsborough, the Artist's Daughters by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1770-74. Private Collection

This is a rare exhibition then. It traces Gainsborough's career from its beginnings in rural Suffolk to the peak of his fame as one of greatest portraitists of all time. But this show will also make you smile – smile in recognition of the love of Gainsborough the husband and father, and smile at the sly humour with which he turned his eye on the rest of the motley crew who made up his family.

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