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THE MATTER OF STYLE: THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH, THE PORTRAIT IN A
LANDSCAPE, AND THE MARK OF THE MODERN PAINTER

by

LORA REMPEL

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Art
History in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New
York.

1997

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Art History in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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ABSTRACT

THE MATTER OF STYLE: THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH, THE PORTRAIT IN A
LANDSCAPE, AND THE MARK OF THE MODERN PAINTER

by

Lora Rempel

Advisor: Professor Carol Armstrong

In late eighteenth-century England, the rise of the appreciation of stylistically distinctive painting went hand-in-hand with the unprecedented imperative to develop one's signature "mark" of distinction as a painter. This dissertation examines the mature work of Thomas Gainsborough -- arguably the most style-conscious English painter of the eighteenth century. Applied to Gainsborough's full-length portraits of women, style registers in two different yet intertwined ways: his sensitivity to matters of stylish feminine fashion and his investment in the formal matters of painting, which is to say the formal aspects that comprise his own signature style of painting.

The institutional framework in which Gainsborough participated after 1768 -- namely the Royal Academy -- is closely examined as is his artistic relationship with his closest rival, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Gainsborough's mixing of the genres of landscape and portraiture provides the basis for his development of a distinctive portrait style, which is further enhanced when, upon his arrival in Bath at the end

1758, his spectacularization of contemporary feminine fashion becomes a key feature of his large-scale portraits. The issue of Gainsborough's style is inextricably intertwined with his commitment to formal experimentation, a commitment that is evident in his crossing of boundaries between different media. His most innovative techniques evolved from his experimentations in drawing, watercolor, and pseudo-landscape "assemblages;" the fruits of his experimentation in these media were imported to his large, commissioned portraits. Finally, I aim to locate Gainsborough's distinctive style within the context of critical shifts in the increasingly commercial art market, the rise of art criticism, and emerging attitudes toward aesthetic judgement in late eighteenth century England.

"The Matter of Style" is an intentionally shifting phrase that slips from addressing the importance of style as a manner of painting (one which may on the one hand be circumscribed by historical circumstances yet on the other hand be the outcome of a painter's unique skills and sensibility) and style as a subject that is unequivocally fashionable, indubitably stylish. Both senses of the phrase are conveyed most compellingly in Gainsborough's portraits of fashionably-dressed women in landscape settings, pictures in which the mimetically representational objects of fashion and nature simultaneously provide the vehicles and set the limits of their painterly dissolution.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like spokes of a wheel, each and every one of the individuals who played a role in the formulating, researching and writing of my dissertation assured that the central axis of the wheel (me), and its outer rim (my dissertation), would sustain the weight which pressures of the dissertation process inevitably impress upon the mind, body, and spirit. First and foremost, I wish to thank my advisor Carol Armstrong, who, upon our first meeting encouraged me to liberate myself and find pleasure in painting. This was the first lesson I learned from her, and also the most important and intellectually emancipating one. My debt of thanks to Michael Rosenthal is second only to Prof. Armstrong. Even in absentia, Prof. Rosenthal offered astute guidance and enthusiastic dialogue which was nourished, no doubt, by our shared admiration for the painting of Thomas Gainsborough. I wish also to acknowledge the editorial input and rewarding challenges provided by of my other committee members, Profs. Diane Kelder and Jane Roos.

I am grateful for the financial support of a generous two year research fellowship from Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and a Robert Wark Research Fellowship from the Huntington Library and Art Gallery. I am also grateful to the staff of the Paul Mellon Centre for British Art, the Victoria and Albert Museum, the British

Library, and especially Nicholas Savage of the Royal Academy of Arts for all their helpfulness. Hugh Belsey (Curator, Gainsborough's House), Rica Jones (Conservator, Tate Gallery), Viola Pemberton-Pigott (Conservator, The Queen's Pictures), Christopher Lloyd (Curator, The Queen's Pictures), and Susan Sloman deserve special thanks for generously sharing with me their vast knowledge, expertise and insights. I am both grateful and honored that Her Majesty The Queen granted me permission to view her collection at short notice. For either reading early drafts of sections of this manuscript or discussing aspects of it with me during its formative stage I thank Griselda Pollock, Laura Mulvey, Mary Kelly and Ron Clark. I would like also to thank Dan Graham for kindly allowing me to write my "Matter of Style" on the same desk that he wrote his Rock My Religion.

I wish to express my gratitude to Dena, Keith and Lewis Blakeman for always welcoming me to London with unmeasurable hospitality and fraternity. Other friends and comrades who supported me in various magnanimous and extraordinary ways include Sandra Gillespie, Ramsay Walker, Shelley and Stacey Johnson, John Goodman, and Claire Daigle. Lastly, I wish to thank all the members of family for their goof humor and sustained confidence in me, and I thank especially my sister Helga Rempel-Walker to whose memory this work is dedicated.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	vi
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS	ix
INTRODUCTION	1
Chapter	
1. FORMAL CONCERNS, COMMERCIAL PORTRAITS: GAINSBOROUGH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE ROYAL ACADEMY	23
2. MIXING GENRES: THE PORTRAIT-IN-A-LANDSCAPE	59
3. THE ART OF FASHION AND THE ARTIFICE OF PAINT	91
4. VITAL GROUND: THE ANATOMY OF STYLE; OR, THE MAKINGS OF A MODISH MANNER	137
5. THE BUSINESS OF ART: MAKING ONE'S MARK	184
POSTSCRIPT	219
ILLUSTRATIONS	225
BIBLIOGRAPHY	270

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Figure	Page
1. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Self-Portrait</u> , 1787. Oil on canvas, 74.9 x 61 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London	225
2. Johann Zoffany, <u>The Academicians of the Royal Academy</u> , R.A. 1772. Oil on canvas, 100.7 x 147.3 cm. H.M. The Queen	226
3. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Isabella, Countess of Sefton (Lady Molneux)</u> , R.A. 1769. Oil on canvas, 239.2 x 156 cm. Earl of Sefton	227
4. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>The Three Eldest Princesses</u> , 1784. Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 179.7 cm. H.M. The Queen	228
5. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Mary Graham</u> , R.A. 1777. Oil on canvas, 237.5 x 154.3 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh	229
6. Joshua Reynolds, <u>Joanna Lloyd</u> , R.A. 1776. Oil on canvas, 236 x 146 cm. Private Collection	230
7. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Grace Dalrymple Elliott</u> , 1778. Oil on canvas, 234.9 x 153.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York	231
8. Joshua Reynolds, <u>The Montgomery Sisters, "Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen"</u> , R.A. 1774. Oil on canvas, 233.6 x 291 cm. Tate Gallery, London	232
9. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Mr and Mrs John Gravenor and Their Daughters</u> , c.1752-54. Oil on canvas, 90.1 x 90.1 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven	233
10. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Portrait of the Artist with Wife and Daughter</u> , c.1748. Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 70.5 cm. National Gallery, London	234
11. Thomas Gainsborough, <u>Margaret Gainsborough</u> , c.1778. Oil on canvas, 76.6 x 63.8 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London	235
12. Johann Zoffany, <u>Queen Charlotte with Members of her Family</u> , R.A. 1773. Oil on canvas, 105.1 x 127 cm. H.M. The Queen	236

13. Thomas Gainsborough, Mary, Countess Howe, c.1763-64. Oil on canvas, 243.2 x 154.3 cm. Kenwood House, London ... 237
14. Thomas Gainsborough, Elizabeth and Mary Linley, R.A. 1772. Oil on canvas, 199 x 153.1 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London 238
15. Thomas Gainsborough, Sarah Siddons, 1783-85. Oil on canvas, 221 x 152.7 cm. National Gallery, London 239
16. Joshua Reynolds, Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse, R.A. 1784. Oil on canvas, 239.7 x 147.6 cm. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino 240
17. Thomas Gainsborough, Musidora, c.1780-1788. Oil on canvas, 192.4 x 156.6 cm. Tate Gallery, London 241
18. Thomas Gainsborough, Diana and Actaeon, c.1785. Oil on canvas, 158.1 x 188 cm. H.M. The Queen 242
19. Attributed to Reverend John Sneyd, Janetta Cook and Mrs Gibbons, c.1794. Pencil and watercolor, 28.6 x 18.2. Avon County Library, Bath 243
20. Thomas Gainsborough, Francis Catherine, Countess of Dartmouth, c.1769. Oil on canvas, 127.4 x 101.4 cm. On loan to Gainsborough's House, Sudbury 244
21. Thomas Gainsborough, Francis Catherine, Countess of Dartmouth, c.1771. Oil on canvas, 78 x 65 cm. Earl of Dartmouth 245
22. Thomas Gainsborough, A Woman with a Rose, c.1763-65. Black chalk and stump, heightened with white on greenish-buff paper, 46.6 x 33 cm. British Museum, London 246
23. Thomas Gainsborough, Study of a Woman Seen from Behind, c.1763-70. Black chalk and stump with white chalk on greenish-brown paper, 48.8 x 30.4 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford 247
24. Thomas Gainsborough, Study for a Lady, for "The Richmond Water Walk" (?) I, c.1785. Black chalk and stump, heightened with white on buff paper, 48.4 x 31.3 cm. British Museum, London 248
25. Thomas Gainsborough, Study for a Lady, for "The Richmond Water Walk" (?) II, c.1785. Black chalk and stump, heightened with white on buff paper, 48.4 x 31.3 cm. British Museum, London 249

26. Thomas Gainsborough, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, c.1785. Oil on canvas, 130 x 104 cm. Chatsworth House Trust 250
27. Thomas Gainsborough, The Mall, 1783. Oil on canvas, 120.6 x 147 cm. Frick Collection, New York 251
28. Thomas Gainsborough, Elizabeth Brinsley Sheridan, 1785-1786. Oil on canvas, 219.7 x 153.7 cm. National Gallery, Washington 252
29. Thomas Gainsborough, Penelope, Viscountess Ligonier, R.A. 1771. Oil on canvas, 240 x 157.5 cm. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino 253
30. Thomas Gainsborough, Edward, 2nd Viscount Ligonier, R.A. 1771. Oil on canvas, 239 x 157.5 cm. Huntington Museum, San Marino 254
31. Thomas Gainsborough, William and Elizabeth Hallett, "The Morning Walk", 1785. Oil on canvas, 236.2 x 179.1 cm. National Gallery, London 255
32. Thomas Gainsborough, Francis Duncombe, c.1777. Oil on canvas, 233.7 x 155 cm. Frick Collection, New York ... 256
33. Thomas Gainsborough, Giovanna Baccelli, R.A. 1782. Oil on canvas, 226.7 x 148.6 cm. Tate Gallery, London 257
34. Thomas Gainsborough, Uvedale Tomkins Price, c.1760. Oil on canvas, 124 x 99 cm. Staatsgemaldegammlung, Munich 258
35. Thomas Gainsborough, Beech Trees at Foxley, with Yazor Church in the Distance, 1760. Brown chalk, with watercolor and body color over pencil, 28.7 x 38.9 cm. Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester 259
36. Thomas Gainsborough, Self-Portrait, c.1750-55. Pencil on paper, the figure cut out and laid down on a landscape background, 35.2 x 25.7 cm. British Museum, London ... 260
37. Thomas Gainsborough, A Woodland Pool with Rocks and Plants, c.1765-70. Black chalk with watercolor and body color, varnished, 22.9 x 28.3 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven 261
38. Thomas Gainsborough, Queen Charlotte, R.A. 1781. Oil on canvas, 238.8 x 158.7 cm. H.M. The Queen 262

39. Thomas Gainsborough, Henry Bate, R.A. 1780. Oil on canvas,
223.5 x 149.9 cm. Tate Gallery, London 263
40. Thomas Gainsborough, Carl Friedrich Abel, R.A. 1777. Oil
on canvas, 223.5 x 147.3 cm. Huntington Library and Art
Gallery, San Marino 264
41. Thomas Gainsborough, Johann Christian Fischer, R.A. 1780.
Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 150.5 cm. H.M. The Queen 265
42. After Johann Heinrich Ramberg, The Exhibition of the Royal
Academy, 1787. Engraving by Pietro Antonio Martini, 37.9 x
52.5 cm. 266
43. After Thomas Gainsborough, The Three Eldest Princesses,
1784. Mezzotint by Gainsborough Dupont, 66 x 45.5 cm; 2nd
state. Published 2 September 1793 267
44. Thomas Rowlandson, A Portrait Painter's Ante-Room, 1809.
Pen and watercolor, 12.4 x 20.1 cm. Ashmolean Museum,
Oxford 268
45. Thomas Gainsborough, Mary Bate, 1787. Oil on canvas, 221 x
144.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London 269

INTRODUCTION

The aesthetic appreciation of a distinctive, signature style of painting gained unprecedented currency in England during the late-eighteenth century as did the commercial imperative to develop one's own "mark" of distinction as a painter. The aim of this dissertation is to track the emergence of a recognizable, singular style of painting as it pertains to the work of the most "stylish" English painter of the eighteenth century: Thomas Gainsborough (1727-88).

Focusing on the work of an individual artist may immediately suggest that this study is in the honorific monographic mode. Indeed, Gainsborough is represented as the central protagonist within a historical narrative. My aim, however, has been simultaneously more expansive and more specific than a mapping of the key events of this painter's artistic life would require.¹ It is more specific, on the one hand, because I have set my eyes on an analysis of those features of image- and mark-making that have come to stand as the legible signs not of Gainsborough the individual but of "Gainsborough," by which I refer to the particular style of which he is the author. Rather than reconstructing the painter as a complete subject I have attempted to reconstruct the

¹ Although my questions regarding Gainsborough's place within the business of portraiture and the pursuit of individual style have steered me in different directions from Richard Wendorf's outstanding recent critical "monograph" (a category Wendorf expresses his reservations toward with cautious eloquence), I still have found his approach most illuminating. Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Painter in Society (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1996).

elements -- the conventional forms and motifs, the preferred techniques and studio practices -- that together comprise his style. And, even in this, rather than taking a panoramic overview of his vast oeuvre I have honed my focus on his mature work, paying special attention to his full-length portraits. On the other hand, this study is more expansive than the traditional monograph as I have endeavored to thematize personal style as a historical phenomenon, indeed as an artistic necessity, within the particular historical context in which Gainsborough became one of England's most eminent portrait painters.

The five chapters which comprise this dissertation can be seen as a series of frames. The first and last chapters are concerned with the framing of Gainsborough's practice: the first provides an institutional frame and the last an economic frame. I have conceived of the second, third and fourth chapters as concentric circles within the frame of the paintings themselves. The second chapter looks at the landscape settings which are the outermost frame of the sitter, and the third focuses specifically on the importance of dress and fashionable accessories which comprise the frame around the body of the sitter. The fourth chapter probes the signature mark of the painter which, I argue, is the focal point and distinguishing trademark of Gainsborough's mature portraits in landscapes.

Shifts in the perception of nature and the depiction of the humble native landscape in the late eighteenth century have become the subject of a number of recent art historical studies. Writings on eighteenth-century British landscape painting by John Barrell, Ann Bermingham, David Solkin, Michael Rosenthal, Marcia Pointon and Ronald Paulson, among others, are exceptional in their manifold interpretations of its rise against the contemporaneous social landscape. In their groundbreaking analyses of Gainsborough's landscape imagery, Barrell and Bermingham have studied the relationship between socioeconomic factors and depictions of nature in which these historical actualities are obscured or sublimated beneath the ideology of those who owned the land and, in Bermingham's case, also the personal concerns of the artist.² Subscribing to the fundamental precepts of Barrell's and Bermingham's Marxist reading of landscape imagery, Solkin approached the work of Gainsborough's contemporary Richard Wilson with special consideration of the ideological needs of the painter's patrons.³ By contrast, Rosenthal argued convincingly that Gainsborough's images of the rural poor are essentially subversive by virtue of their solicitation of viewers'

² John Barrell, The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting 1730-1840 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980) see esp. 1-89. Ann Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition, 1740-1860 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1986) 1-54.

³ David H. Solkin, Richard Wilson: The Landscape of Reaction (London: Tate Gallery, 1982).

sympathies and nostalgia for a rustic simplicity threatened by enclosure and agricultural modernization.⁴ Pointon's very important contribution to the literature on Gainsborough's landscape imagery is her analysis of the relationship between visual and literary the representation of the country as the idyllic counterpart to the city.⁵ Although their paths are strikingly distinct, Pointon and Bermingham converge in their conclusions -- namely that the image of nature provided both the painter and his patrons with a site of (and a sight of) nostalgic, imaginary respite. But whereas the work of these scholars has produced many valuable insights, I am less interested in gleaning social, political or psychological meaning from iconographical details than in studying, first of all, how the legible forms of sitters and landscape settings are fabricated in paint and secondly, what role the alluring artifice of paint played in the formal evolution and commercial success of Gainsborough's style.⁶ In this regard my stylistic

⁴ Michael Rosenthal, "The Rough and the Smooth: Rural Subjects in Later Eighteenth-Century British Art," Eighteenth-Century Life 18 (May 1994): 36-58.

⁵ To be sure, Barrell and Bermingham also argue for the inflection of literary ideas on Gainsborough's landscape production. Marcia Pointon, "Gainsborough and the Landscape of Retirement," Art History 2 (December 1979): 441-455.

⁶ Other notable contributions to the art historical scholarship on eighteenth-century British landscape painting which have been of particular value to my study include John Hayes' significant work on Gainsborough's landscape paintings and drawings, The Drawings of Thomas Gainsborough 2 vols. (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), and The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough: A Critical Text and Catalogue Raisonné 2 vols. (London: Sotheby Publications,

analysis relates most closely to that of Paulson, who is particularly astute in his articulation and interpretation of the formal aspects of the painter's work.⁷ However, my focus is on that body of Gainsborough's production which has not received the same degree of critical analysis as have his landscapes: his mature, large-format portraits, and in particular those situating the sitter in a kind of setting which Gainsborough was exceptionally deft at depicting.

Only Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-92) was regarded by many contemporaries as superior to Gainsborough in portraiture. Much of Chapter One, "Formal Concerns, Commercial Portraits: Thomas Gainsborough Inside and Outside the Royal Academy," is devoted to an analysis of the "duel" between these two painters as it was played out on the stage of the annual exhibitions of the Royal Academy, on the page, and on canvas. Founded at the end of 1768, the Royal Academy became the most important public venue for artists to display their talents to a broad viewership. Both Gainsborough and Reynolds were founding members of the Academy, but their engagement with that institution was strikingly different. Reynolds, as the

1982); and John Dixon Hunt, The Figure in the Landscape: Poetry, Painting, and Gardening During the Eighteenth Century (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). Although it is concerned with the early nineteenth century, Michael Rosenthal's Constable: The Painter and his Landscape (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983) also offers a compelling analysis of landscape painting in Britain.

⁷ Ronald Paulson, Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1975) esp. 204-231.

Academy's first President, the author of its aims and doctrines, and its knighted figurehead, was for all intents and purposes the embodiment of the Academy. Gainsborough, however, had little interest in it beyond submitting paintings to its annual exhibitions.

The Academy helped raise the status of the artist in England in the late-eighteenth century, just as Reynolds' lectures, delivered at the Royal Academy and subsequently published as his "Discourses," did much to reframe art-making as an intellectual rather than a manual endeavor.⁸ The Royal Academy has survived for over two centuries, but if Reynolds is its most respected relic, Gainsborough remains one of its most loved renegades. And, when art serves a predominantly secular, commercial society, for better or for worse, it rewards its renegades. Perhaps this is because artistic creativity, personified most compellingly by those who come to be regarded as artistic renegades, has become in capitalism's collective consciousness the most potent nostalgic escape from materialist exigencies. But the state of nostalgia implies that that for which one pines is already lost, and I wish to trace that loss back to late eighteenth-century England. Chapter one thus concludes with a discussion of the stated aims of the Academy as they are articulated in the Discourses, proposing ways in

⁸ For a discussion of Reynolds' investment in this debate see Wendorf, Sir Joshua Reynolds 89-90.

which Reynolds was indeed the "rule maker" and Gainsborough the "rule breaker."

One of the underlying arguments of this study is that Gainsborough was not merely a rule breaker but a masterful compromiser, and Chapter Two, "Mixing Genres: The Portrait-in-a-Landscape," examines Gainsborough's compromise between the genres of landscape and portraiture in his employment of landscape backgrounds for his sitters.⁹ Already in his early, small-scale conversation pieces, the natural setting was used by Gainsborough as a pictorially enhancing, culturally significant frame for his sitters. Upon his relocation to Bath toward the end of 1758 he began to work in the larger format for single-figured portrait compositions -- a format conducive to the free handing of landscape elements characteristic of his mature style. In doing so, Gainsborough was not only imitating the native tradition of courtly portraiture established more than a century earlier by Anthony Van Dyck. He was also satisfying the desires of his sitters for whom "being natural" had become a virtue, and bringing his commercially less profitable skills as a landscape painter to his portrait practice.¹⁰

⁹ To borrow Bermingham's concluding statement to her discussion of Gainsborough's conversation pieces: "Gainsborough's art seems at one conventional and iconoclastic, masking the profound division between man and nature and then pointing to the mask." Landscape and Ideology 33.

¹⁰ My analysis of Gainsborough's portrait painting concurs with what Wendorf has aptly termed "transactional" portraiture, which is to say that I understand the construction of identity

It was of no small consequence to the complexion of the commercial art world that, during the eighteenth century, portraiture provided most British painters with their economic sustenance.¹¹ In fact, even after the reevaluation of landscape subjects in the first decades of the nineteenth century, portraiture was still the most economically viable genre, compelling most British painters to engage in its production at some level.¹² So persistent was the taste and demand for faces in Britain that even John Constable spent his professional youth painting portraits of local members of the landed gentry. In short, chapter two is primarily concerned with Gainsborough's innovative use of the portrait-in-a-landscape motif. His hybridization of the genres of

in portraiture to be always already a fashioning, one that is the result of a mediation between the physical appearance of the subject, the demands of the patron, and the pictorial interpretation (rather than "translation") of that appearance and those demands on the part of the painter. It is the last of these three interconnected mediations, however, -- namely the painter's interpretation in paint -- that is my main point of departure. Sir Joshua Reynolds 6.

¹¹ A writer for the London Chronicle in 1777 saw the imbalance in favor of portraiture as a reflection of the "mean vanity and selfishness of the age." Rather than faulting artists or the Academy for the dismal shortage of historical paintings, the author blamed "our great personages" -- which is to say members of the art buying public -- who "would rather give two or three hundred pounds for their own dear likeness, than one half, or even one third of that sum for the noblest historical picture that ever was produced." "A Spectator," London Chronicle 24-26 April 1777: 396.

¹² Ellis Waterhouse's claim that "no painter of the time could survive without a portrait practice" seems not to be an exaggeration of the situation. Gainsborough (London: Spring Books, 1958) 17. See also Marcia Pointon, Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) 36-52.

portraiture and landscape was a pictorial reconciliation, one which brought together his love of landscape (what I term, at the risk of vulgarizing Freudian terminology, the painter's creative "id") and his need to paint portraits for money (the manifestation of the painter's socialized "ego").

Gainsborough's full-length portraits in landscapes, furthermore, hold in riveting balance the persistence and the sacrifice of the conventions of mimetic portraiture, paradoxically vindicating and forsaking (albeit with caution) those conventions.

Chapter Three, "The Art of Fashion and the Artifice of Paint," is devoted to an analysis of Gainsborough's painterly and coloristic investment in the depiction of contemporary dress, and here I show how he was particularly adept at working with the objects of fashionable feminine display. Indeed, it was shortly after his arrival in the fashionable resort town of Bath that the dramatization of gestural line, prioritization of lustrous color, and fascination with the textures and minute details of fashionable dress become featured in his portraits of women. For generations, the Gainsborough family had been involved in the fashion and fabric trade, and it has recently been discovered that one of the painter's sisters set up her millinery shop across the hall from Gainsborough's painting parlour in the Abbey Churchyard area of Bath -- the town's social and shopping center.¹³ Furthermore, illustrated fashion

magazines, which began publication in the 1770s, were a visual "resource" for Gainsborough's elegant female sitters, who are almost invariably presented in up-to-date modes of dress. Gainsborough's production of "fashion plate" imagery reveals his interest in studying how he could best render an assortment of painterly effects in the depiction of different styles of dress and combinations of fabrics. I further suggest, however, that if there is a seductive sumptuousness to be found in these canvases it is located not so much in the illusion of the fabrics and frills of feminine artifice -- the legibility of which is consistently interrupted by the painter's gestural, scumbled calligraphy -- as in the materiality of their painted construction, or in other words in the painter's distinctive, and distinctively sumptuous marks. Not unlike Gainsborough's loose, confident virtuoso handling of the elements of nature in his portrait settings, his treatment of the collective inventory of fashionable attire is the pictorial terrain where he foregrounds his emphatic marks, where the seductive and substantial daubs, scribbles, streaks and stains announce the constructedness of these would-be fetishes and remind us that we are looking at a painting -- indeed, a painting by Gainsborough.

Gainsborough's notable investigation of how the materials of painting and drawing fabricate an image was unique among his

¹³ Susan Legouix Sloman, "Gainsborough and the Lodging-House Way," Gainsborough's House Society, Annual Report (1991/92): 23-43.

British contemporaries. The stunning results of his investment in formal experimentation is evident in his large portraits in oil but, as I argue in Chapter Four, "Vital Ground: Anatomy of Style," the arena for his most innovative formal experimentation was drawing and watercolor. In this chapter I give an overview of Gainsborough's characteristic methods of preparing his canvases and techniques of painting as well as the role of drawing in the evolution of his distinctive washy, loose, "unfinished" style. As we know from a letter Gainsborough wrote to his friend William Jackson in 1773, the former wanted the arduous technical procedures he developed to imitate the look of oil in his varnished drawings.¹⁴ Jackson claimed that he had seen at least a thousand drawings by Gainsborough and that "there are more drawings existing [by Gainsborough] than of any other artist, ancient or modern."¹⁵ Indeed, just as the objects of the natural landscape and feminine fashion provided the "subsidiary stuff" upon which Gainsborough inscribed his stylistic singularity, the more modest media of drawing and watercolor provided the groundwork

¹⁴ Gainsborough to William Jackson, 29 January 1773, in the collection of the Rare Book Department of the Yale Center for British Art. Reproduced in Jonathan Derow, "Gainsborough's Varnished Watercolor Technique," Master Drawings 26 (Autumn 1988): 259.

¹⁵ William Jackson draws a contrast between the output of drawings by Gainsborough and Reynolds, the latter of whom he says "made very few drawings." "Character of Reynolds," The Four Ages, Together with Essays on Various Subjects (London, 1798) 181-182.

for the technical experimentation which the painter then transferred to his large-scale contractual portraits.

A few months after Gainsborough's death Reynolds delivered his fourteenth Discourse entitled "Character of Gainsborough; his excellencies and defects." In it Reynolds warned against pursuing "novelty and peculiarity of manner," and in doing so, I argue, he was deflecting his own anxiety concerning the issue of style.¹⁶ Nearly a decade earlier, and in the context of a satirical review of an imaginary exhibition at the Royal Academy, "Roger Shanhagan" (a pseudonym for the authors William Porden, Robert Smirke, and Robert Watson) detailed what he deemed to be most significant about Gainsborough's style.¹⁷ In

¹⁶ Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir Joshua Reynolds. Discourses, ed. Pat Rogers (Middlesex: Penguin, 1992) 312 (all further references to Reynolds' Discourses will be to this edition). In his sixth Discourse, Reynolds mentions "peculiarity of style," warning that "it is vain labour to endeavor [sic] to imitate; because novelty and peculiarity being its only merit, when it ceases to be new, it ceases to have value." As will be discussed in Chapter Four, "peculiarity of style" was the matrix for Reynolds' anxieties over Gainsborough's manner of painting.

¹⁷ Roger Shanhagan [pseudonym], The Exhibition, or Second Anticipation: Being Remarks on the Principal Works to be Exhibited Next Month, at the Royal Exchange (London, 1779) 49-53. For the sake of clarity all subsequent references to this text will refer to the authors by their joint pseudonym "Shanhagan." In his biography of Robert Adam (one of the targets of Shanhagan's criticism), Arthur T. Bolton lists only Smirke and Porden as the authors of Second Anticipation. In discussing the authorship of the pamphlet William Whitley, Artists and their Friends in England 1700-1799 vol. 1 (London: Medici Society, 1928), 344, adds a third participant: Robert Watson. John Sykes, Watson's biographer, makes the claim that Watson was responsible for the whole of it. My thanks to Nicholas Savage, librarian at the Royal Academy of Arts, for directing me to documents clarifying the publication year of the pamphlet as well as the identity of its authors.

contrast to Reynolds' complaint that Gainsborough sought to gloss over the faulty aspects of his paintings with surface wizardry -- "to cover his defects with his great beauties"¹⁸ -- Shanahan praised Gainsborough's paintings as "the beauties of the day," and astutely pointed out the complementary fit between the "modish matter" Gainsborough's canvases represent (that is, the beautiful, ephemeral women) and the "modish manner" in which these representations are rendered. Simply put, then, both Reynolds and Shanahan recognized the singularity of Gainsborough's distinctive style. But whereas Shanahan used the otherwise satirical context of an exhibition review to champion the characteristic features of Gainsborough's paintings, Reynolds used sophisticated rhetorical twists and turns to transform the "excellencies" of his rival into "defects."

Gainsborough's reliance on models -- layfigures, landscape maquettes, and plaster models of animals -- is also mentioned in the fourteenth Discourse. Reynolds again damns Gainsborough with faint praise by suggesting they were aids for mechanical copying. "Such methods," according to Reynolds, "may be nothing better than contemptible and mischievous trifling; or they may be aids."¹⁹ By a sleight of hand Reynolds relegates Gainsborough's use of models to the domain of empirical copying rather than "imitation" which was for the President the more

¹⁸ Reynolds, 316.

¹⁹ Ibid., 304.

intellectual approach to learning from nature and from examples of great art of the past. I propose instead that Gainsborough produced these three-dimensional "landscape" arrangements (made of rocks, bits of moss, shards of glass, broccoli, and so forth) in order to study the essential characteristics of different objects and discover different ways in which those characteristics could be translated from one medium to another -- from three-dimensional constructions to two-dimensional drawings. Rather than functioning merely as models to be copied into mimetically truthful representations of objects in nature, these models were themselves "imitations" of nature which in turn would be imitated in another medium.

The fifth and final chapter, "The Business of Art: Making One's Mark," begins with an analysis of the relationship between Gainsborough and the Reverend Henry Bate, the painter's most insightful and supportive critic. By the late-eighteenth century, the artistic, academic and critical environment of London's art world was a complex one, in which institutional endorsement by the Academy and popular publicity in the press were two avenues of sponsorship by which an artist's reputation could be effectively built and enhanced. Those two avenues were not entirely separate, for they crossed tangibly at least once a year when newspaper art criticism concentrated on the pictures exhibited at the Royal Academy. The Academy was an important forum for self-promotion for both Gainsborough and Reynolds but both painters were also well served by sympathetic

critics. As the single most important venue for advertising the visual proof of one's artistic talents to the largest audience of potential patrons, the annual exhibition was a crucial event which ambitious painters could not ignore without jeopardizing their careers.²⁰ Gainsborough ignored the annual exhibition only after his career and artistic reputation were secured -- a security which his alliance with Bate helped facilitate and fortify. As the Editor of the Morning Post and later as the sole Editor and proprietor of the Morning Herald, Bate began praising the work of Gainsborough in reviews of the Academy exhibitions in 1777, precisely when the painter resumed exhibiting at the Academy after a four-year hiatus. It was in that year that Bate also lodged the first public challenge to

²⁰ This aspect of my thesis -- i.e. that the development of a distinctive style is intrinsically connected to market factors -- is somewhat presaged by Marcia Pointon in what remains the most pithy essay on the subject of late eighteenth-century English portraiture. My slant, however, is slightly different from her's. Namely, she suggests that

the development of the individual portrait-painter's style may be dictated by the conditions of production. Thus the fluid handling of paint (a feature of Romney's late work, for example), may evolve as a result of the need for speed of execution rather than as a latent tendency toward romantic sensibility;...the outdoor setting may be related to the fact that it is simpler to fill in an imaginary open-air landscape than to depict with accuracy an ideal or an actual interior, especially when sittings take place in the artist's studio. (p. 203)

She continues, offering another reason why artists were pressured to develop an individual style (and here my view parallels her's quite closely): "The highly competitive market and the dominance of the Royal Academy as a forum for display and publicity made it imperative for artists to develop an individual and readily identifiable visual formula as quickly as possible." (p. 203) Pointon, "Portrait Painting as a Business Enterprise in London in the 1780s," Art History 7 (June 1984): 187-205.

Reynolds' reign over the annual exhibition by giving his greatest praise to Gainsborough's submissions. The concurrence of securing Bate's critical support and returning to public exhibition is surely more than a serendipitous coincidence; rather, it demonstrates the expediency of sympathetic spokespeople's endorsements, and Gainsborough's sagacious exploitation of that public artery of support for his own gain.

When in 1783 and again in 1784 Gainsborough came to loggerheads with the Academy Hanging Committee, Bate was quick to come to his friend's defense. Gainsborough adamantly and consistently insisted that his paintings be hung in such a way that they could be viewed from close proximity as well as from a certain distance so as to make their "effect" legible but also to allow for all the parts to merge together into a unified whole. So much did he invest in the dual legibility of his pictures that he threatened to have his submissions removed from the 1783 exhibition if his demands for rehangings were not met. The Academy complied. In the following year, though, the Academy refused Gainsborough's request to lower his portrait of the three eldest Princesses, and Gainsborough in turn followed through with his threat -- he had all his submissions removed and refused to show at the Academy again. For Gainsborough, whose "performance" in paint existed in the subtle painterly effects enacted on the surface of his canvases, it was better to offer no performance than to offer one that did not present his work to full advantage. The space of the Royal Academy

exhibition was of course a performative stage, and Gainsborough's exit from it was also a "performance," one which he could afford to enact once his reputation was established and supported.

It has been argued that the heated politics around the Westminster Election of 1784 -- an election in which both Gainsborough and Reynolds were eligible to vote -- were what fired the flames of the Academy's resistance and led to its refusal of Gainsborough's demands.²¹ However, I suggest that Gainsborough's letters and actions provide ample reason to doubt that party politics were ever his prime motivation.²² This is not to say that he was altogether uninterested in political matters of the day but rather that his overriding irreverence went against the grain of establishing firm political attachments.²³ To do so, after all, could be bad for

²¹ This is the central concern of David Brenneman's chapter "Gainsborough, the Newspapers, and Party Politics c.1784," in "The Critical Response to Thomas Gainsborough's Painting: A Study of the Contemporary Perception and Materiality of Gainsborough's Art," diss., Brown University, 1995, 156-179.

²² Pointon has remarked that Gainsborough "enjoyed a degree of autonomy unusual for the period." Although her statement refers specifically to the painter's relationship with his patrons, I would venture to claim that autonomy also describes his relationship to the affairs of politics (as it does, of course, to his consummate incapacity for deference in dealings with the Academy). Hanging the Head 48-49.

²³ Gainsborough has been described as a "staunch Tory" but he left behind little tangible evidence of his partisan sympathies, unlike Reynolds, who did not hide his association with Whig politics. On Reynolds' political affiliations see Wendorf, Sir Joshua Reynolds. I will venture here to make the (irreverent) confession that I am unconcerned with linking

business.²⁴ Indeed Gainsborough, like Reynolds, received commissions from prominent members of both political parties.²⁵ These issues will be taken up in the concluding section of chapter five, which is concerned predominantly with an analysis of the "bottom line" -- with the symbiotic relationship between commerce and art in late eighteenth-century England, a relationship which, I argue, was a particularly close one.²⁶

politics to style except to argue that Gainsborough's manner presents an alternative to the artistic doctrines of the Academy and that Reynolds' essentially illustrates them.

²⁴ On the other hand, politics -- especially when they mingled with scandals -- were very good business for the Morning Herald, and its editor did on occasion vent political opinions within his art criticism. Nor were the operations and decisions of the Academy uninfluenced by political pressures. But, if the Morning Herald thrived on pointing fingers at culpable members of the political establishment, the Academy, by contrast, was surely an apparatus of the ruling order -- royal patronage made it compulsory for this to be the case.

²⁵ Gainsborough's daring diplomacy is conveyed by his statement that he talked bawdy to the King and morals to the Prince of Wales -- cannily appealing, it would seem, to the perceived weaknesses of father and son. (Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor, The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds : with Notices of Some of his Contemporaries vol. 1 [London, 1865] 366.) When both Gainsborough and Reynolds both lobbied for the position of Principal Painter to the King in 1784 it was Reynolds who, when awarded the appointment, complained that the position carried no more dignity than that of "His Majesty's rat catcher." Reynolds was focussing his eye on the bottom line when he complained also that it was a money-losing appointment. Reynolds to Charles, 4th Duke of Rutland, London, 24 September 1784, Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds, ed. Frederick Whitley Hilles (Cambridge, Mass., 1929) Letter #76, 112.

²⁶ David Solkin, Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993) has been infinitely helpful in examining the conflict between the professed humanist aims of the Academy and the commerciality of the art world in the eighteenth century. On the subject of the "public" and "audience" for art, although dealing specifically

Catch phrases such as "the making of the English middle class," "the birth of consumer society," the "consumer revolution," "industry and empire," and "the age of manufactures" have been used by historians to describe what is by now a well-rehearsed history of the social, economic, and political shifts that took place in Britain, or more specifically in England, during the eighteenth century.²⁷ I agree that the historical phenomena discussed by these scholars are by no means insignificant to the climate of the art market, changes in patronage, the founding of the Royal Academy, the rise of art criticism and connoisseurship, the manner in which painters approached the business of art making, and, of course the social role of portraiture in late eighteenth-century England. But I want to go further and propose that this unique constellation of economic, social, and institutional factors also made it necessary for painters to establish their artistic singularity through the expression of an easily recognizable style. Indeed, I argue that it was precisely this singularity which Gainsborough sought when he first ventured into the large

with the French eighteenth-century context, see Thomas Crow, Painters and Public Life in Eighteenth-Century Paris (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1985).

²⁷ Peter Earle, The Making of the English Middle Class: Business, Society and Family Life in London 1660-1730 (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989); Eric Hobsbawm, Industry and Empire (Middlesex: Penguin, 1968); Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J.H. Plumb, The Birth of Consumer Society: The Commercialization of Eighteenth-Century England (London, et. al.: Hutchinson, 1982); E.P. Thompson, The Making of the English Working Class (Middlesex: Penguin, 1977); Maxine Berg, The Age of Manufactures 1700-1820: Industry, Innovation and Work in Britain (London and New York: Routledge, 1994).

full-length format and that he featured more and more throughout the 1770s and 1780s. Eventually his characteristic style would no longer be limited to full-lengths; his distinctive, fluid manner progressively also pervaded his half-lengths and kit-cats of the 1770s onwards. Witness, for example, his last self-portrait, a bust length in a faux oval within a rectangular format, in which the deep green waistcoat highlighted with daubs of peach is reversed in the moss green mottling on peach-colored ground behind the sitter his, and the white ruffle at his collar is scribbled over with ribbons of green and salmon-colored paint (fig. 1).

Gainsborough's distinctive mark stands not only as the trace of the painter's performance but it is also the enduring trademark of the commodity he sells. Furthermore, in the context of eighteenth-century reevaluations of originality and genius, that sign of the painter also became the site for aesthetic wonder and admiration. What made Gainsborough's style so peculiarly amenable to such aesthetic regard was the precarious balance his application of paint managed to enact between representational transparency and its material opacity. My uses of the terms "form" and "formal," then, encapsulate the two opposing tendencies that are juxtaposed, though curiously delineated from each other, in Gainsborough's portraits. Form refers to the resolutely representational quality of the image; to the depicted objects which bear a referential relationship with the external world. The formal qualities of the painting,

by contrast, refer instead to the internal structure of the painting; to the materiality of the medium, the self-reflexive marks of facture and the collective, perceivable traces that bear the signs of the process of image making. The portrait face is, essentially, the pictorial vestige of faithful form whereas all that surrounds the sitter's face -- hair, fabric, foliage, clouds -- is the domain of painterly intransigence, where the readability of forms is disrupted by the detachment of marks from their ostensible referent, where form is dissolved and "un-formed." And, as we shall see, it is precisely in his full-length portraits of women where this balance between form and un-form is most evident: where the meticulous, restrained application of paint in the rendering of the sitter's face fulfills the mimetic function of denotation, and where the loose, gestural "Gainsboroughesque" marks surrounding the face are the index of their author. Is it any wonder that he described painting "heads" as drudgery?

Prior to beginning my study however, let me be perfectly clear on one final point. I am not claiming that Gainsborough was the first painter to be concerned with style as a saleable expression of his individual, inimitable self -- such formal strategies are evident in the work of painters long before him and they certainly characterize the efforts of a number of his contemporaries from Joseph Wright of Derby and George Romney, to George Stubbs and Angelica Kauffmann. The formal choices of these painters are evocative responses to a network of emerging

institutional, commercial and public regimes. What stands out about Gainsborough's formal innovations, his characteristic motifs, the openness of his distinctive style to connoisseurial appreciation and aesthetic curiosity, however, is that they combined to produce a remarkable brand of imagery which conformed (largely by its academic nonconformity, or its contemporary and subsequent interpretation as such) exceptionally well to notions of aesthetic taste, artistic genius and originality that began to develop in the late-eighteenth century. Yet, however well his style appealed to the tastes of his patrons, it did not agree with the lofty pedagogy of the Academy. Certainly Gainsborough did not subscribe to the Academy's dictates when they countered his aims. And although the Academy honored him after his death, it is important to note that during his association with it he was not always treated with the esteem that his posthumous accolade by its President (and his closest rival) would seem to suggest he deserved. Had the distinctiveness of his style not raised anxieties, Gainsborough may have received greater kudos from that institution before his death. Yet, without the singularity of his style, one wonders whether he would have succeeded outside the Academy quite as well as he did during his long and highly productive career.

CHAPTER I
 FORMAL CONCERNS, COMMERCIAL PORTRAITS:
 GAINSBOROUGH INSIDE AND OUTSIDE THE ROYAL ACADEMY

The group portrait Academicians of the Royal Academy (fig. 2), painted by Johann Zoffany and exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1772, shows the gathering of the Academicians in London's Old Somerset House, in rooms recently provided by King George III to accommodate the schools of the young Academy. Zoffany, who became an Academician in 1769 at the nomination of the King, includes a self-portrait in the bottom left corner. Of the large group of men converged in the life-drawing class, only Zoffany and the young male model, seated in the opposite corner, turn their heads to address the viewer with their gaze. With his evening's duty completed, the model stretches to pull on a white stocking, curving his bare muscular back in a pose reminiscent of the Spinario, then one of the most admired of antique sculptures. The model's pose also roughly mirrors that of the painter across from him; Zoffany hunches slightly forward with one hand on his knee and the other holding brushes and a palette. Having completed his task as author of the tableau he takes his respite and becomes a participant in the assemblage of his peers.

Equal in importance in the pedagogy of the Academy was the study from life and the study of the antique; the plaster casts lining the shelves of the room indicate the premium the Academy placed on esteemed art of the past. A fragment of a female nude figure lies on the ground partially hidden beneath the dressing model's bench and oddly supports the walking

stick of Richard Cosway. In flesh and blood, Cosway's pose imitates that of the Apollo Belvedere, one of the most venerated classical sculpture in England during the late-eighteenth century. Next to the discarded antique female cast is an hourglass which simultaneously marks the passage of time and suggests the Academy's aim to transcend it by pursuing that which the ancients had triumphantly consummated: perfect form. Most of the Academicians turn their attention to the evening's second model whose pose is being adjusted by George Moser, Keeper of the Academy. On the wall behind the model hang portraits of the two female founding members of the Academy. By including effigies of Angelica Kauffmann and Mary Moser, the latter's hanging directly above the active figure of her father, Zoffany has devised an ingenious pictorial solution that allows their inclusion without breaching social decorum or breaking the Academy's rule barring women from the life-drawing class. Their portraits turn their absence into presence, but a presence that removes them from their male counterparts who talk, study, and engage actively within the perspectival space of the life-drawing studio.¹ Three

¹ Angela Rosenthal, "She's got the look! Eighteenth-century female portrait painters and the psychology of a potentially 'dangerous employment,'" discusses the odd placement of Cosway's stick and the simultaneous inclusion and exclusion of Kauffmann and Moser as two sides of the same coin: "anxiety about female transgression." The violence "of the gesture against female form," as encapsulated by the "triumphant and provocative placement of the stick of Richard Cosway," she writes, "can be read as a sign of male anxiety, and particularly anxiety concerning woman's mastering and desiring gaze." In Portraiture: Facing the Subject, ed. Joanna

founding members of the Royal Academy are conspicuously absent from the group portrait, however, with no surrogates of any kind to stand in for them. The first is Nathaniel Dance, whose omission has traditionally been explained as the result of his recent argument with the President of the Academy.² The second is the architect George Dance whose exclusion may have been the price of his brother Nathaniel's sins. The third is Gainsborough, for whose omission there is no such quick alibi. The fact that Gainsborough was residing in Bath at the time seems not to be a valid pretext for his exclusion since Zoffany's clever inclusion of Kauffmann and Moser proves the artist's imaginative resourcefulness. Surely including Gainsborough's likeness would have required far less ingenuity. It was not the last time Gainsborough would be excluded, either by his own volition or by other forces, from the inner circle of the Academy.³

Woodall (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1997) 150.

² See Mark Evans' discussion of this painting in The Royal Collection: Paintings from Windsor Castle (Cardiff: National Museum of Wales, in association with London: Lund Humphries, 1990) 132.

³ In discussions, Michael Rosenthal suggested that one simple explanation for Gainsborough's exclusion is not that the painter was living in Bath (indeed we know that he made frequent visits to London) but that he may have refused to sit for the group portrait. If this was the case it suggests that Gainsborough's antipathy (or aloofness) toward the Academy was there from the start. And I would argue that that antipathy was thus mutual, each side feeding spitefully on the other.

Before 1740 there was virtually no venue at which the public could view paintings by contemporary artists in England, although old master paintings could be seen at auction houses⁴ and painters could sometimes pay servants to gain entrance into houses where private collections were displayed.⁵ The decades between 1740 and 1760 were a pivotal period in which the complete lack of public exhibitions gave way to the founding of numerous independent exhibiting societies. The remarkable initial success of these societies, such as the Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (which later became the Free Society of Artists), the Society of Artists (which became the Incorporated Society of Artists), and the Society of Artists of Great Britain, proved beyond doubt that large numbers of the public were more than willing to pay the customary nominal fee of one shilling for the official catalogue which served as admission. Although the independent exhibiting societies suffered when the Royal Academy's annual exhibitions won the lion's share of public attention, various kinds of private exhibitions began flourishing in London in the 1780s -- a

⁴ Mentioned in Parme Giuntini, "The Politics of Display: Family Portraits, the Royal Academy and Modern Domestic Ideology," diss., University of California, Los Angeles, 1995. See esp. 27-46.

⁵ John Steegman, The Rule of Taste from George I to George IV (London: Macmillan, 1968) 107, writes: "[Private] collections remained closed to all but those who could afford the fantastically exorbitant fees (they were more than tips) to the servants and caretakers who herded the sightseer round the houses of the Great."

phenomenon of which Gainsborough's own Schomberg House exhibitions are but one manifestation.⁶ Parallel to the growing interest in these exhibitions of contemporary art was the emergence of newspaper reviews of exhibitions. These reviews, usually by authors who remained anonymous or wrote under pen names, tended to be brief and appeared only sporadically in the period before the founding of the Royal Academy.⁷ With the founding of the Academy, however, there emerged a critical discursive space for art in the form of regular newspaper columns covering, and eventually also criticizing, sometimes with wit and sometimes with venom, the works on exhibition in London.

The British institution of the Royal Academy was founded at the end of 1768 and it held the first of its annual exhibitions in the spring of the following year.⁸

⁶ See Joseph Burke, English Art 1714-1800 (Oxford: Clarendon, 1976) 253-257, for a discussion of the sudden proliferation in London during the 1780s and 1790s of private galleries, solo-shows, group "theme" exhibitions and so forth.

⁷ Although anonymous art reviews occasionally appeared in London newspapers after the foundation of regular exhibits sponsored by the Society of Arts in 1760, it was not until 1773, when Henry Bate founded the Morning Herald, that art reviews became a regular feature in the London press. On the rise of art journalism in England at the end of the eighteenth century see Shelley Bennett, "Anthony Pasquin and the Function of Art Journalism in late Eighteenth-Century England," British Journal for Eighteenth Century Studies 8 (Autumn 1985): 197-207.

⁸ The best source on the history of the Royal Academy is Sidney Hutchinson, The History of the Royal Academy, 1768-1986 (London: R. Royce, 1968). Other useful studies on the subject include: Joseph Baretti, A Guide through the Royal Academy (London, 1781); Algernon Graves, The Royal Academy of Arts: a Complete Dictionary of Contributors 6 vols. (London: Henry

Gainsborough, who had dominated the market for fashionable portraiture in Bath for nearly a decade, was independent of the maneuvering and lobbying with which a group of soon-to-be Royal Academicians in London were engaged virtually from the time of their collective exodus in 1768, the Independent Society of Artists.⁹ Despite not having been involved in the clandestine negotiations of late 1768 which would give birth

Graves and George Bell and Sons, 1905); W.R.M. Lamb, The Royal Academy. A Short History of its Foundation and Development to the Present Day (London: Alexander Maclehose, 1935); Eric Shanes, The Genius of the Royal Academy (London: John Murray, The Royal Academy, 1981); and Robert Wraight, Hip! Hip! Hip! R.A. An Unofficial Book for the Royal Academy's Bicentenary 10 December 1968 (London: Leslie Frewin, 1968). See also Iain Pears, The Discovery of Painting: The Growth of Interest in the Arts in England 1680-1768 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).

⁹ The Society for the Encouragement of the Arts, Manufactures and Commerce (commonly referred to as the Society of Arts) was the nation's first public exhibiting body. It held its inaugural exhibition in 1760, displaying a total of 130 exhibits in one room by such prominent painters as Reynolds, Francis Hayman, Paul Sandby and Richard Wilson, all of who would become founding members of the Royal Academy. In 1762 the Society of Arts evolved into the Free Society of Artists and continued to hold exhibitions until 1783. A number of artists who had participated in the 1760 exhibition of the Society of Arts left the Society to join another new organization, the Society of Artists of Great Britain (Society of Artists), which immediately became the dominant of the two exhibiting bodies. The Society of Artists held its first public exhibition at Spring Gardens in 1761 with 229 exhibits, and Gainsborough was among the participating artists. In 1765 the Society of Artists became the Incorporated Society of Artists, and it was from this body that those artists who would be instrumental in founding the Royal Academy and acquiring Royal patronage defected in 1768. The following texts can be consulted for an elaboration of my thumbnail sketch of the history of public exhibiting bodies prior to the founding of the Royal Academy: Hutchison, The History of the Royal Academy; Pat Rogers' introduction to Reynolds' Discourses; Ilaria Bignamini, "Art Institutions in London 1689-1768. A Study of clubs and academies," Walpole Society 54 (1988\1991).

to the Royal Academy and secure its patronage from George III, Gainsborough was one of the forty artists invited to become founding members, and the only one of them not to have a London address.¹⁰

Gainsborough accepted the invitation and sent four paintings to the first Royal Academy exhibition: a "large landscape" and a so-called fancy picture of a "boy's head," as they were listed in the official catalogue, and two full-length portraits, one of George Pitt, the other of Isabella, Lady Molyneux (fig. 3). Together, his four submissions offered a summation of his breadth and skill in three of the four subject categories for painting at the Academy. Of the four paintings only the full-length portrait of Lady Molyneux was included in the list of pictures that had "chiefly attracted the attention of the Connoisseurs at the Royal Academy."¹¹ It is premonitory that of his submissions only the portrait of a female sitter, moving with casual elegance through a landscape and wearing a fashionable striped satin gown accessorized with a lace-trimmed black shawl, received attention and admiration in the press. It was precisely with this format -- the full length portrait-in-a-landscape -- and with this subject -- the fashionably dressed female sitter --

¹⁰ Ellis Waterhouse, "The First Royal Academy Exhibition, 1769," The Listener 1 June 1950: 946.

¹¹ Lloyd Evening Post 1-3 May 1769: 427, lists the portrait of Lady Molyneux among those "Pictures that have this season chiefly attracted the attention of the Connoisseurs at the Royal Academy." The same review appeared in the Middlesex Journal 2-4 May 1769: 4.

that Gainsborough would make his most distinctive appearances at the subsequent ten annual Royal Academy exhibitions in which he would participate.

During the years he exhibited at the Academy he came to be universally considered by the press as a premier painter of the Academy as well as one of Britain's most eminent "modern" artists, second only to the Academy's first President, Sir Joshua Reynolds.¹² The artistic reputations of both these painters were already well established by 1768; both had been contributing pictures to publicly accessible venues such as the new Vauxhall Gardens and the exhibitions of the Society of Artists which held the first of its public exhibitions in 1760. Both artists also shared whatever kudos might be gotten from commanding higher prices for "heads" than any of their contemporaries, with the President always maintaining a lead over Gainsborough.¹³

Contemporary critics were quick to adopt the trope of opposition between Gainsborough and Reynolds, using it to evoke two contrary stylistic mannerisms while conserving a sense of the two artists' shared preeminence.¹⁴ Critics were

¹² Pronouncements such as "The best paintings in the rooms, are those of Sir Joshua, and Gainsborough," are common among Royal Academy reviews of the time. London Chronicle 28 April-1 May 1781: 416.

¹³ On the prices Reynolds and Gainsborough demanded for portraits, see David Mannings, "Notes on some Eighteenth-Century Portrait Prices in Britain," British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies 6 (Autumn 1983): 185-196.

¹⁴ Jackson concludes his essay on the "Character of Sir Joshua Reynolds," which follows his essay on the "Character of

frequently split over who best deserved the year's laurels; but one particular pattern becomes pointedly apparent in reviews of the Academy exhibition by 1777, if not before.¹⁵ Namely, the tendency to posit the President as the defending champion of the prestige arts and Gainsborough, who returned that year after a four year absence, as the contender. A review of the 1777 exhibition published in the Morning Chronicle is not unusual in its juxtaposition and judgement of the merits of the two painters:

The Exhibition this year is considerably enriched by the paintings of Mr. GAINSBOROUGH, whose general skill, as an artist, renders him a most valuable acquisition to any Society who exhibit, and whose particular merit, as a portrait painter, places him on a form with those who have no superior in this country, but Sir Joshua, and who, in some instances, (as Mr. Gainsborough's pictures this year prove) tread so close upon the heels of that chief of the Science, that it is not always evident Sir Joshua has a superiority.¹⁶

As in any competition, the contest becomes more ardent when the champion and challenger are deemed equal in merit but different in method. For Gainsborough and Reynolds that competitive arena was the annual exhibition of the Royal

Thomas Gainsborough" with an outline of their diametrically opposed personal and artistic propensities. In The Four Ages, see especially 178-184.

¹⁵ The critical reception of Gainsborough in the contemporary press recently has received detailed analysis in Brenneman's meticulously researched dissertation, "The Critical Response to Thomas Gainsborough's Painting." Brenneman's narration and exposition of contemporary political machinations that underwrote art journalism in the 1770s and 1780s -- political agendas and affiliations, as well as gossip and payola -- alert us to the covert contingencies of art journalism at the moment of its emergence in Britain.

¹⁶ "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy," Morning Chronicle 25 April 1777: 1-2.

Academy, and their combined "excellencies" only gave more luster to that Royal institution.

Art historians thenceforth have subscribed to the Gainsborough-Reynolds duality as an economical means by which to denote opposite ends of the spectrum of artistic practice in the prestige arts in late eighteenth-century England. Fact, speculation, and myth-making intermingle in the standard biographical sketches of the two painters: Reynolds, temperate and imperturbable, intellectual and learned, a prominent member of London's literary elite, admirer of the ancients and the great "moderns" of the Italian Renaissance, and practitioner of the classicist revival in England; Gainsborough, intemperate, gregarious, allegedly promiscuous and perhaps syphilitic,¹⁷ self-taught and intuitive, a musical "man of feeling," a "natural painter," and a precursor of Romanticism in England.¹⁸ A case in point is Ellis

¹⁷ Insinuating that Gainsborough promiscuity was the root cause, Stephen Butler, *Gainsborough* (London: Studio Editions, 1992) 31, claims that Margaret Gainsborough, the younger of the painter's two daughters, suffered a mental condition "which was the consequence of her inherited syphilis."

¹⁸ For example, Waterhouse, *Gainsborough* 44. Other biographical "sketches" that convey Gainsborough as a "natural" painter include Philip Thicknesse, *A Sketch of the Life and Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough, Esq.* (London, 1788); George Williams Fulcher, *Life of Thomas Gainsborough, R.A.* (London, 1856); Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Sculptors, and Architects* (London, 1829); Sir Walter Armstrong, *Gainsborough and his Place in English Art* (New York: Scribner's, 1906); Lord Ronald Sutherland Gower, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: G. Bell, 1903); William Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Smith, Elder, 1915); Mary Woodall, *Thomas Gainsborough: His Life and Work* (London: Phoenix House, 1949); Geoffrey Williamson, *The Ingenious Mr. Gainsborough* (New York: St Martin's Press,

Waterhouse's 1958 catalogue raisonné on Gainsborough. As a formidable authority on both painters as well as British eighteenth-century art in general, Waterhouse provides a weighty opening statement: "Gainsborough was so nearly the exact opposite in temperament to Sir Joshua."¹⁹ At every turn in Waterhouse's subsequent sketch of the character of Gainsborough the painter appears to be the foil to Reynolds.

Their beginnings were, however, not altogether dissimilar. They were born in the same decade and were the youngest sons of large families of similar middle-class means. The Gainsboroughs had for generations been involved in the cloth and haberdashery trade,²⁰ whereas Reynolds' father was a clergyman and schoolmaster.²¹ Both came to London from the provinces, Gainsborough from Suffolk when he was thirteen or

1972); Isabelle Worman, Thomas Gainsborough: A Biography 1727-1788 (Leverham: Terence Dalton, 1976); Jack Lindsay, Thomas Gainsborough: His Life and Art (London: Granada, 1981).

¹⁹ Waterhouse, Gainsborough 11.

²⁰ The most detailed documentation of Gainsborough's family is Hugh Belsey, Gainsborough's Family (Sudbury: Gainsborough's House Society, 1988); and John Bensusan-Butt, Thomas Gainsborough in his Twenties: A Memorandum based on Contemporary Sources 3rd ed. (Colchester: published by the author, 1993). See also William Whitley, "The Gainsborough Family Portraits," Studio (August 1923): 167-167.

²¹ The most useful biographies on Reynolds are: Derek Hudson, Sir Joshua Reynolds. A Personal Study (London: G. Bles, 1958); Leslie and Taylor, The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds; Ellis Waterhouse, Reynolds (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trubner and Co., 1941); and Martin Postle, Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995). Essays included in the exhibition catalogue Reynolds, ed. Nicholas Penny (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986) contain much valuable information and illuminating analyses.

perhaps younger as an apprentice to an unknown silversmith, and Reynolds from Devon at age seventeen as an apprentice to Thomas Hudson, then the most successful portrait painter in London.²² We can be far less certain about Gainsborough's first years in London than we can about Reynolds' -- perhaps because the latter proceeded along the rather more conventional and esteemed rite of passage as an apprentice in the studio of an established master, whereas the former seems to have embarked immediately on a less prestigious path that included work as a restorer, copier, and itinerant hired hand to mature painters, decorators, theatrical scene painters, and engravers. Although they entered the London art milieu under very different circumstances, both painters managed eventually to ascend to the top of their shared profession. Both managed also to surpass the distinction of their teachers only to become rivals of each other.

Gainsborough's relationship with the Royal Academy is a curious one and his status within it can be characterized as being at one and the same time parallel to and antithetical to that of Reynolds. Reynolds, the President of the Academy for its first twenty-four years, its unrelenting promoter, tireless theoretician, and author of its civic humanist

²² Adrienne Corri, The Search for Gainsborough (London: J. Cape, 1984), problematizes much of the hitherto accepted speculative dating of Gainsborough's pre-Bath years. See also Bensusan-Butts' response to, and refutation of, Corri's research in Gainsborough in his Twenties.

doctrine, rules of conduct and pedagogic philosophy, was so much "inside" the Academy that he can almost be said to have personified it not only during his Presidency but also long after it. Gainsborough, however, was both inside and outside the Academy.

Indeed, Gainsborough gave very little else to the Academy except many years' worth of show-stopper portraits, landscapes, and so-called "fancy pictures." He never attended Academy meetings or dinners, declined running for offices for which he was nominated, and clashed with the Hanging Committee in 1784 over the placement of his full-length portrait of the three eldest Princesses, an event that led to his self-imposed exile from the Academy (fig. 4).²³ Gainsborough's famous quarrel with the Academy in 1784 attests to how the painter would not accept the Academy's rules and judgements if they countered his own or, perhaps more importantly, if they in any way deterred from the visual impact of his pictures. A decade earlier Gainsborough had declined from submitting pictures to the Academy, possibly because of an altercation with the Academy, and was unrepresented for a string of four years.²⁴

²³ See Brenneman's commentary on this event in "The Critical Response to Thomas Gainsborough's Painting," 157-179.

²⁴ William Whitley speculates that Gainsborough's absence was the consequence of the artist's quarrel with the Academy in 1772. Whitley explains that "because of the suppression of a portrait he had sent to the [1772] exhibition of Walpole's niece, the Duchess of Gloucester, whose then recent marriage to the King's brother had made her obnoxious to George III. In any case Gainsborough was offended and sent nothing to the exhibitions of 1773, 1774, 1775, and 1776. But in the year 1777...the quarrel, whatever the cause, was patched up, and

When Gainsborough returned to the Academy in 1777 the critics were pleased:

We are glad to see Mr. Gainsborough once more submitting his Performances to public Inspection; which cannot fail to add to the Entertainment of the Town, as well as to the Reputation and Emolument of the Artist.²⁵

A critic for the London Chronicle, despite an introductory diatribe against the lamentable abundance of portraits on show at the expense of historical subjects, included mention of Gainsborough's portrait of Mary Graham (fig. 5) in order that he

may have the opportunity of felicitating the Royal Academy upon the re-acquisition of Mr. Gainsborough as one of the first portrait-painters in the kingdom. He is inferior to none in the more essential requisites of his art, but perhaps he is superior to all others in the ease and richness of his drapery.²⁶

Nevertheless, in 1784, by carrying through his threat to have his paintings removed Gainsborough denied himself the professional advantages that the public visibility at the Academy exhibition had granted him in previous years.²⁷ Consequently, after 1784 Gainsborough truly was "outside" the Academy, no doubt with the confidence that he could operate well enough without it.

Gainsborough offered to return, subject to certain conditions. What they were we do not know...." "An Eighteenth-Century Art Chronicler: Sir Henry Bate Dudley, Bart.," Walpole Society 13 (Oxford, 1925): 25-66 (passage appears on p. 31).

²⁵ Public Advertiser 26 April 1777: 2.

²⁶ London Chronicle 24-26 April 1777: 396.

²⁷ Shelley Bennett, Thomas Stothard. The Mechanisms of Art Patronage in England circa 1800 (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1988).

The prominence of Gainsborough and Reynolds in the history of late eighteenth-century British art is as unequivocal now as it was in the decades during which their paintings hung side by side at the Royal Academy. It was a situation that prompted the press and the public to measure and compare their respective merits especially as they were demonstrated in portraiture -- the genre in which they both excelled. Given that Gainsborough was customarily considered on equal footing with the President, his marginalization by the Academy seems more implausible than inevitable. Yet, inevitable it was. On many counts Gainsborough was indeed outside the fold of the Academy's didactic mission.

Gainsborough's commercial success as a portraitist with a distinctive, individual style, and his critical recognition as an innovative artist, owed more to the failure of the Academy to achieve artistic hegemony than to its success in doing so. Almost despite itself, the Royal Academy fostered the growth of public interest in art and the development of a public discourse on art in the London press which together undermined the essentially conservative aims of the Academy to control, standardize, and "improve" the Arts in Britain. If Reynolds wished the institution of which he was President to inspire a "Republic of Taste,"²⁸ others saw very different kinds of heterogeneous operations taking place at the Academy:

²⁸ The phrase is borrowed from the introductory subtitle of John Barrell's The Political Theory of Painting from

Yesterday great numbers of persons, of almost every condition, flocked to the Exhibition Rooms in Pall Mall. -- Artists, to compare their merits to their brethren -- Connoscenti, to watch the improvement of the several exhibitions -- Criticks, to search for faults -- Amateurs, to praise beauties -- and an infinity of Ladies and Gentlemen, to see their acquaintance among the portraits, and to reap that rational satisfaction, which even those who know nothing of the rules of painting cannot fail to receive from a view of a large variety of pictures, many of established reputation.²⁹

The above statement appeared in the Morning Chronicle in 1777. The anonymous author claimed to take "Nature for his guide" and hoped that "his remarks would not be the less relish'd for being couched in plain English, and without the fectionation of Italian phrases." He admitted to being an "admirer of art" without being knowledgeable of its rules "and still less of the technical terms used by the professors." It would not be inconceivable, I think, to imagine that the author is arguing for an expansion of the standards of judgement set and advocated by the Academy more than he apologizing less for his lack of knowledge of those rules. In short, for the author the Academy's elitism and mystification of artistic quality contrasts starkly with the democratization of the judgement and satisfaction of looking at art he wishes to foster. I propose that Gainsborough's views with regard to the Academy and how art should best be appreciated were not unlike those of the anonymous "admirer of art." Oddly enough, and this will be unravelled from a number of angles in the following

Reynolds to Hazlitt (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986).

²⁹ "The Exhibition of the Royal Academy," Morning Chronicle 25 April, 1777: 1-2.

chapters, Gainsborough's affronts to the doctrinaire conservatism of the Academy were expressed most forcefully in the essentially conservative genre of portraiture.

It is notable, though not at all surprising given the historical circumstances, that the two most celebrated painters of the "great renaissance in British painting" made their most lasting mark on the history of British painting in the domain of portraiture.³⁰ Yet, a comparison between the mature work of Gainsborough and Reynolds highlights the two painters' different manners of compromising their respective artistic ambitions and stylistic savvy with the necessity of painting portraits. Reynolds' portrait of Joanna Lloyd (fig. 6) and Gainsborough's of Grace Dalrymple (fig. 7) were both exhibited at the Royal Academy in the second half of the 1770s, when the two painters were roundly considered to be Britain's foremost portrait painters. The sitters are similarly situated in the open air: Lloyd in a shady birch grove complete with brook, blossoming wild spring flowers, and a convenient stone monument against which she leans; Dalrymple in a somewhat less remote setting although the opening on the left gives a view to a stormy evening sky and thickly-wooded terrain. Both sitters are shown in profile and do not meet the viewer's gaze: absorbed by her demonstration of affection and fidelity, Lloyd carves the name of her husband into a tree

³⁰ The expression is borrowed from Butler, *Gainsborough* 5.

while a contemplative Dalrymple takes a small graceful step in front of an unadorned stone wall. Yet, in terms of the painters' style and the attitudes in which they have portrayed their sitters, the two paintings could hardly be more disparate. First, the portraits are virtual illustrations of the traditional art historical categories of disegno and coloris: Reynolds has favored clear contours and a restrained, almost monochromatic beige-to-chestnut palette while Gainsborough has blurred boundaries and given the satin gown of brilliant yoke yellow and creamy white -- colors that reappear in the misty evening sky beyond -- a scintillating, glowing richness that combines Titian's treatment of color with Gerard Ter Borch's skill at rendering texture with crisp tangibility. The difference between the costumes of the sitters is also striking. The clingy white muslin garment worn by Lloyd is more of a drape than a dress -- truly a garment that is as imaginative as it is impractical. Her sandal betrays a wish to call up a classical past even though the lifted hairstyle fixes the portrait squarely in the 1770s. The young bride's declaration of love may be alluding to Ariosto's epic Renaissance poem Orlando Furioso, where Angelica carves the name of her lover into a tree.³¹ Dalrymple, by contrast, can be mistaken neither for a devoted Angelica nor a classical nymph, not only because the composition lacks the accoutrements or narrative element

³¹ See Penny, ed., Reynolds 275-276.

necessary to connect the sitter to a lofty literary source but also because few visitors to the Academy in 1778 would have been unfamiliar with the stories of Dalrymple's numerous "adventures" (to use an eighteenth-century euphemism for romantic, adulterous liaisons). Dalrymple's "adventures" may have marginalized her from some circles of society, but Gainsborough's flattering depiction of her brings her into to the fold of eighteenth-century society and makes her a spectacle for adoration on account of her glamorous physical charms. Furthermore, instead of superimposing an allegorical conceit in order to give character to the figure, Dalrymple wears her character on her sleeve, so to speak, in the form of lace, pearls, silks and satins. She is dressed from powdered coiffure to pointed slipper in the height of elegant, up-to-date fashion. The painter has treated her costume with a sense of minute detail in the hem, sleeve and scalloped pearl-edged skirt as well as with the desire to achieve effect in the broad, almost calligraphic gestural lines that read as dazzling highlights from a distance.

Perhaps the patrons of these portraits proposed the landscape backdrop, the airy grove or the stormy sky in the distance, and perhaps they even requested that the sitter be represented in a specific pose, style of dress and attitude. Alternatively, the painter could have recommended those features to the patron. Nonetheless, a dialogue between painter and patron at the outset of a commission surely was the rule and the final portrait was thus generally the outcome

of requests, demands, suggestions, and recommendations communicated between the two parties, combined with the particular compositional and stylistic propensities of the portraitist. Surely the latter was surely a prime motivating factor in the patron's choice of one painter over another.

Neither Gainsborough nor Reynolds, however, limited their lucrative professional careers to the painting of portraits. Reynolds painted allegorical and classical historical subjects in the so-called "grand style" in addition to his vast production of portraits. The theoretical equivalent of these history paintings were his Discourses, a collection of ambitious writings on art which were presented as lectures at the annual award-giving ceremony of the Royal Academy, immediately published in the press, and later compiled and sold in editions. By infusing his portraiture with quotations from antiquity and the Italian Renaissance, Reynolds imported the grand style into the territory of portraiture. "Historical portraiture," a hybrid genre in which a sitter's likeness was set within a mythological or literary narrative or a scene of historical importance, functioned to raise his status as a portraitist as well as to raise the status of portraiture in an age of "mean vanity and selfishness."

Reynolds' use of landscape settings may reveal more about the preferences of his sitters and the resonance of Van Dyck's courtly portraiture throughout the eighteenth century,³² or

³² Deborah Cherry and Jennifer Harris, "Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and the Seventeenth-Century Past:

the appropriateness of such a background for a particular thematic pretext than it does the painter's own predilections for landscape. For him landscape was a lowly genre unless it was of the classical, Italianate, Claudian variety.³³ The same could not be said of Gainsborough who throughout his career produced and exhibited landscapes and rustic scenes for which he was praised in the press but not much patronized by the art-buying public. In his letters he describes painting portraits as drudgery and muses about devoting himself to landscape. Landscape settings became his signature motif for full-length portraits and provided a format to display his talent for less marketable landscapes within the more profitable genre of portraiture. Thus Reynolds and Gainsborough both found a pictorial method by which to integrate their less feasible first loves -- that is, history painting and landscape -- with the commercially fruitful genre of portraiture.³⁴ But, interestingly, Reynolds' contribution to portraiture was aimed at elevating that genre, whereas one of Gainsborough's contributions to the genre was to give integrity to the landscape backgrounds, thereby elevating the a less respected subject for painting.

Gainsborough and Van Dyck," Art History 5 (September 1982): 287-309.

³³ See, for example, Joshua Reynolds' essay on landscape in The Idler 20 October 1759.

³⁴ For a discussion on this subject, see Burke, English Art 210-211.

The differences between Gainsborough's and Reynolds' artistic influences and stylistic propensities did not escape the notice of art commentators. What was seldom raised, however, was their respective artistic rules and guidelines; if the pedagogical credentials of the young Royal Academy were used as the yardstick Gainsborough automatically would have been found lacking and Reynolds leading the pack. It is no insignificant coincidence that, for all intents and purposes, Reynolds wrote those rules, and no British painter in the eighteenth century better fulfilled his prescriptions better than Reynolds himself.

Reynolds' group portrait of the Montgomery Sisters, titled Three Ladies Adorning the Term of Hymen when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1774 (fig. 8), is one of the most dramatic examples of his ambition to adapt his own academic prescriptions to the demands of portraiture.³⁵ Contrasted with one of Gainsborough's most highly acclaimed Academy portraits, Mary Graham, the profound difference in these painters' approach to portraiture by the mid-1770s becomes even more vivid. The tendencies of Reynolds to limit himself to one area of the color spectrum and to outline his forms with clarity is again evident, as is Gainsborough's more varied palette and juxtaposition of complimentary colors -- the orangy-peach of the crushed satin skirt balanced on the

³⁵ See Edgar Wind's excellent discussion of this painting, Hume and the Heroic Portrait: Studies in Eighteenth-Century Imagery, ed. Jaynie Anderson (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1986) 43-44.

upper register of the canvas with the indigo-blue evening sky, for example. Set in an autumnal landscape and engaged in a ritual, of fertility around the statue of the Roman god of marriage, the Montgomery sisters are arranged in a sweeping diagonal of outstretched arms and bough of flowers. The classical vessel and rams' head urn comply with the pagan classical ritual and the garments and sandals of the three young women are inspired by classical examples. Their poses, as any learned viewer would have taken pride in recognizing, derive from various classical and Renaissance sources. The portrait was commissioned by Luke Gardiner, M.P., the fiance of one of the sisters, who requested a full-length portrait of the three sisters "representing some emblematical or historical subject."³⁶ No doubt such a request would have piqued the interest of Reynolds and his solution was no less classical than it was appropriate to the circumstances of the sitters: one married, another recently engaged, and the third not yet betrothed. Draping the three sitters in "timeless" pseudo-classical garb, so as to allude to the three graces,³⁷ was not only suited to the theme but was also a mode Reynolds recommended to avoid the negative consequences outdated fashion might have on the judgement of a portrait over time.³⁸

³⁶ Penny, ed., Reynolds 262.

³⁷ The Montgomery Sisters were referred to in London society as the "three Irish Graces." See Burke's analysis of this painting's various classical, Renaissance, literary quotations. English Art 206-207.

Nothing could be further from Gainsborough's portrait of Mary Graham. Gainsborough endowed his female sitters (and to a lesser degree his male sitters) with fabulously elaborate fashionable costumes and accessories, and his depiction of the costume worn by Graham, from plumed hat to delicately beaded slipper, revels in the minute details and luxurious textures of feminine finery. Although Graham's is not strictly speaking a contemporary costume but rather a historical Van Dyckian one (or one inspired by Rubens), art and costume historians have pointed out that such seventeenth-century attire was a favorite masquerade costume in England during the 1770s.³⁹ As such, Gainsborough is being historically courtly and contemporarily stylish at the same time -- surely a winning combination for his well-heeled patrons.

When Reynolds made his reproach of fashionable dress within the public venue of his seventh Discourse, delivered 10 December 1776, Gainsborough was quick to deflect the criticism a few months later when he exhibited his portrait of Mary Graham at the Royal Academy -- an elevated fashion plate of lush, exuberant finery if ever there was one. Any number of paragraphs from the seventh Discourse would sufficiently

³⁸ Reynolds treats the subject of fashionable dress in portraiture in his seventh Discourse (see esp. 196-200).

³⁹ On the influence of Van Dyck on Gainsborough's portrait of Graham, see Cherry and Harris, "Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and the Seventeenth-Century Past." For a discussion of echoes of Rubens in late eighteenth-century British portraiture (a discussion which highlights Gainsborough's full-length of Graham, see Aileen Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress: Fashion in England and France, 1750-1820* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995) 193-199.

convince the reader of Reynolds' utter indifference to matters of "taste in dress," which he contended "is certainly one of the lowest subjects to which this word [taste] is applied,"⁴⁰ but the following statement summarizes his conviction on the question of how best to dress a sitter:

As Greece and Rome are the fountains from whence have flowed all kinds of excellence, to that veneration which they have a right to claim for the pleasure and knowledge which they have afforded us, we voluntarily add our approbation of every ornament and every custom that belonged to them, even the fashion of their dress.⁴¹

Gainsborough may well have interpreted Reynolds' argument for unchanging "general dress" as a slight against his own trademark inclination to dress -- one could almost say "decorate" -- his sitters in elaborate modern styles of attire. In a letter to his fellow academician William Hoare, Gainsborough turns the tables on Reynolds' taste for antique dress and, in his usual lively, irreverent style of prose, mocks the President's extolment of the grand style. The letter is in direct response to Reynolds' fifth Discourse, and in it Gainsborough seems to be defending himself against Reynolds' criticism of one of the most characteristic features of his portraits, the use of contemporary fashions:

Every one knows that the grand style must consist in plainness & simplicity, and that silks & satins, Pearls and trifling ornaments would be as hurtful to simplicity as flourishes in a Psalm Tune...there must be variety of lively touches and surprizing Effects to make the Heart dance, or else they had better be in a Church -- so in

⁴⁰ Reynolds, seventh Discourse, 197.

⁴¹ Ibid., 198.

Portrait Painting there must be Lustre and finishing to bring it up to individual life.

As Mr. G.[ainsborough] hates all things the least tendency to the sour Critic, [he] hopes to talk over the affair some Evening over a Glass, as there is no other Friendly or sensible way of settling these matters except upon Canvas.⁴²

Whether the question was indeed settled "over a Glass" some evening we cannot know, but Gainsborough's and Reynolds' portraits provide ample evidence that the matter was indeed addressed on canvas.

Surely Gainsborough's already well-established reputation was what prompted him to be among those few invited to join the Academy in the first place despite his decidedly unacademic, unclassical training. Yet, in this respect he was no exception among the forty founding Academicians.⁴³ Because of the nature of the art world in England before the founding of the Academy, most of Gainsborough's fellow founding members had received their training either as apprentices in the studio of a master, or at one of the sundry "academies" that were then in operation. At Kneller's Academy, Thornhill's Academy, and St Martin's Lane Academy (all founded between 1711 and 1734 but none surviving beyond the first few years of the founding of the Royal Academy) training was far less

⁴² Mary Woodall, ed. The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough (Greenwich Connecticut: New York Graphic Society, 1961\1963), Letter #46, 95-97.

⁴³ See Giuntini, "The Politics of Display," 47-54.

systematic, controlled, and strictly classically based than it would be in the schools of the Royal Academy.⁴⁴

Like the Florentine Accademia del Disegno founded in 1563 by Georgio Vasari, the Roman Accademia di S. Luca founded in 1593, initially led by Federico Zuccaro and later reorganized by Pope Urban VIII, and the French Académie Royale de Peinture et de Sculpture founded in 1648 with the royal sponsorship of Louis XIV, the Royal Academy in London advocated a clear set of aesthetic aims and artistic standards which were instilled through the teaching of art theory and direction in the studio setting. In his discussion of the ideological motivations behind the founding of academies, Albert Boime summarizes the aims of the Fine Arts Academy in the following way:

The Fine Arts Academy, like any other institution, is a subdivision of society consisting of human beings in well-defined groups established together with its ideology, rules, procedures, and material structures, and organized around a central aim or purpose. The central aim or purpose is repeated often in the rhetoric used by those in key positions to justify the nature of the institution. The declared idea underlying the foundation of most academies is the training and indoctrination of young artists within a honorific context -- that is, it enjoys the sponsorship of important people -- that elevated their social position.⁴⁵

The emphasis on "training and indoctrination" was certainly at the heart of the stated aims of the British institution, and

⁴⁴ Rica Jones, "The Artist's Training and Techniques," in Manners and Morals: Hogarth and British Painting 1700-1760 (London: Tate Gallery, 1987) 19-22. See also The Artist's Model: Its Role in British Art from Lely to Etty, eds. Ilaria Bignamini and Martin Postle (London: University of Nottingham and English Heritage, 1991).

⁴⁵ Albert Boime, "The Cultural Politics of the Art Academy," The Eighteenth Century 35 (1994): 203-204.

such aims are conveyed repeatedly and in no uncertain terms throughout Reynolds' Discourses. Interesting, too, is the fact that with the establishment of the Royal Academy schools the earlier independent and diverse art schools in London were obliterated, leaving the Academy free to erect and sustain its hegemonic hold on fine art training.

The impact of the President's theories on art for generations of ambitious British artists can hardly be overestimated. For some the example of Reynolds' art and in particular his much read Discourses provided an inspirational guiding light; for others, it promised only creative strangulation. William Blake's annotations to the Discourses are a case in point when he complains of "Having spent the Vigour of my Youth and genius under the Oppression of Sir Joshua and his Gang of Cunning Hired Knaves." Making his comments some fifteen years after Reynolds' death, Blake would not submit to the principles and pedagogies of the Royal Academy, and Gainsborough, once his artistic reputation in London was secure -- a security that his self-advertisement in the Academy's annual exhibitions helped establish -- seems to have gone out of his way to thwart them. It is tempting to imagine that Gainsborough deliberately broke with Reynolds' recommendations.

And here I will speculate that Gainsborough's motivation was not merely to discredit his rival but to distinguish himself from his rival -- to stake out a stylistic, emphatically painterly territory of his own. One is the rule

maker, the other the rule breaker: one professing and representing the aims of hegemonic order within the arts, the other forging an independent alternative to that order. I wish to argue that by breaking Reynolds' rules, which were essentially the guiding rules of the Academy, Gainsborough was not merely playing the renegade; he was a clever operator who gauged the tastes of his audience and patrons with amazing astuteness and responded by developing a distinctive, individual style that put a high premium on elegant stylishness and contemporary fashions, non-Italianate landscape settings, broad, bold gestural marks, and the construction of forms through a build-up of thin veils of luminous color.

In the first Discourse, delivered on 2 January 1769, the President made the recommendation that

an implicit obedience to the Rules of Art, as established by the practice of the great MASTERS, should be exacted from the young Students. That these models, which have passed through the approbation of ages, should be considered by them as perfect and infallible guides; as subjects for their imitation, not their criticism.

I am confident, that this is the only efficacious method of making a progress in the Arts; and that he who sets out with doubting, will find life finished before he becomes master of the rudiments. For it may be laid down as a maxim, that he who begins by presuming on his own sense, has ended his studies as soon as he has commenced them. Every opportunity, therefore, should be taken to discountenance that false and vulgar opinion, that rules are the fetters of genius; they are fetters only to men of no genius; as that armour, which upon the strong is an ornament and a defence, upon the weak and mis-shapen becomes a load, and cripples the body which it was made to protect.⁴⁶

⁴⁶ Reynolds, first Discourse, 82-83.

The President's demand for dedication, discipline and deference to rules and standards is inflexible indeed. In the passage above he addresses young students specifically, almost as though he was mindful that experienced artists (and his fellow Academicians) might be resistant to his unrelenting emphasis on "infallible guides."

Measured against the biases of the Royal Academy, neither Gainsborough's training with the French engraver and decorator Hubert François Gravelot (1699-1773), nor his early assignment as a restorer of Dutch landscapes for London art dealers, nor his association with Hogarth's St Martin's Lane Academy could have had much currency: engravers were initially barred from becoming Academicians, the stylized flourishes of French design received little favour from the Renaissance-minded Reynolds, and the categorization of Hogarth with Dutch painters of low subjects in the third Discourse was no subtle denigration. Furthermore, having never made the Grand Tour, Gainsborough could have been perceived as lacking the gentlemanly polish and cultural capital attained by those young men, such as Reynolds, who had travelled to the mecca of antique relics and Renaissance examples of artistic perfection.⁴⁷ Indeed, there were other founding members of the Academy who like Gainsborough had not travelled to Italy, but the experience was considered by the President to be a

⁴⁷ Burke describes Gainsborough's "discovery" of Van Dyck in various private collections as the painter's substitute for the Grand Tour. *English Art* 199.

necessary and formative step for any ambitious artist. London-based artists who did manage to travel to the Continent to study the great works of the ancients, such as Henry Fuseli, were rewarded with praise and promotions by the Academy even if their private ventures were complete financial flops, as was Fuseli's Milton Gallery. Angelica Kauffmann, too, was given pride of place in the Academy despite its gender bias, no doubt as a result of her impressive learnedness in the area of Italian classical and Renaissance culture -- impressive, certainly, to the likes of Reynolds.⁴⁸

The regard for landscape and up-to-date dress on the part of Gainsborough contrasts sharply with the classical references, themes and costumes that are for the most part quintessential to the portraits and history paintings by Reynolds. The crucial difference is that Reynolds conveyed his indebtedness to the classical tradition in art in no uncertain terms. References to great art of the past are not absent in Gainsborough's portraits, landscapes, and rustic scenes but, as many art historians recently have pointed out, those references are veiled, subdued, made inconspicuous and sometimes purposefully debased.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Waterhouse, "The First R.A. Exhibition, 1969," 944-946. Worth noting is that both Fuseli and Kauffmann were originally of the Continent.

⁴⁹ For example, Michael Rosenthal, "Gainsborough's Diana and Actaeon," Painting and the Politics of Culture: New Essays on British Art 1700-1850, ed. John Barrell (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992) 167-194; and Cherry and Harris, "Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and the Seventeenth-Century Past," 288. Ronald Paulson, Breaking and Remaking: Aesthetic

Instead of exhibiting deference to the ancients by painting in the grand manner prescribed by Reynolds, Gainsborough fashioned himself as a "natural painter" -- or at least he did not contest the epithet. This is not to suggest that the term "natural painter" was without merit; in the nineteenth century of Constable and John Ruskin it would become an accolade. But already in the late-eighteenth century it connoted artistic virtues such as a mimetic truth to nature and an honest, sensitive eye.⁵⁰ When Reynolds dedicated his fourteenth Discourse to the recently deceased Gainsborough and described him as not having been trained by any school but the school of nature he was giving his rival a much qualified compliment: the "natural painter" was one who relied on his eye and appealed to the senses, not the intellect, of the viewer. For the proponent of the Italianate grand manner, a "natural painter" was a mere copier. In

Practice in England, 1700-1820 (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1989), 272-274, makes this argument in reference to a number of Gainsborough's paintings, but his discussion of Gainsborough's quotation from Rubens' Descent from the Cross for his Harvest Wagon (1767), is particularly pithy.

⁵⁰ Fulcher, whose Life of Thomas Gainsborough, R.A. was published in 1856, describes the painter's habit of sketching directly from nature and conveys the character of the painter and his landscapes in terms of their honest transcription of the natural world. Birmingham, Landscape and Ideology 62-63, discusses Fulcher's characterization of Gainsborough and argues that the biographer's "account no doubt owed as much to Ruskin's defense of Turner and Pre-Raphaelites as Gainsborough's Suffolk landscapes, but it left unchanged the legend of Gainsborough the nature painter."

essence, then, Reynolds was damning his rival with faint praise.

The irony of the characterization of Gainsborough as a natural painter is that his landscapes proper and landscape settings rarely correspond directly to an actual site: certainly after the mid-1750s his landscapes cease being topographical, becoming instead generalized and imaginary, and in that sense idealized landscapes while maintaining an evocation of decidedly English scenery. Gainsborough took trips to the English Lake District during the early 1780s to sketch landscapes, but Jackson's account of the painter arranging landscape maquettes, from moss, bits of glass and stalks of broccoli -- "that most rococo of green vegetables"⁵¹ -- which would be transformed into images of wooded landscape scenes seems to be a rather innovative adaptation of Reynolds' prescription that painters should see nature through the lens of art, that is, they should transform nature into art through the improvement and idealization of the visible.⁵² Moss into thick shrubs, glass shards into ponds, broccoli into leafy trees -- could not this manner of transforming nature into art be read as a wry rumination on, or an impertinent inversion

⁵¹ I have borrowed the irresistible, vivid description of Gainsborough's "broccoliesque" foliage from Burke, English Art 220. Gainsborough's construction of landscape maquettes is described in Edward Edwards, Anecdotes of Painters who have resided or been born in England (London, 1808) 139. Reynolds also makes reference to Gainsborough's practice of constructing mock landscape scenes in the Fourteenth Discourse.

⁵² See Waterhouse, Gainsborough 16.

of, Reynolds' prescriptions to render the general rather than the detail, the universal rather than the specific?⁵³

The inclusion of classical accoutrements such as follies, plinths, and garden sculpture in so many of Gainsborough's portraits -- ornaments that were also making appearances in contemporary gardens -- makes one wonder whether they were requested by the patron, or whether they evince an ironic gesture toward the Academic tyranny of the grand manner. After all, next to the fresh, young, blushing face of a stunning society beauty such as Mary Graham -- "painted from life" -- the stone profile on the "timeless" classical plinth appears dull, iconic, tarnished and weather-stained -- a mere ornament, eclipsed by shadows and obscured by a stray vine.

It is with portraits such as those of Dalrymple and Graham that Gainsborough made his mark and maintained his enviably high ranking and lucrative position as a portraitist. And it is also with his distinctive portraits, landscapes and fancy pictures that he differentiated himself from Reynolds, and that was what he ultimately needed to do: to stake a place for himself both in the Academy and outside it as somehow tangibly different, tangibly singular, tangibly modern, perhaps even tangibly English, and certainly tangibly not-Reynolds.⁵⁴ In subsequent generations painters would

⁵³ Although Wilson chided called Gainsborough's pictures as "fried parsley." Whitley, Artists and Their Friends in England 1700-1799 vol I, 381.

⁵⁴ Cunningham, Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, argued for the Englishness of Gainsborough's

increasingly be forced to differentiate themselves from their most established, esteemed contemporary, just as Gainsborough so precociously and so successfully had done. What a radical shift from the dominant situation young painters faced before the founding of the Royal Academy when it was their raison d'être to master the style of the master. And how paradoxical that to follow the rules of Reynolds' august academicism was to become exactly that which he repudiated: a mere copier -- a mere member of Sir Joshua's "Gang of Cunning Knaves," to borrow Blake's invective. Luckily for Gainsborough the Academy could not dictate public taste, although it tried to "improve" it. Perhaps by breaking with the Academy and dismissing its humanist rhetoric Gainsborough can be credited with having helped "improve" painting in England; at the very least his work helped broaden and diversify the criteria by which painting was and would be judged, for better or for worse.

Gainsborough's place inside and outside the Academy points to a curious paradox: that he exploited the Academy as a space in which he could distinguish himself from its rules

landscapes: "A deep human sympathy unites us with his pencil, and this is not lessened because all its works are stamped with the image of old England. His paintings have a national look." (p. 273) The same point of view was expressed early in this century by Roger Fry, "Line as a means of Expression in Modern Art," A Roger Fry Reader, ed. Christopher Reed (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996 [originally published in Burlington Magazine, December 1918 and February 1919]) 336. "[T]he charm which some of Gainsborough's vague and incoherent designs still exercise," he write, "is due almost entirely to the peculiarly English sensibility of his handwriting."

and from its rule-maker. He would not be the last painter to adopt this ploy. Indeed, the notoriously cantankerous James Barry would use it (with rather less success and savvy than had Gainsborough) only to be expelled from the Academy in 1799. The significance of this paradox is that it marks a shift from the bygone protectionism of the guild system to the modern configuration of the art world, one in which artists were compelled to forge their own path yet be nimble enough to pursue more potentially favorable options when they arose.

CHAPTER TWO MIXING GENRES: THE PORTRAIT-IN-A-LANDSCAPE

The most conspicuous characteristic of late eighteenth-century British portraiture is the presentation of the human subject in "nature."¹ As backdrop scenery, one would expect nature to assume a role subordinate to the primary function of these portrait-in-a-landscape paintings: to capture the physical likeness of the human subject. But despite the compositionally subordinate role of the landscape in eighteenth-century British portraits, elements of nature often emerge from the background to surround the sitter, be "absorbed" by the sitter, and help articulate some tacit, and tacitly ideal, aspect of his or her "inner nature." Picturing the sitter in a landscape setting was, therefore, a means by which portrait painters could connotatively endow their figures with natural charm, sincere character, and romantic sensibility -- those traits of personality increasingly embraced by a broad spectrum of late eighteenth-century British culture.² Furthermore, as an enlivened formal element

¹ Some of the historically specific problems and expectations of portraiture are raised by Richard Brilliant, *Portraiture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1991), especially the Introduction and chapter entitled "The Authority of the Likeness." See also Pointon's discussion on the eighteenth-century concern for likeness in portraiture which, she explains, was generally secondary to the concern for other artistic qualities. *Hanging the Head* 79-104 (esp. 79-85).

² A pivotal philosophical voice which influenced much thought on, and reevaluation of, notions of nature and human nature in eighteenth-century Britain was David Hume. *Essays: Moral, Philosophical, and Literary* (London: Oxford University Press, 1963 [orig. 1753-1756]). An exceptionally insightful

rich with associations, pictured nature embodied visual, symbolic, and metaphorical "characteristics" that extended beyond its compositional function as background scenery.³ In some cases, the combination of landscape and portrait gave painters the opportunity to experiment with grafting together these two parts of their compositions, and that hybridization spawned novel painterly, coloristic, and thematic strategies which in turn could provide the pictorial terrain for the painter's individual, subjective -- "natural" -- rendering of

synthetic study of the impact of Hume's thought on portraiture is Wind, Hume and the Heroic Portrait.

I have relied heavily on the following texts which belong to a vast pool of secondary literature on the relationship between the representation of nature in art and its construction in other social discourses in eighteenth-century Britain: Barrell, The Dark Side of the Landscape; Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology; John Christie, "Ideology and Representation in Eighteenth-Century Natural History," Oxford Art Journal 13 (1990): 3-10; Carole Fabricant, "The Aesthetics and Politics of Landscape in the Eighteenth Century," Studies in Eighteenth-Century British Art and Aesthetics (University of California Press, 1985) 49-81; Louis Hawes, Presences of Nature: British Landscape 1780-1830 (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1982); Hunt, The Figure in the Landscape; Paulson, Emblem and Expression; Pointon, "Gainsborough and the Landscape of Retirement"; Simon Shama, Landscape and Memory (New York: Knopf, 1995); Solkin, Richard Wilson; Dora Weibenson, The Picturesque Garden in France (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); and Raymond Williams, The Country and the City (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).

Specifically on the relationship between "swelling nationalism" and the emergence of an English school of landscape, see Malcolm Andrews, The Search for the Picturesque: Landscape Aesthetics and Tourism in Britain 1760-1800 (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1989).

³ See James Heffernan, The Re-Creation of Landscape: A Study of Wordsworth, Coleridge, Constable, and Turner (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1984) for an excellent discussion of the formation of new meanings of landscape in Britain and its expression in the arts.

nature. For no eighteenth-century British painter was this more patently the case than Gainsborough.

In portrait after portrait, Gainsborough's sitters promenade, pause, and pose before landscape backdrops, be they productive agricultural tracts (as occasionally appear in his early, small-scale conversation pieces), groomed gardens, or thickly-wooded sylvan vistas. The landscape setting provided his sitters with a framing motif that had currency within the exchange of growing philosophical, literary, artistic, nationalistic, touristic, and scientific pursuits. Nature, in these various cultural practices, became a virtuous domain of understanding, expression, pleasure, transcendence, self-definition, exploration, and discovery. Consequently, by situating his portrait subjects within "nature," he could satisfy a number of contemporary concerns at a single stroke -- some directed toward the self-fashioning desires of the sitter, others expressive of embryonic cultural values being placed on nature and on "being natural."⁴ Finally, in the large format Gainsborough began employing for portraiture at the end of the 1750s, the landscape motif a provided a topography onto which he could project his stylistic singularity -- a stylistic self-annunciation which challenged the traditional primacy and mimetic clarity of the sitter-subject of portraiture.

⁴ For more on the class of Gainsborough's patrons, see Albert Boime, Art in the Age of Revolution 1750-1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987) 5.

Landscape settings had been the stock-in-trade of Gainsborough's production of small-scale portraits from the late 1740s and through most of the 1750s. While in Ipswich between 1752 and 1758, Gainsborough produced a large body of such diminutive outdoor group portraits for local notables.⁵ Gainsborough's John and Ann Gravenor with Their Daughters, Elizabeth and Ann (fig. 9), dates from the painter's Ipswich period and bears all the standard criteria of the conversation piece -- a genre which, in the words of Mario Praz, is exemplary of "the art of the bourgeoisie."⁶ Indeed, the portrait of the Gravenors is an image of a proud and prosperous provincial bourgeois family; one in which the display of wealth and social ambition is tempered with Protestant modesty. The family patriarch, local apothecary cum prominent politician, stands apart and slightly forward from the female members of his family.⁷ His black leather

⁵ Nearly eighty portraits from his Ipswich period are extant. Although this constitutes a rather large number of canvases, as John Hayes points out, spread over a period of some ten years this amounts to less than ten per year which is rather less than what would have been considered a thriving portrait business in those years. For more on Gainsborough's patrons while in Ipswich see John Hayes, "Gainsborough's Suffolk Patrons," The Painter's Eye (Sudbury, Suffolk: Gainsborough's House, 1977) n.p. See also the catalogue for the recent exhibition dedicated to Gainsborough's pre-Bath work. Young Gainsborough (London: Apollo, in association with National Gallery Publications, 1997).

⁶ Praz, "Introduction: The Art of the Bourgeoisie," Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America (University Park and London: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1971) 11-31.

buckled shoes, immaculate white silk stockings, black velvet breeches, ivory satin waistcoat, white ruffled shirt, and coffee-colored frock-coat are within the fashions of the decade without being ostentatiously embroidered or brocaded (as a similar style of costume worn by a contemporary urban man of wealth might be). His unpowdered wig also strikes a balance between fashionability and unpretentiousness. Yet his "hand-in-waistcoat" pose -- that "veritable English hallmark" -- and the elegant position of his feet convey gallant sophistication and genteel refinement.⁸

Only Mr Gravenor's tricorne hat and walking stick overlap into the mass of undulating, sparkling satin that dominates the central area of the canvas. The pale sea-green of Mrs Gravenor's dress and the peach-coral of her elder daughter Anne's break with the dominant warm earthy tones of the setting, while the younger daughter's silvery white dress balances the composition by echoing the accessories of her father's costume on the left and the cool white highlights of the lavender sky above. All the figures look directly at the viewer: the girls reserved in their expressions, the adults smiling slightly as if to express affable acknowledgement of the viewer. The rolling hills, thick leafy oaks, clay soil and wheatfields are generalized and localized landscape

⁷ On the re-dating of this painting and the social status of John Gravenor see Bensusan-Butt, 76.

⁸ Arline Meyer, "Re-dressing Classical Statuary: The Eighteenth-century 'Hand-in-Waistcoat' Portrait," Art Bulletin 77 (March 1995): 45-63.

elements that appear in many of Gainsborough's Ipswich conversation pieces.

The square canvas of the Gravenors, measuring 90.1 centimeters, is only slightly larger than the upright conversation piece Gainsborough painted of his own family, also in the early 1750s (fig. 10). Even though the figures in both of these canvases are depicted in small scale, they are given legible expressions and individualizing facial details - a reminder that capturing likeness was the portrait painter's foremost duty. In Gainsborough's portrait of himself, his wife Margaret, and their first daughter Mary, he is a young man in his early to mid-twenties. Sitting in a casual cross-legged pose, he leans his upper body slightly toward his wife who likewise leans toward him. Gainsborough's rendering of his wife's features is particularly striking for its minute details: the round, steady dark eyes, fine pointed nose, and the slightly upturned corners of her mouth. Gainsborough would paint her again some thirty years later, in a more loose, brushy, and confident style (fig. 11). Although her hair has changed from dark brown to silvery grey and her bonnet replaced by an elegant black lace mantilla, the defining features of her face are treated with the same sensitivity and faculty for likeness. We can recognize the physiognomy of the young woman in the image of her as a mature woman of fifty.) Between them stands their daughter, barely old enough to walk but already responsive to the viewer whom she greets with apparently more curiosity than do her parents.

Even the family's spotted spaniel looks up at the viewer without interrupting its drink from the pond.

Despite the various common denominators of these two family portraits, closer analysis betrays subtle yet significant differences that in turn reveal something of both the Gravenors' and the Gainsboroughs' concerns for self-presentation. Mrs Gainsborough's gown is virtually identical to that of Mrs Gravenor, although the white apron of the former has a transparent effect, giving view to a brazen exposure of the young woman's ankles, bent knee, and the fleshy contour of her lower leg. But it is the painter who is the audacious one for having depicted his wife in an indiscreet pose (fashion and social mores would keep women's ankles, let alone knees, hidden behind layers of fabric for another century and half). Although Gainsborough himself wears the same hat and cut of fashionable male attire as Mr Gravenor, he appears rather aloof towards his appearance: his stockings are wrinkled at the knees and baggy at the ankles, and his buckled shoes are worn and dull. A mere glance back to the erect standing figure of Mr Gravenor with his neat wig and his shiny black shoes makes the painter appear slipshod by comparison. Furthermore, the polite social gestures of a smile and a tip of the hat, as we see in the figure of Mr Gravenor, are not incorporated in Gainsborough's self-representation.

The figures in both group portraits are marked by an awkward artificiality of pose, a "doll-like" stiffness which

is characteristic of Gainsborough's work until the late 1750s. The painter's friend and first biographer, Philip Thicknesse, reported many years later that the portraits he viewed in Gainsborough's studio in 1753 were "truly drawn, perfectly like, but stiffly painted."⁹ This criticism of the early portraits was echoed by the obituarist of the London Chronicle who wrote that they had "very little to recommend them."¹⁰ But, Gainsborough's portrait of his family is compositionally tighter, ultimately a more intimate grouping, than his portrait of the Gravenors, and the landscape setting is significantly sketchier, less detailed, but more atmospherically suggestive of England's damp autumn climate. This might well be because Gainsborough's portrait of his family is unfinished, or in any event less finished than the commissioned portrait of the Gravenors, and because there he was not obliged to please a patron. The casual nature -- and casually natural look -- of the Gainsboroughs' poses, the rough and thinly tinted screen of trees in the middle ground behind the figures and veil of dark clouds above are features which would become notable characteristics of Gainsborough's portrait style almost immediately upon his arrival in Bath in late 1758.

Gainsborough's mature style did not arise, fully formed, upon his arrival in Bath for he had been experimenting with

⁹ Thicknesse, as quoted in Waterhouse, Gainsborough 17.

¹⁰ London Chronicle 7-9 August 1788, n/d.

different painterly modes of handling while still in Ipswich. It was in Bath, however, that the process of his experimentation accelerated. There he had access to local private collections of master paintings, patrons who could afford full-scale portraits and apparently desired a more cosmopolitan mode of self-presentation than his provincial patrons in Ipswich. His Bath patrons surely encouraged the artistic license that allowed Gainsborough to develop a manner of portraiture that departed from the stiff awkwardness and rather reserved pencilling of his early conversation pieces. It has become somewhat of an orthodoxy to separate Gainsborough's production into three neat categories which correspond to his location in Ipswich, Bath, and then London, a tripartite categorization which is not persuasive when applied to an analysis of his stylistic, compositional, or even the technical procedure used in his portraits.¹¹ A dramatic, indisputable transition correlates with his move from Suffolk to the fashionable resort town of Bath. But no such parallel stylistic change is evident in his portraits when he moves to London in 1774. This is not to say that there are no noticeable stylistic permutations in his portrait

¹¹ Paulson makes the argument that Gainsborough "was a painter whose phases can better be named after the painters he imitated than the places he inhabited. The Dutch landscapists...were followed by Rubens and Van Dyck, as he moved from one palette and one way of handling paint to another." I agree that the move from one dominant influence to another is one of the notable features in Gainsborough's production, although I hesitate to see it as the most important one. *Breaking and Remaking* 275.

style between 1758 and his death thirty years later, but they are permutations rather than dramatic shifts. All the formal rudiments of his mature style are evident already in the earliest of his Bath portraits. From that point on the fundamental characteristics of his mature style are merely honed and refined. The distinctive formal elements of his style will occasionally be exaggerated, or "glamorized" (a term used by Waterhouse to criticize Gainsborough's theatricalization of form and obsession with fashionability), but they do not change.

Although the portrait-in-a-landscape type became a popular format for British portraiture in the late-eighteenth century, it was a re-invention, or a re-interpretation of a pictorial tradition; a re-invention and re-interpretation which was largely activated by Gainsborough and adopted by many of his contemporaries, including Henry Raeburn, George Romney, and later Thomas Lawrence. But Gainsborough's portraits-in-landscapes differ strikingly from those of his contemporaries in that he treats both parts of the image with equal attention -- equal, but different.¹² Although the

¹² Paulson's observation on this subject is pointed: "Gainsborough integrates figure and ground so that either one or both is the subject; so that it is an open question whether he is painting his beloved landscape or another drudging portrait." Emblem and Expression 216. This feature is also discussed at some length in Hunt, The Figure in the Landscape 213-218; and briefly mentioned in Hugh Belsey, "A Case of Mistaken Identity: Thomas Gainsborough's Ralph Bell," North Carolina Museum of Art Bulletin 15 (1991): 44-50.

landscape in these pictures is compositionally backgrounded, it is part of the all-over, unified surface of the canvas. This unity, this harmony of parts, was noted by Gainsborough's contemporaries and art historians still distinguish him from his peers because of this unique characteristic of his manner.

In France, during the first half of the eighteenth century, painters who worked in a style that would subsequently be designated as "Rococo" populated their scenes of groomed yet fantastically fecund gardens with groups of fashionable figures in the new subject of the fête galante.¹³ For portrait painters in late eighteenth-century London, the fête galante was chronologically the closest pictorial source of ideas on how to integrate human figures with natural settings. This cross-channel kinship was noted in the first half of the eighteenth century by the engraver and essayist George Vertue who traced the roots of the so-called "conversation piece" -- a distinctly anglo-European and anglo-American subject -- back to early eighteenth-century French art.¹⁴ Vertue cited Antoine Watteau's fête galantes, imported

¹³ For a discussion of the problematics of the term "Rococo," see Matthew Craske, Art in Europe 1700-1830: A History of the Visual Arts in an Era of Unprecedented Urban Economic Growth (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

¹⁴ Praz, Conversation Pieces. On the British conversation piece and its sources, see John Sunderland, Painting in Britain 1525 to 1975 (New York: New York University Press, 1976) 28; Pointon, Hanging the Head 159-175 (although her interest leans toward the family portrait set within the interior domestic space); and Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology 18.

to England by that painter's student Philip Mercier, as the prototype for the motif of British informal group portraits set in landscapes.¹⁵ The influence of Watteau on English painting was due in part to the undertakings of one individual, Dr Richard Mead, whom Watteau visited in London in 1719 to receive medical treatment. He acquired from his patient at least two paintings which were subsequently engraved.¹⁶ Students of painting as well as professional copyists were admitted to the doctor's private gallery which was attached to his residence in Great Ormond Street; Mead may well have been the first English collector to make his collection accessible in this way.¹⁷ Even if Gainsborough did not visit the doctor's collection himself, he surely would have come in contact with the French painter's Rococo style and subjects since Mead's private gallery was frequented by artists associated with St Martin's Academy. One of these artists was the Frenchman Gravelot who had been a student of François Boucher and with whom Gainsborough occasionally collaborated during his first years in London no doubt

¹⁵ For a discussion of Watteau's fêtes galantes, one which places them into a historical context and interprets them as social texts, see Crow, Painters and Public Life 55-74.

¹⁶ The two paintings were A Pastoral Conversation and Comédiens Italiens. Mentioned in Whitley, Artists and their Friends vol. 1, 28-29.

¹⁷ Whitley, Artists and their Friends vol. 1, 29; Steegman, The Rule of Taste 107.

learning many lessons from the Frenchman's manner of painting.¹⁸

The anonymous figures populating the parks and gardens of the fête galante are essentially "types" conferred no more specificity than their narrative contribution as staffage in the pictured social scene requires. The figures in conversation pieces, by contrast, read as portrait renderings: the informal arrangement of figures and their narrativized interactions are devices mobilized in the service of constructing individualizing characteristics for the family members included in the ostensibly candid slice of everyday domestic life. This is patently the case in the whimsical royal confection Queen Charlotte with Members of her Royal Family painted by Johann Zoffany in 1773 (fig. 12).¹⁹ In this

¹⁸ On Gainsborough's artistic relationship with Gravelot, and their supposed collaborative work in the medium of engravings, see Malcolm Cormack, The Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1901) 8-9. Gainsborough's association with Francis Hayman has traditionally been described as a student-teacher relationship, a view which Brian Allen accepts in his definitive monograph, Francis Hayman (London and New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987) although no documents exist to give evidence that Gainsborough was indeed Hayman's pupil.

¹⁹ In contrast to Italian Renaissance appropriations of landscape imagery for portraiture, the French Rococo landscape is less ancillary to the figures that populate it. The landscape becomes instead an integral pictorial and necessary narrative element in the depiction of groups of figures visiting mythical or arcadian lands, or local gardens patterned on them. The so-called "Merry Company in the Open Air," a subject for painting that gained popularity in the Dutch Republic during the seventeenth-century, similarly features groups of fashionably dressed figures socializing out of doors. Here figures are engaged in animated conversation and revelry often around a compositionally unifying dining table spread with food and drink. In the shared stress on the

ostensibly impromptu family gathering set out of doors, exchanged glances and reprehending responses to young Prince William's antics all provide insight to the characteristic role of each portrayed member of the extended royal family. This is the crucial point of departure of the conversation piece and Watteau's fete galantes: the subjugation of the landscape in order to forefront thematically the human subject -- a feature that characterizes early Netherlandish and Italian Renaissance portraits in landscapes as well.²⁰ Thus, whenever depicted figures are named and individualized, the painting becomes a portrait and the landscape is consigned to the status of a mere secondary element: a setting into which the jewel of the sitter's face is fixed. This would be a valid description of Gainsborough's early portraits-in-

informality of poses and casualness of the figures' interactions, the outdoor conversation piece, which enjoyed extraordinary popularity in England, could be considered the English equivalent of both the fête galante and the "Merry Company." Although landscape backgrounds appear in both French Rococo and seventeenth-century Dutch portraits "proper," their numbers are nowhere near the vast production of conversation pieces in England in the eighteenth century.

²⁰ At least since the Renaissance, landscapes had been used as portrait settings. In Early Netherlandish painting, for example, patrons kneel before manifestations or incarnations of the divine in minutely detailed enclosed gardens, replete with familiar flowers that perform double-duty as sacred symbols; or narrow paths snake through prosaic panoramic landscapes in which Biblical episodes unfold at every consecrated twist and turn. In Italian Renaissance painting vast estates recede behind portrait profiles of wealthy, powerful patrons, while ascetic monks in barren craggy landscapes greet holy visions. By incorporating landscape as the setting for divine intervention or as a sign of princely power, but maintaining a human or heavenly protagonist as the all-important narrative crux, such images simultaneously elevated and subordinated landscape as a subject in painting.

landscapes, but far less so of his mature full length portraits, where both parts -- landscape setting and portrait sitter -- vie for attention, although they attract it by different means.

For late eighteenth-century British painters of society portraits, the most influential stylistic and compositional source for full-length, single figure portraits was one that had been cultivated on British soil in the previous century by the Flemish painter Anthony van Dyck, court painter to Charles I between 1632 and 1641.²¹ Van Dyck's legacy remained the most commanding example for British portraitists throughout the next century. Eighteenth-century emulations of Van Dyck's distinctive portrait compositions, courtly grand style, and landscape backgrounds were, however, not always simply retrograde or indicative of a general paucity of pictorial imaginativeness among portrait painters during the less illustrious reign of George III.

On the contrary, the painterly attention given to the details and diversity of natural forms (uncommon in British landscape paintings before the 1760s²²), and the innovative compositional treatment of the landscape-portrait combination suggest that the joining of these two traditionally "lower" subjects in late eighteenth-century painting gave rise to a

²¹ Sunderland, 16-18.

²² Solkin, Richard Wilson.

creatively fruitful interpretation of the portrait-in-a-landscape as well as granting the tradition of portraiture a modern gloss.

Within the broadened parameters of this generative sub-genre, Gainsborough engaged in formal experimentations in weaving together figure and landscape elements, thereby developing distinctive stylistic techniques, compositional motifs, narrative tropes, and metaphorical associations less restricted by entrenched expectations of the separate genres of formal portraiture and classicized landscape painting.²³ At the same time, Gainsborough's portraits with landscape settings are clearly mindful and reminiscent of an established national tradition epitomized by the courtly portraiture of Van Dyck, and a reminder of the tenacity of tradition in the genre of portraiture. William Seward, a friend of Reynolds, recalled in 1797 an exchange between himself and the painter with regards to the ability of Gainsborough to copy Van Dyck's style:

Sir Joshua Reynolds declared of Gainsborough that he could copy Vandyck so exquisitely that at a certain distance he could not distinguish between the copy and the original. His manner of painting was his own and produced great force and effect. Sir Joshua was one day examining with attention a picture of his for a great

²³ See Pointon's discussion of portraiture as a conservative genre in "Portrait-Painting as a Business Enterprise in London in the 1780s" (esp. 201-203). Although this essay is tremendously informative and helpful in mapping out the commercial terrain of portraiture in England at the time, her stress on the portrait as a commodity obscures other functions of the portrait as an aesthetic object. A revised version of the essay appears as a chapter in Hanging the Head which presents a more balanced account.

while together, and at last exclaimed, "I cannot make out how he produces his effect."²⁴

It was through the portrait-in-a-landscape motif that Gainsborough would forge his singular style while simultaneously mimicking the notable characteristics and techniques of a preeminent portrait painter of a previous era.

Some of Gainsborough's patrons possessed portraits of family ancestors by the illustrious seventeenth-century painter, next to which the new, slick portraits by Gainsborough would be hung, showing not only the continuation of family lineage but also the continuation (and updating) of the family's discriminating taste in works of art from generation to generation.²⁵ At Holkham Hall, for example, Gainsborough's portrait of Thomas William Coke was hung (as it still hangs) in the so-called Saloon together with portraits by Van Dyck, Kneller, Carlo Maratti, and a religious subject by Van Dyck's teacher Rubens.²⁶ This pictorially announced reverence for the most venerable British portraiture of the past was surely as vital to the contemporary success of Gainsborough's portraiture as his formal innovativeness in the portrait-in-a-landscape sub-genre would be instructive to nineteenth-century British landscape painters.

²⁴ Quoted in Whitley, Artists and their Friends in England vol. 1, 264.

²⁵ Cherry and Harris, 305.

²⁶ Holkham (Norwich: Jarrold and Sons Limited, 1969).

Portraiture and landscape painting were low in status during the second half of the eighteenth century; however, the representation of both genres in the annual Royal Academy exhibition was not, quantitatively speaking, shadowed as a result of the preference for history painting among the spokespeople of that institution.²⁷ As discussed in the previous chapter, the Academy's efforts to direct public taste toward the high-minded subjects of history painting did not have a negative impact on the demand for portraits; indeed, the Academy's President aimed to "heroicize" portraiture. On the contrary, the 1780s in particular were "boom years" for portraiture in London.²⁸ Perhaps those members of the monied, landed, professional, and political classes who desired to have their image immortalized in paint also wished that the notion of what constituted the heroic and historically consequential would be broadened to encompass them and their achievements. Indeed, that broadening also had an impact on the rise of interest in subjects for painting that hitherto had been deemed unheroic and historically inconsequential: namely, landscape.

²⁷ Pointon, "Portrait-Painting as a Business Enterprise in London in the 1780s," 187-205. I also wish to alert the reader to Pears, The Discovery of Painting, which, although focusing on the social role of the visual arts in England before the founding of the Royal Academy, has proved germane to my interpretations of Gainsborough's portraiture.

²⁸ Pointon, "Portrait-Painting as a Business Enterprise in London in the 1780s," 187.

It was the works which mattered the least (in so far as there was no obligation to satisfy a paying patron) -- his uncommissioned portraits, the numerous portraits of his daughters nearly all of which were left unfinished, his figure and costume studies which were neither sold nor exhibited,²⁹ his experimental drawings that combine different media, and his drawings and oil paintings of anglicized pastoral landscape scenes for which, initially, there was only a very limited buying audience³⁰ -- that provided Gainsborough with the experimental formal stepping stones leading toward his mature and distinctive portrait-in-a-landscape style. His large-scale portraits in oil were far too important, too expensive, and far too fettered by tradition and the expectations of paying patrons to allow for unbridled trial and error, but they benefitted greatly from his experimentations in the "lesser" subjects and more modest media. Is it any wonder that Gainsborough, once his status as a premier portraitist was established, would complain about the drudgery of painting portraits and express a desire to leave the studio to sketch landscapes in the open air? Gainsborough's own words, in his famous "Viol da Gamba" letter

²⁹ Waterhouse, Gainsborough 38.

³⁰ John Hayes has discussed the market for landscape painting in eighteenth-century Britain in a number of essays: "Gainsborough's Early Landscapes," Apollo (November 1962): 667-672; "Gainsborough's Later Landscapes," Apollo (July 1964): 20-26; "British Patrons and Landscape Painting," Apollo (March 1966): 188-197; and The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough. See also Waterhouse, Gainsborough 39.

written from Bath to his close musical friend and amateur painter Jackson, can convey how tiresome painting portraits had become:

I'm sick of Portraits and wish very much to take my Viola da Gamba and walk off to some sweet Village when I can paint Landskips and enjoy the fag End of Life in Quietness and ease. But these fine Ladies and their Tea drinkings, Dancings, Husband huntings and such will fob me out of the last ten years, & I fear miss getting Husbands too -- But we can say nothing to these things you know Jackson, we must jogg on and be content with the jingling of Bells, only d-mn it I hate a dust, the Kicking up of a dust, and being confined in Harness to follow the track, whilst others ride in the waggon, under cover, stretching their Legs in the straw at Ease, and gazing at Green Trees & Blue skies without half my Taste, that's damn'd hard. My Comfort is, I have 5 Viols da Gamba 3 Jayes and two Barak Normans.³¹

Gainsborough's language is ripe with class-conscious resentment, vexed curses, and nostalgic longings.³² The above statement is often quoted as evidence of his waning enthusiasm for portraiture (his "harness"), his passion for music, and his desire to retreat to the countryside, but it is suggestive of much else besides. It suggests, first of all, that painting sitters was a social affair, sometimes so much so that the painter and his easel were the mere aesthetic background of the sitter's own social drama. Furthermore, the statement reveals an awareness that a husband was to young

³¹ Letters of Gainsborough, Letter #56, 111.

³² Paulson, Breaking and Remaking 276, is worth quoting on this point: "It is not, as used to be thought, that Gainsborough escaped from portraiture into landscape but that he employed landscape with its malleable shapes as a way of controlling human experience. And I think his characteristic shapes functioned similarly in the pure landscapes." This view was expressed, although coming from a slightly different angle, by Hunt, Figure in a Landscape.

women what a wealthy patron was to the portrait painter -- his proposal was to be courted, "hunted down," and not to be passed up. The witty phrase is a clear testament of Gainsborough's keen awareness of the business concerns of the portrait painter.³³ This is confirmed over and over in his frank correspondence with Jackson, but nowhere is it more obvious than in the following statement:

now damn Gentlemen, there is not such a set of Enemies to a real artist in the world as they are, if not kept at a proper distance. They think (and so may you for a while) that they reward your merit by their Company & notice; but I, who blow away all the chaff & by G-- in their eyes too if they don't stand clear, know that they have but one part worth looking at, and that is their Purse: their Hearts are seldom near enough the right place to get a sight of it -- If any gentleman comes to my House, my man asks them if they want me (provided they dont seem satisfied with seeing the Pictures) & then he asks what they would please to want with me; if they say a Picture, Sir please to walk this way and my master will speak with you; but if they only want me to bow and compliment -- Sir my Master is walk'd out -- and so my dear there I nick them.³⁴

The statement also indicates that Gainsborough was deeply aware of the gap separating him from those who could leisurely enjoy the offerings of nature from the privileged comfort and vantage point of a covered carriage but lacked sufficient "taste" with which to appreciate it. Taste, he implies, cannot be bought or learned; but he, "a real artist," had an eye and an ear for it.

³³ For a discussion of this point, see Michael Rosenthal, "Testing the Water: Gainsborough in Bath in 1758," *Apollo* new series, 142 (September 1995): 49-54, as well as Susan Legouix Sloman, "Gainsborough in Bath 1758-59," *Burlington* 137 (August 1995): 509-512.

³⁴ Letters of Gainsborough, Letter #50, 99-101.

What surfaces so candidly and descriptively in his private statement also surfaces in his mature portraits, sublimated in the sketchy backgrounds and scumbled mayhem of his canvases. The imaginary "sweet Village" would have to wait, or remain forever in the irretrievable realm of the imaginary; there were patrons, those beneficent "Husbands" and "Damn Gentlemen," kicking up a dreaded dust, demanding to be served, to be given what they had come to his studio for -- a flattering image of themselves. Yet, where thin washes of color, flecks of sparkling highlights, and calligraphic scumbles encounter the document of the sitter's demand, the likeness, the moribund tradition of portraiture takes its sublime last gasp and is given a picturesque new life. The sitters look approvingly at the mirror the painter has made of them: a painted surface that incorporates a bit of something old, something borrowed, something new, and perhaps even something more true than what the most truthful mirror could reflect.

For Gainsborough the portrait painter the world outside the studio was imagined as a realm of personal freedom and landscape a nostalgic realm of artistic freedom. Yet, on some level, the genre of landscape did provide him with a real territory of artistic freedom. Landscape was for him a familiar form though a relatively unrespected subject to be "borrowed" for his portraits. As a genre less circumscribed than portraiture by tradition and expectation, academic rules

and social codes, landscape was a realm of formal liberation and experimentation -- the creative id of the professional portraitist's ego.³⁵ Gainsborough's complaints and nostalgic longings, as well as the remarkable incongruity between his stiff, awkward early portraits and lively fluid early landscapes, already bear this out. The more landscape became a formal focal point of his portraits, the more his style became absolved of the traditional constraints of formal portraiture. It would require the financial security of sufficient commissions and the professional prestige of his public successes at the Academy exhibitions to give him license to make formal innovation, painterly bravura, and distinctive style the focal characteristics of his large-scale canvases.

But there is a dissonance in Gainsborough's portraits that stems from his fusion of the mimesis that portraiture demands with the formal fluidity evident in his settings: the juxtaposition of the ego and the id not simply in terms of the painter's compromise of his split allegiances to portraiture and landscape but also the uncanny pictorial concession between the materiality of paint and the mimetic forms that emerge from it, somehow, "out of chaos."³⁶

³⁵ Ellis Waterhouse draws a similar conclusion from contrasting Gainsborough's landscape drawings to his animal and figure drawings, (although he does so without the use of Freudian terminology). The landscape drawings, he writes, "are the essence of his secret self." "Gainsborough's Secret Self," *Apollo* (August 1971): 158-159.

That fusion, that compromise, and that concession occurred around the turn of the decade from the 1750s to 1760s. Whether one flags Gainsborough's relocation to Bath, where he encountered a larger and more cosmopolitan class of patrons and gained access to important local art collections,³⁷ or his venture into full-length portraiture as the decisive factor, is not really the point, for these explanations all recognize the same dramatic shift. Gainsborough's full-length portrait of Mary Howe is one of the earliest of his Bath portraits, and quite possibly the first female full-length of his career (fig. 13). Painted either in 1763 or 1764, it already bears all the trademarks of his mature portrait style. The virtually life-size figure of Mary Howe takes a step forward on a slightly downward-sloping path. She turns her head and lower body in one direction and her shoulders and upper torso in the other; combined movements that animate the layers of her costume just as the wind activates the leaves of the tree next to her and the clouds above. The five strands of sparkling pearls around her neck accent the turn of her head, as the fashionable black velvet bracelet on her right hand draws attention to the graceful pivoting of her upper and lower torso. Gainsborough went to great lengths to convey the figure's casual movement. Recent X-rays and infra-red photography have revealed reworkings of

³⁶ The expression is Reynolds', in his description in the fourteenth Discourse of Gainsborough's style.

³⁷ On collections of paintings in the Bath area, see Cormack, 18.

the figure's right foot which balances lightly on its point with the simultaneous suggestion that it is advancing forward.³⁸ The shaded contours of Howe's straight left leg and the bent knee of her right further convey not only that she is stepping forward but also that her next step may take her outside the frame into the space of the viewer on whom her sparkling brown eyes are fixed.

The finely detailed face of the sitter, framed above by the yellow straw "Leghorn" bonnet, contrasts with the loosely brushed surfaces and sketchy outlines of her costume.³⁹ The much tighter handling of paint evident in the treatment of the face is employed in the figure's right forearm and hand -- the only other part of her body not covered or veiled by silk, lace, or tissuey muslin. The contrast between costume and bare hand, emerging as it does from a voluminous cascade of gathered lace, makes the different modes for rendering fabric and flesh notable. The cursory, sketchiness of Gainsborough's rendering of women's clothes has been discussed by the costume historian Aileen Ribeiro, who, in her analysis of this portrait describes Gainsborough's treatment of Howe's costume in the following way:

...he captures the intrinsic nature of the fine floating materials of the sleeve ruffles, apron and kerchief crossed over the bosom, but without defining precisely

³⁸ Viola Pemberton-Pigott, "The Development of the Portrait of Countess Howe," The Earl and Countess Howe by Gainsborough, ed. Anne French (London: English Heritage, 1988) 37-43.

³⁹ Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 64.

what they are, whether lace-edged silk gauze or fine embroidered muslin. It does not particularly matter, for the tout ensemble delights the eye, as it also serves to demonstrate the genteel art of deportment, how to manage yards of expensive silk and gossamerfine accessories with grace.⁴⁰

Agreed, the painterly handling of Howe's costume is invested so much in conveying various textures and the way different fabrics cling to or drape the walking figure that it becomes impossible to read the logic of the costume's construction.⁴¹ The painterly dissolution of form is markedly evident in the costume accessories, which are present in proliferation but not with clarity. Howe's left hand is gloved and holds the creamy-beige glove she has removed from the other. The contrast between the worn and removed glove is striking for one defines the outlines of her thumb and bent fingers while the removed glove is a mere thin wash of paint: one is an object defined in paint, the other barely achieves legibility as an object as it "regresses" to the unformed status of paint. As a piece of costume accessory the removed glove is not significant; but as a passage of paint, as a liminal zone between figure and landscape, it is significant indeed. Fashion and foliage make contact at the left of the painting,

⁴⁰ Ibid., 64.

⁴¹ The dress worn by Mary Howe in Gainsborough's portrait was reconstructed by Margaret Dobbie, from the Victoria and Albert Museum, in celebration of the reuniting of this portrait with its pendent portrait of Richard Howe at Kenwood House in 1988. The dress remains on display at Kenwood, revealing, despite the commendable efforts of Dobbie, the gap between the representation of the costume in paint and its reconstruction in silk and lace. The Evening Standard 4 August 1988: 17.

where a clump of rough, brown thistles catches the crisp, smooth salmon-pink silk of Howe's skirt. Whereas this is a logical overlapping of two foreground objects, the same is not the case on the opposite side of the canvas where the lace sleeve ruffles make contact with similarly colored clouds in the far distance. Here the sparkles of lace blend into the creamy-yellow highlights of the passing clouds, making the boundary between them, as spatially separated individual forms, ambiguous.

Clearly the painter's investment in making the setting a visually rich and formally complex aspect of the portrait as a whole has been carried over into Gainsborough's depiction of Howe's costume. Indeed, Ribiero's statement about Gainsborough's rendering of his sitter's costume could also describe his treatment of the landscape -- that no less ephemeral accoutrement surrounding the sitter. The leafy trees, receding vista, and fine clothing that he had depicted with such clarity of outline and representational veracity in the family portrait of the Gravenors appear also in the full length, but they are transferred to the later, single-figure composition without the high resonance of linear clarity and containment of saturated color. Note the leaves on the tree above Mr Gravenor, or the blades of wheat next to the standing daughter, or the finely detailed slope of hill in the distance and the articulation of a smooth horizon line even further in the distance. Clearly these minute details of the landscape have been depicted with great attention in an effort to

represent a truthful copy of the visible world, however generalized and "composed." Those same landscape elements appear in the portrait of Mary Howe, but the gently sloping hill has become a roughly-outlined mountain. The two substantial oaks that cross behind the figures of husband and wife in the earlier portrait have been supplanted by a thin silver birch with its leaves sketched over a dramatically colored sky -- a sky that is first dandelion yellow, then mint green, then various intensities of mulberry, all interspersed with highlights of cool turquoise and dusty rose. The sky is more a painterly orchestration of color than a studied transcription of actual climatic phenomena. It is unimportant whether the landscapes behind the Gravenors or Howe corresponds to a real place or time; what matters is that one appears to do so while the other appears, somehow, too good to be true. Howe's setting seems too good to be a truly actual place just as her costume seems too exquisite, too ephemeral, too animated, to be an actual dress. We may suspect that the painter has taken great liberties in inventing the landscape and the dress, but the face, formed of virtually invisibly fine strokes of softly blended color suggests that here there is no invention but only the intention to skillfully copy the original.

Nearly a decade later, while still in Bath but soon to leave it for London, Gainsborough painted a double portrait in which the same characteristics of the loose, evocative landscape evident in the portrait of Mary Howe are taken a

step further, which is to say that the adherence to the appearance of objects in nature are now the objects of, and for, greater inventive painterly liberty. The portrait of Elizabeth and Mary Linley (fig. 14), shown at the Royal Academy in 1772, depicts the two teenaged sisters at the edge of a wood. The Linleys were a large musical family -- one described by Charles Burney as "A Nest of Nightingales." By 1772 the Linley sisters had already awed London society with their precocious musical talents. Elizabeth had made her London singing debut at Covent Garden in 1767, at age thirteen. Mary, also a musical child prodigy, made her London debut two years later, when she was nine years of age. Gainsborough, whose enthusiasm for music is well documented, befriended the Linleys upon his move to Bath and was a frequent guest at their concerts and may have undertaken the large double portrait on his own accord.

While the evocative, pseudo-romantic landscape seems a highly appropriate one for the young "natural" songstresses, their facial expressions, rendered with great dedication to the tradition of mimetic portraiture, also suggest some aspect of each girl's character. The elder sister looks contemplatively out of the frame while the younger one smiles self-assuredly toward the viewer. One can ignore neither the fact that Gainsborough was a personal friend and admirer of the two girls nor that the portrait of them was destined for the Academy Exhibition: displayed at the Academy the portrait would have promoted the musical achievements of the Linley

sisters and publicized the artistic talents of the painter at the same time. Holding the accoutrements of their profession and situated in an unmanicured landscape, their talent is suggested as being natural, inherent, as intuitive as the work of nature. In perhaps no other portrait does Gainsborough use the landscape setting with so much evocative insinuation as a background ripe with meaningful associations to be mapped onto the characters of his sitters. Furthermore, the setting is also fully exploited by the painter as a territory for the display of his own "natural" talent as a painter -- the two dimensional terrain upon which he signs, with sumptuous calligraphic flourish, himself.

As in the portrait of Howe, the landscape is an integral part of the portrait of the Linley sisters. However, whereas Howe stands on an elevated ground which gives view to a variety of natural elements behind her -- rolling hills, wandering deer, a cluster of spindly birch trees and a strip of bushy green trees, as well as a brilliant sunset -- the Linleys' space spills forth into the our's outside the frame. The thickly foliated wood behind the Linleys acts as a natural screen that shades all but the minimum amount of sky needed to bring light into the composition, and our eye must pass through the shaded area inhabited by the sisters before it can continue on to the illuminated area sky in the distance. But if the earlier portrait represents a variety of landscape elements, the landscape setting in the later portrait displays a variety of techniques of brushwork and methods of evoking

forms. The brushwork used to suggest the rustling of leaves and scrubs on the entire left side of the canvas is virtually uniform in this diagonal orientation, leading one to assume that it was executed rapidly using pigments diluted to a very thin consistency. On the opposite side, on the upper register of the canvas, the outlines of trees have been scratched into the thin layer of red-brown, exposing the warm, creamy-beige layer of underpaint, the same color used to "represent," by the absence of paint, the patch of sky on the left. Indeed, the technique employed for the top right corner is almost that of watercolor, so thin and washy is the paint.

The most colorful element of the painting is the clothing of the sitters: Elizabeth in silvery blue, Mary in pumpkin orange. Like the landscape, their dresses have been built up with multiple layers of thin paint. The vertical expanse of Elizabeth's skirt provides a particularly clear "window" into how her dress has been constructed, not as a garment but as a two dimensional representation built up from veils of paint, crisscrossed brushstrokes, pearly daubs and thick, opaque scribbles of white highlights applied with the same calligraphic confidence as the silvery dew on the leaves above. Yet, even as the figures stand out from their setting by virtue of the brightness of their costumes, with an economy of painterly means Gainsborough has also linked them with their natural surrounding: leaves from a branch just above and to the left of Elizabeth are tinted with a rather unnatural shade of blue, and in the bottom right corner the jagged edge

of a rock is articulated by the thick scribble in orange. This scribble stands almost as a signature of, or a sign of, the painter: a reminder that this is his orchestration. His notation in paint. His harmonization in color. And this, it would seem, is the "truthfulness" of his representation.

CHAPTER THREE
THE ART OF FASHION AND THE ARTIFICE OF PAINT

Sarah Siddons (1755-1831), star of Drury Lane during the 1780s, was painted by Gainsborough in three-quarter length in c.1783-85 (fig. 15). The portrait is one of the rare occasions in which the painter did not use a landscape setting for so large a canvas. Instead, the figure is seated on a crimson upholstered chair and the background filled with a mass of similarly colored drapery. The near-profile face absorbs some of warm glow from the swatch of firey-red fabric that frames the sitter from behind, while the thin band of black velvet around her neck and the wide-brimmed black hat articulate the face and strike a contrast with her creamy-pale complexion. Siddons would be portrayed by virtually all the eminent portraitists of the day, often in the guise of one of her famous stage roles, such as the Tragic Muse in Reynolds' honorific, grand allegorical portrait or as Melpomene in James Gillray's unflattering satirical print. Not so in Gainsborough's portrait in which she is dressed in the height of fashion: feathered and bowed beaver hat, frizzed and powdered coiffure, fox fur-lined cloak and matching fur muff, and horizontally-striped ivory and peacock-blue wrapping gown.¹ Gainsborough has converted the actress celebrated for her passionate portrayals of tragic heroines into a poised but detached fashion plate.²

¹ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress* 73-74.

"Particularly novelle" is how the critic Henry Bate described the portrait when he saw it in Gainsborough's studio, referring to the depiction of the sitter in an unequivocally modern style of dress.³ The emphasis on contemporary fashion did not, however, deter that critic from commenting on the painter's success at capturing the likeness and character of one of England's most illustrious women of the stage. Nor did Gainsborough think that contemporary dress detracted from likeness. On the contrary, he defended it as adding veracity.

When the French art critic Théophile Thoré saw the portrait exhibited at Manchester nearly three-quarters of a century later he could not judge the portrait on the basis of its empirical match with its referent, but he felt obliged to commend it for its unsurpassed conveyance of character which, in his terms, meant something other than outward physical appearance:⁴

The great tragic actress who interpreted the passions with such energy and such feeling, and who felt them so strongly herself, is better portrayed in this simple half-

² See Gertrude Aretz, The Elegant Woman. From the Rococo Period to Modern Times, trans. James Laver (London: George G. Harrap, 1932) 99, for a discussion of eighteenth-century English actresses as fashionable role models. Ivan Bloch, Sexual Life in England, Past and Present (Hertfordshire: Oracle, 1996 [orig. 1938]) 476, highlights the actress Fanny Abington as particularly influential and financially successful as a fashion and cosmetic consultant.

³ Quoted in Whitley, Thomas Gainsborough 76.

⁴ See Joanna Woodall's thoughtful and illuminating discussion of the "dualist conception of identity" -- the visual appearance of the outward material body versus the abstract inner subject -- as it pertains to shifts in the codes for portraiture. "Introduction," in Portraiture esp. 9-12.

length, in her day dress, than in allegorical portraits as the Tragic Muse or in character parts. This portrait is so original, so individual, as a poetic expression of character, as a deliberate selection of pose, as bold colour and free handling, that it is like the work of no other painter. It is useless to search for parallels for there are none. Veronese a little -- but no, it is a quite personal creation. This is genius.⁵

In Thore's view, Siddons' manner of dress -- an honest presentation of the actress -- and Gainsborough's manner of representing her -- an honest, "personal creation" -- combine to endow the figure with a "poetic expression of character," which is to say a truthfulness beyond the grasp of vision. There is much else to unpack in his positive account of Gainsborough's Sarah Siddons. Perhaps more than anything, his statement reveals that a new set of qualities in painting had become prominent by the middle of the nineteenth century, not only in Thore's France but also in Ruskin's England, despite the differences between what these two attentive critics thought constituted originality, individuality, and genius.

Thore's remark about "allegorical portraits of the Tragic Muse" is an unmistakable reference and discreet comparison to Reynolds' portrait of Siddons (fig. 16). Reynolds' portrait was exhibited at the Royal Academy where it was one of the main attractions of the 1784 exhibition. Gainsborough's break with the Academy in that year prevented him from sending his portrait to the exhibition, which is the primary cause for the lack of contemporary accounts of his portrait of Siddons.⁶ One

⁵ Waterhouse, Gainsborough 29.

wonders if, precisely because of his break with the Academy, he wished to conjure an alternative mode of representing the famous actress, indeed a kind of representation which was in every way definitively opposite to that of the Academy's President. One wonders, too, how critics would have compared the merits of the two portraits had they been hung side by side, perhaps as the painters had intended them to, or, conversely, as they dreaded they might be.

If critics did not have the chance to view the two portraits of Siddons in the close company of each other, art historians have contrasted them in order to draw conclusions about the painters' manners of preparing the subjects for their sittings, deriving the most appropriate and flattering pose, and deciding how sitters should be dressed.⁷ Indeed, the plenitude of anecdote surrounding the two famous portrayals of the same famous face provides much for analysis, interpretation, and intriguing conjecture. According to Siddons' recollection of the event, Reynolds' words to her upon her arrival to his studio were: "Ascend your undisputed throne and graciously bestow upon me some good idea of the Tragic

⁶ Gainsborough would exhibit his portrait of Siddons in his private exhibition at Schomberg House the following year.

⁷ See, for example, Paulson's excellent discussion in which he contrasts Reynolds' emblematic portrayal of Siddons with Gainsborough's "more straightforward" portrait of the actress, Emblem and Expression 82-85 and 209-211. See also See Wind's compelling contrast between Gainsborough's and Reynolds' portraits of Siddons, Hume and the Heroic Portrait 44-46; and Williamson, 97.

Muse...."⁸ Gainsborough, on the other hand, again according to anecdote, after troubling for some time over the outline of Siddons' profile, is said to have expressed his exasperation by exclaiming: "Madam, there is no end to your nose."⁹

Furthermore, he allegedly asked her to arrive to her sitting wearing a new hat.¹⁰

Indeed, hats are a prominent fashion accoutrement of female sitters in Gainsborough's portraits, especially during the 1780s when the extravagantly "sculpted" and lifted coiffures of the previous decade gave way to the softer, frizzed and ringletted style worn by Siddons.¹¹ But the emphasis on hats and other details of contemporary feminine fashion had been a feature of Gainsborough's portraits of women long before he requested Siddons to wear a new one to her sitting. Even when his sitters were depicted in the diminutive scale of his early conversation pieces details of modern dress and accessories, as well as the rich and varied materials from

⁸ See Whitley, Artists and the Friends vol. II, 4-6, for the three anecdotal accounts of how Reynolds' arrived at Siddons' pose.

⁹ Paulson, Emblem and Expression 211, concludes that Gainsborough resolved the problem of depicting Siddons' nose by echoing the slope of it throughout the portrait: "To get Mrs Siddons' nose into a formal scheme," he writes, "Gainsborough simply made her all nose."

¹⁰ Worman, 67. It is also worth noting that whereas Reynolds signed his name, literally, on the hem of Siddons' gown, Gainsborough signed his, stylistically, throughout his rendering of fabric, feathers, hair and hat.

¹¹ James Laver, Costume and Fashion: A Concise History, revised edn. (London: Thames and Hudson, 1995) 140-143.

which they were constructed, had received the painter's meticulous attention. Translated to the large, life-size scale he began adopting for portraits upon his relocation to Bath that attention was magnified. Despite Reynolds' explicit warnings against modern dress in his seventh Discourse, Gainsborough defended the depiction of sitters "as they go," showing them with powdered hair if that was their habit or unpowdered if such was their usual preference, and claimed that a truthful likeness was the consequent virtue of the portrait as a whole.¹² Truth of likeness in a portrait was indeed a virtue Gainsborough's patrons placed a good deal of emphasis on, and the terms by which he justified his predilection for modern dress -- as that which adds mimetic integrity to the pictured subject -- was a nod to the expectations of his patrons as well as a swerve from the portrait style of Reynolds. It was also a means by which he exhibited his eye for fashion and his technical virtuosity in depicting it -- features that surely were as important to his fashion-conscious patrons, value-judging art critics, and style-conscious connoisseurs as a convincing likeness.

In his proclivity for fashionable contemporary dress Gainsborough was certainly not entirely exceptional -- Richard Cosway was arguably the most "fashionable" portraitist in that sense¹³ -- but in his conflation of stylish modes of dress with

¹² Reynolds, seventh Discourse, 196-200.

a stylish manner of painting he has no English equal, neither in the eighteenth century nor in most of the nineteenth.¹⁴ His fascination with fashion and the facility for depicting it did not come from nowhere: his emphasis on the objects of feminine fashion is at least in part a manifestation of his unique relationship with the fashion and textile trade as a member of a family long engaged in that exchange commodity.

During the sixteenth and early-seventeenth century Gainsborough's ancestors lived in the Lincolnshire villages of Billingborough and Horbling, where they owned land and raised a variety of livestock including horses and sheep.¹⁵ Surviving wills and documents stating taxes paid on livestock holdings indicate that the fortunes of the Gainsboroughs increased

¹³ Aileen Ribeiro, "Portraying Fashion, Romancing the Past: Dress and the Cosways," Maria and Richard Cosway: Regency Artists of Taste and Fashion (Edinburgh: Scottish National Portrait Gallery, 1995) 101-106.

¹⁴ In his best pictures Sir Thomas Lawrence, the premier painter of the next generation of English portrait painters following Reynolds and Gainsborough, comes close to Gainsborough's investment in stylish mark-making and clothing. There is certainly a parallel between Gainsborough and Lawrence in this respect; however, I would argue that it is in the degree of their investment that there remains a gap between them. In the portrait painting of John Singer Sargent and James Abbot McNeill Whistler in the late-nineteenth century, the mutually enhancing facility with stylish mark-making and stylish dress becomes again a striking feature. This more the case with the latter who, like Gainsborough, was so deeply concerned with purely aesthetic, formal matters as to render precarious the status of mimetic representation. He, too, would have his troubles with the art establishment.

¹⁵ Full details of Gainsborough's family lineage as weavers, manufacturers and retailers of cloth dating back to the mid-seventeenth century are given in Belsey, Gainsborough's Family 9-24.

during that time. In the middle of the seventeenth century, the painter's grandfather, Robert Gainsborough (1643-1717), was apprenticed to a saymaker in Sudbury. Robert Gainsborough's success in that profession increased the family's fortunes and established its long association with the making and retailing of cloths and articles of clothing. One of his sons, the artist's uncle and namesake, Thomas Gainsborough (1678-1739), married into a wealthy family from Essex also involved in the textile trade. All three of his uncle's sons flourished, the first as an international merchant, the second as a baymaker and saymaker, the third as a haberdasher. The painter's own father, John Gainsborough (c.1683-1748), fared less well as a milliner, clothier and crepemaker. Facing serious financial instability during the 1730s he changed professions to become postmaster of Sudbury, a post his wife acquired upon his death. Two of the painter's sisters pursued careers in millinery and, unlike their father, they did so with success.¹⁶

Gainsborough's familial circumstances played a significant role in furnishing him with the familiarity and dexterity with the stuff of fashion which is so strikingly evident in his full-length portraits of women. Furthermore, illustrated fashion magazines, often replete with advice to its readers on how to wear and accessorize the latest trends began publication at this time.¹⁷ As a general rule, during the first half of

¹⁶ Bensusan-Butt, 26-27.

the eighteenth century Europeans looked to France for cues as to the latest fashion trends.¹⁸ The "fashion plate" was, however, an English invention, the first being published in The Lady's Magazine in 1770.¹⁹ The distinction between the fashion plate and the costume plate is that the latter aimed to document costumes from the near or distant past whereas the former showed current or upcoming fashion trends.²⁰ The Lady's Magazine's stated mandate was "to combine amusement with instruction, to convey useful information, to register remarkable events, and especially to afford a Repository for the productions of Female Genius," which is to say that it claimed to provide visual examples from which dressmakers and hatmakers could model patterns for their clients.²¹ In addition to engraved illustrations, The Lady's Magazine offered instructions on how to wear the latest fashions and listed, by category, the season's most chic style of shoe, shawl, hat, handbag, hairstyle and so forth. Such fashion illustrations were not entirely unprecedented, but their proliferation and their aim to forecast fashion (rather than to report it after the fact) in the latter part of the eighteenth century was.

¹⁷ Christopher Breward, The Culture of Fashion: A New History of Fashionable Dress (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995) 130.

¹⁸ Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 30.

¹⁹ Laver, 144-147.

²⁰ On this distinction, see Vyvyan Holland, Hand-coloured Fashion Plates 1770-1899 (London: Batsford, 1955).

²¹ Quoted in Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 76.

Spinoffs of The Lady's Magazine sprang up throughout Europe, attesting to the desire to consume such guides to how to wear the latest fashions and the marketability of such colorful inducements to purchase the items on display. Thus historical circumstances -- namely, the emergence of the "fashion industry" combined with the growth of a middle class possessing the means and desire to participate in the consumption of fashionable and luxury goods -- also had an impact on the currency of up-to-date dress in portraiture.²² It was a currency that Gainsborough's full-length portraits of fashionable female socialites helped underwrite more than any of his contemporaries in the field of portraiture. The "fashion plates" Gainsborough produced from the 1760s onwards are indications of his awareness of, and appropriation of, the new genre of imagery featured in the commercial illustrated fashion magazine.

Fashion as a style of dress and a style of painting as a fashion are inextricably intertwined in Gainsborough's portraits. This is made manifest most especially in his large-

²² The literature on the increasing buying power of England's middle class during the eighteenth century is vast but those I have found most relevant to my specific concerns are McKendrick, Brewer and Plumb, The Birth of a Consumer Society; Colin Campbell, The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumption (Oxford and Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1987); Paul Langford, A Polite and Commercial People: England 1727-1783 (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1992); Consumption and the World of Goods, eds. John Brewer and Roy Porter (London and New York: Routledge, 1993); Berg, The Age of Manufactures 1700-1820; Earle, The Making of the English Middle Class. The classic text on the economic character of the middle class in Britain is Hobsbawm's Industry and Empire.

scale portraits of women where meters of canvas provide so much surface for the display of fashionable feminine finery as well as ample latitude for the execution of a distinctive painterly style. In combination, these two features -- style as a mode of dress and style as a distinctive mode of painting -- showed both the portrait subject and the portrait painter to their best advantage and at their most novelle. What is so conspicuously novelle about Gainsborough's portraits, then, is not just what he represents but also how he represents: his portraits of women display an obsessive fascination with feminine finery that equals his application to the formal aspects of picture making. And it is where the surface of the canvas is given over to the depiction of the stuff of fashion -- the plumed hats, beaded shoes, billowing skirts, beribboned bodices, diaphanous shawls and so forth -- that Gainsborough's formal emphasis on matters of paint becomes prominent -- almost as though he needed the lush materiality of fashion to facilitate his stylish execution.

Is it any wonder, then, that nudes are so scarce in his oeuvre? Musidora (c.1780-82), a literary subject from James Thomson's Summer, and Diana and Actaeon (c.1785), which depicts an episode from Ovid's Metamorphoses, are anomalies not only because of the literary nature of their themes but also because they depict nude figures (figs. 17 and 18). Yet even in these exceptionally rare forays into the depiction of female nudes the figures, be they the large-scale single figure of Musidora

or the multi-figure group of nymphs surrounding Diana, are either draped in translucent veils or Cezannesque in their cursory, rough contours which are suggestive rather than definitive.²³ Interestingly, the absence of clothing in these "nudes" seems to have opened the floodgates for Gainsborough's extremely loose, mannered depiction of the landscape settings in these paintings.

What I am suggesting is that the costumes of his female sitters are a matrix for two kinds of spectacularizations, two kinds of fetishizations. The first operates on the level of the object status of the classic fetishes of feminine attire which are so stunningly paraded by his characteristically elongated, elegantly poised female sitters. The second functions on the level of the art object where the attraction is to the rarefied inscriptions of the individual painter. It is precisely this fetishization of the recognizable trace of the artist's presence -- this self-annunciation of the painter's individuality in the materiality of paint -- which makes painting one of the most precious of commodities.²⁴

²³ See Michael Rosenthal's excellent discussion of *Diana and Actaeon*, where he argues convincingly against the conventional view of the painting as unfinished. "Gainsborough's *Diana and Actaeon*," in *Painting and the Politics of Culture* 167-194.

²⁴ What I am introducing here -- a fusion of Freud's theory of fetishism with Marx's theory of commodity fetishism -- is developed further in the following two chapters. Laura Mulvey, *Fetishism and Curiosity* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996) has recently undertaken the project of synthesizing these two separate theories of fetishism. I am grateful to her for sharing with me her

It was in Bath that the key elements of enlarged scale, heightened emphasis on fashion, contact with old master paintings in nearby private collections at Wilton House and Corsham, and the development of a confident painterly execution came together to form the constellation of Gainsborough's mature portrait style.²⁵ It was also in Bath that he received a steady flow of commissions (which previously had been a matter of constant concern) and achieved a degree of financial security that had eluded him as a painter of portraits-in-little in Sudbury and Ipswich.²⁶ The increase in patronage, raised prices for heads,²⁷ and positive response to the

thoughts on the subject as well as for reading and commenting on an early version of this chapter.

²⁵ See Ellis Waterhouse, "Bath and Gainsborough," *Apollo* 98 (November 1973): 34-39, for an analysis of the factors Waterhouse claims were critical to Gainsborough's development "into a great master." See also Philippa Bishop, "Gainsborough's stylistic development during his time in Bath," in *Gainsborough in Bath: A Bicentenary Exhibition* (Bath: Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre, 1988) 18-26, who gives some details on the collections Gainsborough had access to in the Bath area, in particular the works of Van Dyck at Wilton House. She also elaborates on the factors touched on by Waterhouse and states explicitly what Waterhouse hints at:

During the early 1760s, whether consciously or unconsciously, he seems to have been striving for an impression of greater elegance, particularly in his portraits of women. This could be achieved partly through an attention to costume, partly by concentrating on bearing and expression." (p. 18)

Clearly, I am in full agreement with Bishop's observation on the issue of the importance of feminine fashion in Gainsborough's stylistic development.

²⁶ John Hayes, *Gainsborough: Paintings and Drawings* (London: Phaidon, 1975) 42.

pictures he sent to London for exhibition at the Royal Academy beginning in 1769 were all factors contributing to his prosperity at Bath and to his successful monopolization of the market for society portraits in that fashionable tourist town.²⁸

Apparently with the encouragement of his Ipswich friend Philip Thicknesse,²⁹ Gainsborough arrived in Bath at the end of 1758, at the age of thirty-one.³⁰ He seems not to have had a permanent residence in Bath until June of 1760, when he signed a seven year lease agreement with Evelyn, 2nd Duke of Kingston, for a house on Abbey Street.³¹ The large, smart, four-storey

²⁷ He more than doubled his prices for heads in the 1760s (from fifteen guineas for a head in 1758 to twenty guineas for a head, forty for a half-length, and in the neighborhood of eighty for a full-length), and again raised them by nearly fifty percent in the early 1770s (to thirty for a head, sixty for a half-length, and one hundred guineas for a full-length). He did not raise them again until 1787 (to forty, eighty, and one hundred and sixty guineas). Waterhouse, Gainsborough 19.

²⁸ In Bath, Gainsborough's only competition in the business of portraiture was William Hoare (c.1707-1792) who generally worked in pastels and produced small format portraits. Waterhouse, "Bath and Gainsborough," 34-39; and Ann Sumner, "Gainsborough and his circle of friends and patrons in Bath," Gainsborough in Bath: A Bicentenary Exhibition (Bath: Holburne Museum and Crafts Study Centre, 1788) 15.

²⁹ Thicknesse, Gainsborough's first biographer, claimed to have played a decisive role in encouraging the artist to leave Ipswich for Bath. See Worman, 35-38.

³⁰ He is listed among the "Arrivals" in the Bath Journal 9 October 1758. Recent research, conducted separately by Rosenthal ("Testing the Water") and Sloman ("Gainsborough in Bath 1758-59"), confirms late 1758 as the date of Gainsborough's arrival at Bath.

³¹ Sloman, "Gainsborough and 'the lodging-house way.'" I am grateful to the author for guiding me through central Bath and pointing out how important buildings in the area of the

Georgian house had been built for the Duke but never used by him as a residence. Gainsborough probably took the large north-facing room on the second floor as his studio -- a room with three unobstructed walls and three windows on the north wall, a situation which would have provided ideal lighting conditions for the painter notorious for his concern for how correct lighting and specific hanging arrangements enhanced the subtle effects of his painterly technique and the quality of likeness.³² The large rooms and high ceilings of the Abbey Street house may have played a practical role in his move toward larger canvases since he now had the space to paint and properly display them.³³ However, serving a milieu of patrons more cosmopolitan and wealthy than those he had had in Ipswich must have been an equally important factor in the painter's move toward a grander format, more expensive scale, and more glamorous style of portrait painting (not to mention his own move to grander living quarters).

By Bath standards at the time, the 150 pound per annum cost of leasing the Duke's house was a high price to pay for lodging.³⁴ Gainsborough must have thought such stately

Abbey Churchyard were laid out before their demolition in the nineteenth century.

³² Ibid., 29-30.

³³ Ibid. 34.

³⁴ Gainsborough's was the most expensive house on the Duke of Kingston's estate. Thicknesse, who intermittently resided in Bath, approved of the choice and defended it when Gainsborough's wife expressed concern over what seemed to her an extravagant expenditure. Since the lease was renewed for a

property befitted his aspirations to attract well-heeled visitors to his ground floor display "Parlour" and to entice them as patrons to his painting room upstairs. In the end, leasing the Duke's house proved to be an astute business investment since he profited handsomely from renting out many of the extra rooms.³⁵ There could hardly have been a better site in Bath for a painter of society portraits to have set up a painting studio during the late 1750s and 1760s. Situated within a short distance from the Baths, Pump Room, Abbey, Playhouse and the two Lower Assembly Rooms, Gainsborough's studio surely would have been passed by every fashionable, health- and pleasure-seeking visitor either on foot or by sedan chair. Indeed, many of them must have walked through the street-level passageway that cut through one side of the house on their way to one of the town's principal bathing establishments.³⁶ Visitors to Bath not yet aware of the painter's talents could have viewed examples of it at the Pump Room, where Gainsborough and other local artists displayed

further seven years (even though the family moved to a new location in 1767) doubts over the financial expediency of leasing the house had been assuaged. Susan Legoux Sloman, "Artists' Picture Rooms in Eighteenth-Century Bath," *Bath History* 6 (Bath: Millstream Books, 1996): 132-154.

³⁵ Sloman, "Gainsborough and 'the lodging-house way,'" 23. The rental value of the Abbey Street house was three times Gainsborough's cost of renting it.

³⁶ For an account of the various touristic activities available in English spa centers such as Bath, see Barbara Benedict, "Consumptive Communities: Commodifying Nature in Spa Society," *The Eighteenth Century* 36 (Autumn 1995): 203-219. See also Langford's section entitled "Spa and Seaside," *A Polite and Commercial People* 102-108.

examples of their work.³⁷ No doubt Gainsborough hoped that visitors as well as local notables would stop by his parlour and studio on their way to or from one of the nearby attractions.³⁸

As a socially and geographically well-placed resident of Bath, Gainsborough would have had contact with the bounty of luxury goods available in that fashionable "pleasure town" par excellence.³⁹ If, in the world of eighteenth-century English fashion, all roads led to Bath,⁴⁰ the Abbey Churchyard, the town's central square and then the heart of the town's shopping area, was the nexus of all those roads.⁴¹ For good reason, then, the area became a favorite location for milliners to set up shop.

Gainsborough's Abbey Street house was the site of one such fashionable shop for hats, ribbons, perfumes, and other small

³⁷ Worman, 50.

³⁸ The Reverend John Penrose did just that. In a letter to his daughter dated 22 May 1766, he states that "From the P.R. [Pump Room] we went to see Gainsborough's Portraits, among which was one of Lady Waldegrave; no such flaming beauty in my Eyes." Penrose is probably referring to the painting Lady Waldegrave, Maria Duchess of Gloucester, now at the Los Angeles County Museum. His letter is reprinted in Sloman, "Gainsborough and 'the lodging-house way,'" 28.

³⁹ G.D.H. Cole, "Town-Life in the Provinces," in Johnson's England. An Account of the Life and Manners of his Age, revised edn., vol. 1, ed. A.S. Turberville (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952) 197-224.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 213.

⁴¹ On the various "tiers" of shops and the expedient growth of the clothing trade in Bath, see Trevor Fawcett, "Bath's Georgian Warehouses," Costume 26 (1992): 32-39.

attire-related commodities. Opposite Gainsborough's display parlour was a slightly smaller room designated as the "Shop," which was taken over by his eldest sister Mary Gibbon (1713-c.1790) for her millinery business shortly after the painter's acquisition of the house.⁴² Gainsborough seems to have been particularly close to his sister Mary, an apparently pious Methodist whom he refers to in a letter as "Mother Gibbon."⁴³ In 1762, two years after her husband's death, Gibbon closed her successful business in Colchester near Ipswich and opened another in Bath.⁴⁴ Had Gainsborough then advised any of his sitters to wear a new hat they could have chosen one at the conveniently located hat shop of Mrs Mary Gibbon before ascending the stairs to his Painting Room. One imagines that some of Gibbon's wares appear in Gainsborough's portraits just as her perfumes must have scented his parlour. The close proximity of the parlour on one side of the entrance hall and the millinery shop on the other was no doubt a mutually beneficial one to the painter and the milliner since one was a

⁴² Belsey, Gainsborough's Family 20, suggests that Gibbon may have worked for millinery firm Reeve and Wood in Colchester before moving to Bath in 1762. Lindsay, 11, suggests that Gainsborough's mother also worked as a milliner after her husband fell on financial hardship.

⁴³ Writing from London to his friend Dr Rice Charlton, 24 June 1779, about a landscape drawing, Gainsborough states that he had considered giving it to his sister but would give it to the Doctor instead because "Mother Gibbon...delights not in worldly Prospect, I have a damned plague with Her when she comes to Town, to find out new Methodist Chapels enough for her." Letters of Thomas Gainsborough, Letter #12, 43-45.

⁴⁴ Bensusan-Butt, 5-26.

meeting place for those wishing to appear fashionable in public and the other for those wishing to be fashionably represented in paint.⁴⁵ Surely it was both a favorable familial union of fashionable sensibilities and a fruitful business venture in which the artifice of fashion found expression in the materiality of fabric through one door and in the materiality of paint through another.

Gibbon must have already procured some degree of local fame (or some measure of notoriety) as the proprietor of her millinery shop when she became the subject of Christopher Anstey's satirical verse, "The Birth of Fashion, A Specimen of a Modern Ode," published in The New Bath Guide of 1766, which reads in part:

Goddess, if from Hand like mine,
Ought be worthy of thy Shrine,
Take thy flow'ry Wreath I twine.
Lead, oh lead me by the Hand,
Guide me with thy Magic Wand,
Whether thou in Lace and Ribbons
Choose the form of Mrs GIBBONS,
Or the Nymph of smiling Look,
At Bath yclept JANETTA COOK.⁴⁶

⁴⁵ Commenting about the social aspects of the millinery shop in eighteenth-century England, Ribeiro, The Art of Dress, writes:

Their shops and workshops were in the centre of town, in the most fashionable areas, and, inevitably due to their often exalted clientele, became centres of gossip and assignation. Attractive girls were employed to entice the customer and to give advice on the latest styles and accessories. (p. 78)

⁴⁶ Christopher Anstey, The New Bath Guide (Cambridge, 1766) 25.

Gibbon is also caricatured in a posthumous satirical drawing attributed to Reverend John Sneyd dated c.1794 (fig. 19).⁴⁷ Here she is depicted as an elderly woman in a style of dress and coiffeur which would have been ridiculously out of date by the mid-1790s. All the more so because the young Janetta Cook, whose arm the elder woman holds, wears a streamlined, clingy, empire-waist gown which was then the fashion rage, much to the satirical pleasure of graphic satirists.

Susan Gardiner (b.1726), another sister of Gainsborough, was also a trained milliner. Like her sister Mary, she was a recent widow when she moved to Bath in 1780.⁴⁸ Three of her six daughters became milliners, two of them setting up shop in Broomfield Street, a new commercial area just off the Circus, which by then had eclipsed Abbey Churchyard as the town's most fashionable shopping area.⁴⁹ Familial ties may well have been the primary reason for Gainsborough's widowed sisters' move to Bath, but the opportunities Bath offered to professionals in the fashion trade surely also made it an attractive place for the two milliners.⁵⁰

⁴⁷ The script above the drawing is a version of Anstey's satirical poem of Gibbons and Cook which appeared in the 1779 edition of The New Bath Guide.

⁴⁸ Bensusan-Butt, 27.

⁴⁹ Sloman, "Gainsborough and 'the lodging-house way,'" 37.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 29 and 39. Gainsborough had transferred his lease to his sister when he left Bath in 1774. In 1776, when Mary Gibbon was over sixty years of age, she transferred the lease of the Abbey Street house to the perfumiers and milliners Ann and Sophia Heaven. That, too, was a shrewd business

The profession of millinery was one of the few lucrative and respectable avenues available to women left to their own devices to earn a living in the eighteenth century.⁵¹ Yet, in pursuing the millinery profession Gibbon and Gardiner were not merely adhering to gender-defined mores: as milliners they were also continuing a family tradition that stretched back to the middle of the seventeenth century and would extend well into the nineteenth.⁵² Numerous members of the Gainsborough family over the course of nearly two centuries were successfully involved in some aspect of the fashion or fabric trade either as manufacturers or merchants of cloth, haberdashers, or milliners. The family house in which Gainsborough and his siblings were born neighbored a large fabric warehouse, a

maneuver on the part of Gibbon since the area was in decline and could no longer claim to be the town's most exclusive shopping area. She may have retired altogether from the millinery profession at this time, focussing her attention on the running of lodging-houses instead.

⁵¹ On women in the millinery profession, see Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 78.

⁵² Belsey, Gainsborough's Family 9-24. My thanks to Hugh Belsey, Director of Gainsborough's House, for sharing with me his knowledge of the history of the Gainsboroughs in Sudbury. The financial difficulties of Gainsborough's father began in 1733, due at least in some part to the decline of importance of Sudbury as an important center of the worsted textile industry declined as the result of competition presented by cheaper cloth blends. Lindsay, Gainsborough 9, discusses the reasons for the bankruptcy of Gainsborough's father. Nevertheless, by 1733 Mary Gibbon was a grown woman of twenty and quite likely already engaged as a milliner in some capacity, having learned the trade either formally or informally from her father (and possibly from her mother as well). K.H. Burley, "An Essex Clothier of the Eighteenth Century," The Economic History Review 2nd Series, 11 (1958): 289-301.

testament to the economic importance of cloth-making in that region.

The predominance of business ventures in some aspect of the clothing industry among generations of the Gainsboroughs underscores the fact that Gainsborough was well acquainted with the business of fashion. He brought this familiarity to his painting of society portraits and demonstrated it in his painterly sensitivity toward the varying textures of fabric -- to the rendering of their varying qualities of crispness softness, sheen, and weight.⁵³ To quote the historian John Bensusan-Butt on the impact of this familiarity on Gainsborough's treatment of fashion:

it was not for nothing that Gainsborough had sisters in that trade. He had their eye for fine fabrics, not just a "face-painter" as many were, employing someone else to do the clothes.⁵⁴

Indeed, it was the convention among successful portraitists of Gainsborough's generation to employ others "to do the clothes," but clothing was for Gainsborough no mere mundane, subsidiary element -- it was an essential part of his compositions and where he left his distinctive mark.

⁵³ The investment in feminine fashionability in Gainsborough's portraits of women continues to attract note, although it does so among writers on fashion more than art historians. Rebecca Tyrrel, "Gainsborough Girls," The Sunday Times Magazine (London) 15 May 1988: 44-50, for example, draws a parallel between the influence of Gainsborough's depictions of contemporary dress and the French Designer Christian Lacroix's revitalization of haute couture in the 1980s.

⁵⁴ Bensusan-Butt, 27.

Furthermore, the paintings Gainsborough was exposed to in local Bath collections were germane to his approach to depicting fashion. Philippa Bishop attributes Gainsborough's stylistic maturation upon his arrival at Bath to his exposure to the collection of works by Van Dyck at Wilton House. As mentioned earlier, his move to Bath was decisive shift in that it helped foster an artistic license of experimentation and innovation already motivated while the painter resided in Ipswich. Nevertheless, Bishop's observations are well worth noting. A "lesson he learned from his study of Van Dyck's portrait technique," she writes,

was a way of painting costume, so that it should reflect not only the sitter's personality and status in society but appear a determining element in the composition.⁵⁵

The influence of Van Dyck's portraiture on Gainsborough's technical development and move toward his own personal interpretation of grand, glamorous portraiture is well known, and Bishop's observation that costume becomes "a determining element" in Gainsborough's portraits from this time is unequivocal. Although the facts and fictions of the sitter's personality and social status are indeed encoded in the costumes they wear in their portraits, Gainsborough's efforts to flatter his figures by the excessive layering of enhancing fashionable accoutrements and to transform them into ideal mannequins for the display of costume waives the subjectivity of the sitter, at least in part. Moreover, the stuff of

⁵⁵ Bishop, 23.

contemporary fashion -- for which he had a unique sensitivity -
 - and the naturalistic landscape -- the "first love" to which
 he remained committed throughout his career -- became the
 mimetic vehicles of his development of a distinctive style of
 painting; but they were also, paradoxically, the vehicles of
 his painterly dissolution of mimesis. In that sense, his
 rendering of fashion and nature in his portraits is utterly
 opposed to his painting of faces, that sanctuary of painterly
 temperance and self-restraint.

Not unlike Gainsborough's reconciliation of landscape as a
 pictorial space of freedom with portraiture as a genre of
 commercial viability, his inflection of fashion in portraiture
 was also a kind of pictorial reconciliation. His emphasis on
 the sumptuous details of fashionable dress provided a way of
 fulfilling the traditional obligation to enhance and to frame
 the mimetic face of the subject while making the flourishes
 around it objects of visual interest, coloristic harmonies,
 connoisseurial allure, and painterly seduction. By virtue of
 the technical bravura used to simultaneously materialize and
 dematerialize silk, satin, lace, pearls, feathers, and hats,
 Gainsborough made his portrait-sitters and his portrait-style
 appear novelle.

His investment in the depiction of fashion in portraits,
 like his investment in landscape, was a great one. It was one
 worth defending because it was where he made his distinctive

mark, where he displayed the "effects" he could master as a painter, and thereby saliently differentiated his portrait style from that of his peers. Writing to his patron Lord Dartmouth in 1771, Gainsborough urged him to consent to the reworking his portrait of Lady Dartmouth by dressing her "as her Ladyship goes" rather than in the "fancy dress" she had requested. The painter blamed the costume for his clients' dissatisfaction with the finished portrait. "Nothing," he wrote, "can be more absurd than the foolish custom of painters dressing people like Scaramouches and expecting the likeness to appear."⁵⁶ Gainsborough assured Lord Dartmouth that "Lady Dartmouth's Picture will look more like and not so large when dressed properly; and if it does not, I'll begin another."⁵⁷ In his defense of "truthful" modern dress as he makes reference to Reynolds' habit of robing his female sitters in fancy dress, and Gainsborough's contrived humility is a thin gloss for his disdain for grandiose, heroic flummery. Again addressing Lord Dartmouth in a remarkable letter worth quoting at length, Gainsborough wrote:

Your Lordship I'm sure, will be sensible of the effect of the dress thus far, but I defy any but a Painter of some sagacity (and such you see I am, my Lord) to be well aware of the different Effects which one part of a picture has upon another, and how the Eye may be cheated as to the

⁵⁶ Gainsborough to Lord Dartmouth, 13 April 1771, Letters of Thomas Gainsborough, Letter #17, 51. Gainsborough states his position regarding contemporary dress in no uncertain terms in the series of letters he wrote Lord Dartmouth in the spring of 1771.

⁵⁷ Ibid., Letter #18, 18 April 1771, 51-53.

appearance of size, and by an artful management of the accompaniments. A Tune may be so confused by a false Bass -- that is if it is ever so plain, simple and full of meaning, it shall become a jumble of nonsense, and just so shall a handsome face be overset by a fictitious bundle of trumpery of the foolish Painter's own inventing. For my part (however your Lordship may suspect my Genius for Lying) I have that regard for truth, that I hold the finest invention as a mere slave in Comparison, and believe I shall remain an ignorant fellow to the end of my days, because I never could have patience to real Poetical impossibilities, the very food of a Painter; especially if he intends to be KNIGHTED in this land of Roast Beef, so well do serious people love froth.⁵⁸

The knighted painter and inventor of "a fictitious bundle of trumpery" to whom Gainsborough refers is obviously Reynolds. Modern dress, then, is the idiom of Gainsborough's "regard for truth," while fancy dress is, by his account, the indicator of Reynolds' "trumpery" and "froth," as well as his submissiveness to the desires of "serious people." Gainsborough's wry criticism of Reynolds is no doubt intended to underscore the unique value of what he had to offer if given the opportunity to display on canvas what he defended on the page. So confident was Gainsborough that anachronistic dress was the root of the problem with Lady Dartmouth's portrait -- that which compromised likeness and made her appear "too large" -- that he asked to "try an Experiment upon that Picture to prove the amazing Effect of dress."⁵⁹ Perhaps that should have read "to prove the amazing effects of dress I can achieve in paint."

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ See Whitley's commentary on this exchange of letters. Thomas Gainsborough 72-76.

In the end, Gainsborough painted two portraits of Lady Dartmouth, a bust-length in c.1769, which was the object of the correspondence between the painter and his patron, and a half-length in c.1771 (figs. 20 and 21). The first of the two seems not to have been changed, at least not in any considerable way, since the sitter is shown against a plain background and is dressed in a kind of "fancy" historical costume that Gainsborough had requested permission to alter. The second of the two shows the sitter in a style of dress which the costume historian Aileen Ribeiro describes as "an imaginary costume."⁶⁰ In one sense the dress is "imaginary": emerging from veils of thin paint, the sashed wrapping gown does not offer legibility of its construction as a garment. We are left to imagine its construction instead. Nonetheless, the decidedly up-to-date, softly-lifted and lightly-powdered hairstyle of the sitter locates it squarely in the 1770s, and the modern style of dress coincides with the sitter's stylish coiffeur. One might assume that Gainsborough convinced the Dartmouths to allow him to paint the second portrait in his fashion, a fashion that showed his facilities as a painter of contemporary dress and landscapes to best advantage. The Lady, too, thus would be transformed by Gainsborough's painterly fashion. The transformation of Lady Dartmouth from the first to the second portrait is indeed remarkable. Virtually the only facial feature common to both is the receding chin. In the first

⁶⁰ Ribeiro, *The Art of Dress* 26.

version she is noticeably plump and gazes directly toward the viewer, holding a rose decorously in her fleshy hand. In the second her face and torso have been elongated, not unlike the long, slim silhouettes of anonymous figures in fashion plates. Framed by an arching, leafy branch, she turns her gaze away from the viewer. The serpentine line of her pose is simultaneously gracefully elegant and anatomically impossible. Transposed into Gainsborough's distinctive landscape setting, transfigured by his insistence for modern dress, and transmuted by his fashionable manner of painting, she has metamorphosed into an object of art. In the process of becoming "a Gainsborough" she may have shed some of her honest plumpness, but as art she is as bountiful as the shimmering silks and flickering foliage that envelope her. By "improving" the features of the sitter Gainsborough has displaced her individualized physical features and inscribed himself -- his artistic persona expressed in the marks of his individual, recognizable style -- throughout the picture.

By virtue of their illegibility as constructed garments, many of the costumes worn by Gainsborough's female sitters could arguably be described as "imaginary," despite all his casual rhetoric about his "regard for truth." They are neither more nor less phantasmagoric than those of his contemporaries, however, only differently so. The costumes worn by Reynolds' female sitters, for example, are fanciful recreations of an idealized, classical past whereas Gainsborough's are evocative

composites of the idealized present which are essentially no more descriptively imitative of actual garments than are Reynolds. The key difference is that Reynolds' pseudo-classical wrappings are invented costumes, whereas the inventiveness of Gainsborough's depicted costumes resides in their rendering, in their fabrication and factual texturing in paint. As such, Gainsborough's fashionable modern-dress "composites" seem so often to take on a life of their own, not so much as costumes but as painted surfaces colonized by the painter's sparkling colored pigments. Indeed women's clothes often seem to be the territory for Gainsborough to display his virtuoso techniques -- outdoing the craft of the dressmaker by his crafting in paint. However, as outlined above, his encounter and engagement with fashion was multifaceted and the manner in which he animates and conveys the tactility of different kinds of textiles and stylish accessories is an indication of both his knowledge of the stuff of fashion and his ability to translate it onto a two-dimensional surface. That surface is the meeting place of his style as a painter and the style of the dressmaker. But, just as the subjectivity of the sitter is displaced by the subjectivity of the painter's style, so too is the dressmaker's mark of labor displaced by the painter's re-laboring of factual objects of fashion in the facture of paint.

Though the costumes of Gainsborough's female sitters are not close copies of actual garments but rather embellished,

augmented, and glamorized re-creations of the fashions of the day, it is not true that they do not have some referential source in the world of fashion. The last quarter of the eighteenth-century gave rise to a number of publications devoted to fashion, many of them illustrated with fashion plates ranging from simple single figure studies showing one view to double figure studies depicting two views of a similar style of dress, to multi-figure hand-colored tableaux complete with narrative pretensions such as a walk in a park, a visit to the horse races, or a boat outing. Prior to the illustrated fashion magazine, single-sheet engravings of fashion and costume plates could be purchased in print-shops and portable dressed dolls also were used to disseminate information regarding current fashion trends.⁶¹ The stiff wooden dolls dressed in actual examples of fashionable ensembles could not compete with the magazine's ability to combine the hard facts of dressmaking with the enhanced fictions of fashion plates. Nor could the single-sheet engraving compete with the bound array of fashion plates in the illustrated fashion magazines. As commodities advertising commodities, fashion magazines both responded to and fostered the growing fashion industry which in the late-eighteenth century was nourished by the general increase in wealth among England's middle class.⁶² The

⁶¹ Aileen Ribeiro, Dress in Eighteenth-Century Europe 1715-1789 (New York: Holmes and Meier: 1984) 51-52.

⁶² Although focussing on a different historical moment, Carol Armstrong's discussion of the interconnectedness of

conspicuous consumption of fashionable wear, which by its very nature would soon be out of date and require replacing, was a way to display one's disposable wealth and discerning modern taste. The fabulous, fashionable costumes worn by Gainsborough's sitters cost the price of the commission: a less portable sign of disposable wealth than an actual dress, but perhaps a more discerning and enduring one.

Fashion illustration took many cues from oil painting, the most obvious borrowing being the adoption of a somewhat standard series of figure poses that had long been the repertoire of portrait painters. The influence of fashion illustration on oil painting is less easy to recognize, especially when it occurs as discreet borrowings or enhancing details (such as, for example, Ingres' reliance on fashion plates for his female society portraits).⁶³ A number of figure drawings -- it does not seem inappropriate to call them "fashion plates" -- Gainsborough produced from the early 1760s onward do, however, provide convincing examples of his avid awareness and deft appropriation of the pictorial conventions that would find wide circulation in illustrated fashion magazines in the following decade.

fashion and consumption in late nineteenth-century French painting has been tremendously illuminating for my interpretation of Gainsborough's depiction of the objects of feminine display. "Facturing Femininity: Manet's Before the Mirror," October 74 (1995): 75-104.

⁶³ Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 12.

One of the earliest of Gainsborough's costume studies, A Woman with a Rose, dates from the first half of the 1760s and appears to relate closely to a second drawing, Study of a Woman Seen from Behind, dating from the mid to late 1760s (figs. 22 and 23). A Woman with a Rose, a drawing in black chalk, stump, and highlighted with white on pale green paper, depicts a young woman poised with one buckled shoe pointed outward as if to display it as fully as possible. With one arm bent akimbo, she slightly bunches up her overskirt, allowing a full, unobstructed view of the multi-layers of her skirt: a darker-colored petticoat, lighter-colored overskirt and semi-transparent apron. The beribboned "Leghorn" bonnet is not unlike that worn by the sitter in Gainsborough's aforementioned full-length portrait of Mary Howe which dates from the same period, and it has been suggested that this drawing is a study for the portrait.⁶⁴ Indeed, there are obvious similarities between the drawing and the portrait in oil: the bonnet, the buckled shoe, the lacy apron and billowing sleeves, as well as the general positioning of the figure, for instance. The gratuitous blades of grass in the right foreground of the drawing are just barely sufficient to suggest a landscape setting, a setting which is fully elaborated in the oil painting to the coloristic and compositional enhancement of the figure and her costume. The differences between the drawing --

⁶⁴ Lindsay Stainton makes this connection. John Hayes and Lindsay Stainton, Gainsborough Drawings (Washington, D.C.: International Exhibitions Foundation, 1983) 88.

an uncommissioned, unexhibited, private study -- and the oil painting -- a large commissioned portrait intended for display -- suggest something of the difference between their aims as representation: Howe turns her head to look directly out at the viewer while the model in the sketch turns her head away, giving us rather less than a profile. Even though the thick, dark band around the model's neck calls attention to the face, the subject of the drawing is her costume ensemble, from ribboned hat to buckled shoe.⁶⁵

Study of a Woman Seen from Behind effaces the head almost entirely, showing merely a rough contour of the chin and cheek. In general, this drawing is less finished than Woman with a Rose and provides no hint of a setting, save for the shadow cast by the walking figure. Yet the drapery of the skirt has been treated with a keen sense of how it folds and bunches. The most finished area of the drawing is the softly shaded and highlighted exposed ankle and lower calf, revealed by the figure's lifting of her skirt: the delicate curve of the ankle lining up perfectly with the slope of the figure's bare shoulders and neck. With the highest stakes placed on the face, commissioned portraits surely did not grant the opportunity to reveal quite so much forbidden flesh or the chance for fashion to displace so blatantly the centrality of the face.

⁶⁵ Pemberton-Pigott, 37-43.

A pair of costume studies from the mid 1780s is similarly characterized by a pictorial investigation of animated drapery (figs. 24 and 25). Both have been identified as studies either for Gainsborough's The Mall of 1783 or its proposed pendant The Richmond Water Walk, the latter of which was never brought to fruition despite its alleged commissioning by the King. The first of these drawings is in one respect more finished than the two costume studies of the 1760s discussed above: rather than a few blades of grass in the foreground, the figure is provided with tall, leafy framing trees on the left middleground and a pathway leading into a thick wood on the right. The costume of the figure is sketched in loose, dexterous gestural lines which convey the textures of different fabrics: the drag of her full overskirt and train, the snug-fitting sleeves, and the thin shawl falling off her shoulder and fluttering in the wind. A youthful face, surrounded by a shock of waist-length wavy hair topped by a large black hat, turns in profile and casts a coquettish glance at the viewer. Unsatisfactory as a likeness, the sketch is sufficient as a characterization of a flirtatious, fashionable young woman.

The second drawing is likewise rendered with a great economy of line, but the generous application of white accentuates the crispness of the full skirt, the softness of the puffed sleeves, and the transparency of the fichu. The pictorial force of these two costume studies resides largely in the effects created by the formal manipulation of the medium of

smudgy-black chalk, stump, and glossy-white highlights. Importantly, the costume drapery has received the lion's share of shiny white highlights. A large-brimmed hat envelopes the full head of tight curls and long, loose ringlets, creating a double frame for the face. Despite the ornateness of this fashionable framing, the face is punctuated by a few lines and shadows indicating eyes, nose, and lips. In the employment of an evocative, verdant setting and the technical emphasis on costume, there is an unmistakable relationship between this and the previous costume study as well as Gainsborough's full-length portraits of women. Furthermore, in costume, hairstyle and mirror-reversed cross-armed pose, the drawing suggests a connection to Gainsborough's c.1785 full-length (now cut down) portrait of Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, who was then known as London's reigning fashion trend-setter (fig. 26).⁶⁶

In the oil painting, not surprisingly, the face of the Duchess has been given the individualizing features necessary to capture a likeness whereas the lack of facial definition in the sketch is conspicuous, as though the figure in the costume study was drawn not from life but from a faceless mannequin. This could well have been the case. Jackson, who wrote a "sketch" of the "Character of Gainsborough" shortly after the

⁶⁶ The portrait was cut down in the nineteenth century. On the picaresque-like history of Gainsborough's portrait of the Duchess as it passed through the underworld of international thieves and conmen, see Ben Macintyre, "Stolen Kisses," *The Times Magazine* (London) 2 July 1994: 8-11, 15. See also W. Roberts, "Mr. J. Pierpont Morgan's Pictures, The Early English School, II," *Connoisseur* (November 1906): 135-143.

painter's death, recounts the painter's use of a miniature dressed mannequin, and claims that "all the female figures in his Park-scene [The Mall] Gainsborough drew from a doll of his own creation."⁶⁷

Looking forward to the opening of the Royal Academy Exhibition of 1784, The Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser announced that "The approaching Exhibition will have unusual merit. Gainsborough has his magnificent picture of a park, with a variety of figures in the manner of Watteau."⁶⁸ The reference is undoubtedly to The Mall, but Gainsborough's plan to exhibit the genre picture at the Royal Academy was thwarted by his secession from that institution (fig. 27). The endeavor of the artist "to spirit up another exhibition in contest" with the official one resulted in his inclusion of the painting in this private exhibition at Schomberg House which opened at the end of July.

Horace Walpole's pithy commentary on The Mall encapsulates well the frenchified flourish of the picture's ephemeral, brushy style and fashionable, urban subject: "it is all in motion, and in a flutter like a lady's fan."⁶⁹ These

⁶⁷ Jackson, The Four Ages 147-161.

⁶⁸ Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser 20 April 1784: 3.

⁶⁹ See Ribeiro, The Art of Dress 66, for a discussion of this painting in relation to the dress and habits of London's fashionable society.

characteristics of the painting were also noted by Henry Bate in his promotion of Gainsborough's private exhibition:

Some have attributed this piece to be after the manner of a distinguished master of the Flemish School; but the imitation being strictly from nature, and the stile [sic] of colouring possessing every originality, such definition is without propriety.

The view, altho' not taken from St. James's Park, will perfectly well apply to that resort of gaiety, and strikes a spectator as tho' objects were surveyed from Buckingham-house, and a view of the Green Park was included. -- The mall appears full of Company, broken in parties of five, three, and two, to give diversity to the scene. Among these, are all descriptions of characters: women of fashion, women of frolic, military beaus [sic], and petit maitres; with a grave keeper or two, and a few accidental stragglers to illustrate the representation. Looks of characteristic signification, appear to be mutually exchanged by some of the group, in passing: and others on the benches, appear making their comments. Some deer in the distance, and other objects fill up the scene. The foliage of the trees is well executed, and the sky is as clear and unclouded as possible, to give the vesture of the boughs proper relief.⁷⁰

Bate's description attributes to the painting a quality of reportage: a representation of the social habits of "all descriptions of characters" who gather in the Royal park to see and been seen. Leisure activities of London's polite society are certainly the subject of the genre picture.

The Mall is a singular picture in the history of eighteenth-century British painting in its celebration of feminine fashion. And the focus is specifically on the fashionability of the female figures which far outnumber the male figures are and shadow them with their puffy finery. Indeed, it is the ephemeral fashion plate raised to the status

⁷⁰ [Bate] Morning Herald and Daily Advertiser 26 July 1784: 2.

of Academy-destined art, the venue for which it was initially intended.⁷¹ Any of the clusters of two, three, or five figures could stand as fashion plates; in its entirety the scene becomes a deluxe fashion-plate tableau. Unfettered by the obligations of portraiture, the artifice of feminine fashion becomes the collective spotlight protagonist of the picture, and the park setting its natural, complimentary coloristic and compositional support -- both similarly rendered with a feathery, light touch.

Gainsborough's mature portrait paintings are readily recognizable by their investment in coloristic and painterly effect: the address to color, light and shadow as self-reflexive formal elements rather than instruments of mimetic transcription, and the rather rough and expressive handling of paint emphasizes the artifice and materiality of the medium, to the extent that facture threatens to undo the visual integrity of individual objects. There are, therefore, two registers of distinctiveness in his portraits: one on the level of referentiality -- encapsulated above all in the rendering of likeness -- the other on the level of the traces, the significant marks, of the act of painting and the artifice of paint -- which is played out to the fullest in his rendering of

⁷¹ The painting was not commissioned and therefore presumably initiated by the painter himself. The uniqueness of it -- or the precociousness of its subject matter -- is perhaps underscored by the fact that it remained unsold until after his death.

the "secondary" elements of his portraits of women, namely in the costume and in the landscape setting.

It is the first of these two registers that demands our initial attention. In Gainsborough's portrait of Elizabeth Brinsley Sheridan (the elder of the two Linley sisters he had painted more than a decade earlier), the sitter takes repose on a rock at the edge of a wood (fig. 28). The porcelain-white face in the center of the composition -- where all trace of the brush is erased, almost in the manner of an Early Netherlandish panel painting -- becomes the site of representational transparency and thus functions as a vestige of a centuries-old European tradition that equates the illusionistically painted portrait with the truthfulness of a mirror reflection. At its edges, however, the mimetic face encounters another language -- another style -- of representation, which brings us to the second register of distinctiveness in Gainsborough's portraits of women: those significant topographical marks of coloristic and painterly affect that produce a soft, blurred focus and depart markedly from the sharp focus of the face. The pale apricot of her dress and orange highlights of her auburn curls are picked up in the flickers of autumnal leaves from the cluster of trees that frame her at the right and arch above her. The intertwining of shawl and ringlet is a remarkable passage of washy illegibility. How audacious to have placed that this bold patch of wet-on-wet gestural twists and turns at the dead center of the portrait. From hem to hem the outfit is

softly blurred by the effect of wind as well as the light, gestural application of pigment, but the blurring is not complete. The layers of opaque fabric that comprise her skirt and bodice, white diaphanous puffed sleeves emerging from the zig-zag edged cap sleeve, transparent shawl, grass-green satin ribbon around her waist and elbows, and matching green cap-like hat -- the objects of feminine fashionable artifice -- seem still to offer a bountiful vision sufficient to lure us into thinking that we are seeing "something."

The same could be said of Gainsborough's landscape backgrounds. There too, in the meeting of the face and the details of nature, one language of representation, one style of painting, meets another, simultaneously calling attention to the stability of the face as a mimetic focal point and marking the representational instability of landscape elements. As in virtually all of Gainsborough's full-length portraits of women in landscapes, the pictorial, formal dependence of the painter on the secondary elements of the portrait of Brinsley Sheridan -- fashion and nature -- is made manifest. Not only that, for it becomes apparent also that those two elements are dependent on each other. Indeed, so dependent are they as coloristic and compositional complements of each other that they braid and fold into each other: the ephemeral shawl twists into the long auburn ringlet on one side and continues in the swirling diagonal line of clouds on the other; blades of grass accented with orange become the curved hatchings that mark shadows at

the hem of her dress; a thorny shrub weaves its way into the fold of her skirt. Costume and landscape are thus made reliant on one another, just as Gainsborough was reliant on them as the surfaces upon which to leave his stylistic signature.

Yet, not all kinds of fashion are treated equally in Gainsborough's portraits: the costumes of his male sitters rarely receive the painterly attention, subtle coloristic harmonies, and brushy weavings into landscape that are conspicuous in his portraits of women. The contrast between Gainsborough's full-length pendant portraits of Edward and Penelope Ligonier, both exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1771, illustrates how differently the painter treated male and female costumes, and how much more successfully he blended sitter with setting when presented with the pictorial opportunity to add formal flourishes to the objects of feminine finery (figs. 29 and 30). In the portrait of Edward Ligonier the flat, poppy-red cloak and sash tied loosely around his hips are so strikingly brilliant in color that the landscape and horse pale by comparison. Beyond the contours of the figure, subtle gradations of color sink into a washy yet opaque monochrome. In its pendant, however, despite the fact that the pulled-back drapery reveals only a small triangle of sky and wooded parkland, the soft peachy creams of Penelope Ligonier's dress and multi-colored twisted sash harmonize with the sky and foliage.

The double portrait of Mr and Mrs Hallett of 1785 displays even more dramatically the degree to which the accoutrements of feminine fashionability dictate the composition and command the arrangement of color (fig. 31). The puff of semi-sheer white lace on the upper bodice and bell-sleeves of Mrs Hallett's dress and the triple plumes decorating her black beaver hat articulate a central axis that is balanced by the ruff-like chest-fur and curled tail of the picturesque snow-white Pomeranian on the left and by the white-powdered wig, bowed collar, cuffs, and stockinged leg of her husband on the opposite side. Mr Hallett looks dapper in his fashionable black velvet cloak and breeches, but he is placed in the shadow of trees whereas she walks on the bright side, the silvery sunlight accenting the folds and creases of her full skirt. She wears a white dress, but it is a white enriched by all the colors of the clouds and trees around her: from the mauve, mulberry, peacock blue and pearl-white of the clouds to the various cool greens and warm ochres of the trees. The black velvet suit and white accessories of her husband merely provide a flat foil to her animated white costume, and her white pet.

Gainsborough's full length portraits of Mary Graham and Francis Duncombe, both from the 1770s, are superb examples of how the objects of feminine fashion double as sites of visual pleasure and formal experimentation (fig. 32). As already mentioned, Graham's costume (like Duncombe's) corresponds with the contemporary fashion for masquerade costumes inspired by

seventeenth-century courtly portraiture a la Van Dyck.⁷² And yet, what in fact do we see when we look at close range at the objects of feminine artifice? Daubs of pearl-white paint represent three-dimensional jewels; thickly encrusted cream and mustard-colored paint gives the illusion of a scallop-edged overskirt, but at closer range these daubs, scribbles and streaks are just so much impasto. And, whereas the garnet red in the area of the face is delicately transformed into almost smiling lips, and reads as lips from near or far, when that same garnet red is employed below to refer to a diamond-shaped gem, it also turns back into what it is, a stain of red paint surrounded by clumps of white pigment. In a similar way, long, thin blue and yellow streaks at once comprise the lifted hair of the figure but then evaporate into a scintillating halo of clouds above: they are, after all, composed of the same matter, paint. Furthermore, at the meeting places of landscape elements and the details of fashion, the painterly strokes act as a kind of fusion, one into the other, as in Graham's plumes merging with clouds above, or Duncombe's which pass into the feathery foliage behind, surprisingly flattening out the illusion of perspectival depth.⁷³

⁷² J.L. Nevinson, "Vandyck Dress," *Connoisseur* 157 (November 1964): 166-170.

⁷³ On the feather as a costume accessory which recalls Rubens' portrait of his wife, see Cherry and Harris, "Eighteenth-Century Portraiture and the Seventeenth-Century Past," 287-309. Interestingly, both the portrait of Graham and Duncombe include the "Rubensian feather" and are dressed in Van Dyckian costumes. His somewhat subtle harkening back to Rubens

Mary Graham received much critical praise when it was exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1777. A critic for the London Chronicle wrote that it was "a mere portrait" but chose it to express the opinion that Gainsborough "is inferior to none in the more essential requisites of his art, but perhaps he is superior to all others in the ease and richness of his drapery."⁷⁴ Whenever a tone of criticism surfaces in the prose of the admiring critics of Gainsborough's contributions of that year, it is almost invariably directed toward his coloring. The style of coloring considered by some worthy of the highest praise -- "a style of colouring, that bespeaks the great master," in the words of one critic⁷⁵ -- was reckoned by others a too-bold gesture against the mimetic prerogative of the portrait. One critic, for example, wished that "the colouring of his faces was more natural."⁷⁶ Another recommended that his portraits

would be still nearer perfection, if he avoided that purple hue which he is apt to tinge the cheeks with ... which gives the face a foreign air, and reminds the

and Van Dyck may have been a way for Gainsborough to endow his portraits with elevated distinction, but what is more striking is his swerving from, or "misreading" of those old masters (to borrow terms used by Harold Bloom in Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry [London, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1973]) by blending historical portraiture with his distinctive and modernistic style.

⁷⁴ London Chronicle 24-26 April 1777: 396.

⁷⁵ Morning Post 25 April 1777: 4.

⁷⁶ The review charges both Gainsborough and Nathaniel Hone for their manner of coloring faces. Morning Chronicle 28 April 1777: 2.

spectator of the Paris Ladies, whose rubicundity of cheek is derived from art -- in fact, it is not nature's red.⁷⁷

"It is not nature's red." On a superficial level, the expression is simply a criticism of Gainsborough's sacrifice of mimetic truth for artifice, representational clarity for painterly craftfulness. On another level, the critic's conflated rebuke of artifice in the painted portrait and the allegedly foreign fashion of painting one's face -- we can almost hear Ruskin's moral plea for the charms of honest painting and the charms of wholesome, homespun feminine beauty -- betrays a discomfort with an excess of cosmetic color. In the conflation and equation of the two, it appears that Gainsborough is being criticized for his surrender to the artifice of fashion as well as to the artifice of painting.

A similar criticism would be levelled against Gainsborough's portrait of Giovanna Baccelli exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1782 (fig. 33). The portrait was praised for its excellent likeness but the depiction of the Italian ballerina in her stage makeup was considered unfortunate. In painting Baccelli, wrote one critic,

the artist was not only obliged to vivify and embellish, but if he would be thought to copy the original, to lay on his colouring thickly; in this he has succeeded, for the face of this admirable dancer is evidently paint-painted.⁷⁸

It was the artifice of her painted face, not the "original," which Gainsborough chose to "copy" in paint. The critic's

⁷⁷ Morning Chronicle 25 April 1777: 2.

⁷⁸ Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser 1 May 1782: 3.

censure reveals a reluctance to deal with the framed, formal portrait as itself a performative stage that shares certain aspects with the theatrical stage.

Criticism of Gainsborough's manner of coloring faces is simultaneously surprising and unsurprising. Unsurprising because the face was the primary measurement of the painter's skill at likeness and therefore the eighteenth-century portrait painter was compelled to make every effort to follow nature, render its contours, and copy its colors. Surprising because as a rule it is least of all the face where Gainsborough takes coloristic liberties. Indeed, Gainsborough's portraits play out a balancing act over the gap between representation and the act of representing. Curious that this balancing act should take place in the arena of portraiture -- the most obligatorily mimetic of genres. And yet, If the faces of some of his female sitters display an artificial "rubicundity of cheek" it is because that application of cosmetic color too is part of fashion -- "paint of the feminine kind"⁷⁹ -- as well as part of Gainsborough's painterly fashion. In most instances he seemed to have been more careful to keep the face unblemished with the distinctive marks of his stylish, painterly artifice.

⁷⁹ The phrase is borrowed from Armstrong's discussion of how cosmetic color does double duty as paint in some of Manet's images of women. "Facturing Femininity: Manet's Before the Mirror," (esp. 93-98).

CHAPTER IV
VITAL GROUND: THE ANATOMY OF STYLE; OR,
THE MAKINGS OF A MODISH MANNER

But this gaiety of colouring has a further use. It is intended to characterise the sweet subjects of Mr. Gainsborough's pencil.

The selection of modish ideas, which this Artist shews [sic] in his works, must be admitted as no small proof of his genius, for they are admirably suited to those lovely creatures of fashion that alike adorn the court and the canvas. They have so little about them that looks like common Nature, that surely they are another race of Beings. Their form, their colouring is not human; their air, their dress, their language, their ideas certainly are never derived from this gross earth; and did we not know that they eat, sleep, and would couch with men in the fair face of heaven, we could never think them mortal....

These are the subjects of Mr. Gainsborough's art, and so well has he characterised them, that there are not two purposes which they can serve better in life than on canvas. Like them, his Pictures are the beauties of a day; and, as such, they must fall as new graces of fashion and new modes of beauty arise. This the Painter has foreseen, and thence has formed his unlaborious, ideal stile. Pity it is that so much ingenuity should ever lose its value! but so passes the glory of the world.¹

The source of the extended quotation above is The Exhibition, or a Second Anticipation, a pamphlet written in 1779 under the pseudonym Roger Shanhagan. The pamphlet is a curious piece of satirical art criticism on apparently imaginary works exhibited in the previous year at the Royal Academy. Shanhagan aims his satirical pen towards a number of academicians but his treatment of Gainsborough is in the main complimentary. True to the spirit of satire every compliment has its sharp edge and caricatured exaggeration, yet where humorous asides and witty double meanings are incorporated in

¹ Shanhagan, 52-53.

the discussion of Gainsborough's portraits, they are pointed more in the direction of the conduct of the artist's subjects on the stage of life rather than their depiction within his frame. Shanahan exploits the fact that the female subjects of Gainsborough's portraits at the Academy in 1778 provided ample food for satire and celebration, admonition and adoration. When he describes them as "lovely creatures of fashion" adoration dips into mockery, and mockery ascends to adoration. Although the specific names of the individuals represented that year are not provided, the blanks following the title prefixes "Portrait of the Duchess of ---", "Portrait of Lady ---", and "Portrait of Mrs. ---", can be completed with the names of the Duchess of Devonshire,² the Countess of Chesterfield, and Mrs (Dalrymple) Elliott, who were among the women depicted in Gainsborough's full-length Academy portraits of 1778. All three were also young women of either social stature or public notoriety. The Duchess of Devonshire, for instance, was already establishing a reputation as the "Duchess of fashion." And, when Shanahan laments that

Heaven ordains them to outlast a few Birth-nights; in which little space they become Duchess or Lady, intrigue, are divorced, wed again, or live at large, and, like the air, become "charter'd Libertines," and afterwards remain in the world the Ghosts of themselves,³

² There remains doubt over whether the portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire was in fact among the portraits Gainsborough exhibited in 1778. See Whitley, Gainsborough 150-151.

³ Shanahan, 53.

he could be telling the story of the past, present and future of Grace Dalrymple Elliott who was already leaving behind a trail of famous lovers, only he is doing so with a good deal more sympathy than would the newspaper press.⁴ The same scenario could be applied to Penelope Ligonier, whose portrait by Gainsborough had been exhibited at the Academy in 1770 along with that of her husband.⁵ Her marriage also ended in divorce after the scandal of her affair with Count Alfieri broke out in the press the following year.⁶

A number of Shanahan's observations are worth highlighting, but perhaps the most noteworthy is his conspicuous coupling of the subjects of Gainsborough's portraits and the style in which he has rendered them: "those lovely creatures of fashion" make a felicitous fit with his "modish ideas"; "sweet subjects" are given character by his "gaiety of colouring" and "unlaborious" style; the appearance of both his subjects and his canvases are the "beauties of the day," and both are somehow beyond "common Nature" in their perfection. The joining of subject and style is so seamless that one wonders whether Shanahan is referring to the flesh

⁴ On Grace Dalrymple Elliott, see Whitley, Gainsborough 154-156.

⁵ The portraits were commissioned by Penelope Ligonier's father, George Pitt, First Lord Rivers. See William Talbot, "Thomas Gainsborough: George Pitt, First Lord Rivers," The Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art 58 (November 1971): 258-268. See also Paulson's excellent interpretation of these pendant portraits, Emblem and Expression 212-214.

⁶ See Vittorio Alfieri Memoirs, ed. E.R. Vincent (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

and blood "originals" or their painted copies when he remarks that "Their form, their colouring is not human; their air, their dress, their language, their ideas certainly are never derived from this gross earth." Shanhagan implies that the painter procures his "ideal stile" from the "beauties of the day," but begs us to guess which glories -- the glories of youthful feminine beauty or the glories of the painter's brush -- are more ingenious, or more fleeting.

Nowhere in the five pages Shanhagan dedicates to Gainsborough is mention made of male subjects. This comes as no surprise since the author's interest lies in the alluring affinity between Gainsborough's fashionable female subjects and his "Ideal and Unsubstantial" style. In the eyes of Shanhagan, then, Gainsborough has found his painterly niche in female portraiture. Furthermore, "the real marks of Genius," he writes, are the "uniformity of style, and a suitableness of manner to matter", which is to say that the mark of Gainsborough's genius resides in his congenial unification of the modish matter he represents and the modish manner in which he paints.

Shanhagan's account is valuable evidence of the contemporary awareness of how the accoutrements of contemporary feminine fashion provided Gainsborough the opportunity to display his stylishness as a painter. Furthermore, by conflating fashionable subjects and "ideal style" Shanhagan unwittingly sheds light onto the central issue of this chapter: the increasingly significant role of

style in the self-fashioning and self-promotion of a singular artistic persona toward the end of the eighteenth century in England.

The matter of "style" is the primary theme of the following pages. Style can be productively thought of as that which permeates the entire surface of the canvas. In itself it confers no content to the picture; it is essentially insubstantial yet paramount to the overall visual enhancement of the image. Intimately connected to the question of style is "color," and this, as Shanhagan recognized, is particularly the case with regards to Gainsborough, whose use of color was frequently accused of being excessive.⁷

The exposure of the constitutive parts of a painting's construction and constructedness -- in short, the exposure of its making and madeness -- is one in which few British painters indulged in the eighteenth century, but it is characteristic of Gainsborough's style, deployment of exceptionally diluted color, and technique. Indeed, in Gainsborough's paintings these stages of picture making are barely separable. To return once more to Shanhagan:

⁷ To cite only one of many examples of this criticism:
 No one need be informed of Mr. Gainsborough's excellencies in portrait painting; and it may safely be affirmed, that his performance of this year will lose him none of that fame which he has justly acquired by his production. He seems, however, to have one fault though, a fault upon the side of excess, his colours are too glaring. It would be well for him if he would borrow a little of the modest colouring of Sir Joshua Reynolds.
 Middlesex Journal 23-26 April 1772: 4.

Even in his Colouring, which at first view may seem to contradict the general character, by his indulging in the most attracting hues, add, notwithstanding, to the uniformity of the whole, when we observe that they are too crude and unmixed to make us imagine that we see real objects. His Ultramarine and Lake are scumbled every where so obviously, that it is evident the Artist intends only to give an idea of Nature in his colouring; the strong opposition of tints is not calculated for deception, but without which Painting could but coldly imitate that richness and transparency which Nature has given to the female face.⁸

What is curious about this rather opaque passage is that it straddles somewhere between the enlightened wisdom that Gainsborough's pictures invalidate the belief "that we see real objects" and the revelation that it is the nature of painting to encourage such a willing suspension of disbelief. This is precisely the point Shanhagan makes at the outset of his analysis of Gainsborough's portraits of women: "His pieces are masterly and well-chosen imitations of Nature; but we never mistake his Paintings for real flesh and blood, and never find more upon his canvases than ideas."

The "balance sheet of plusses and minusses" method of valuation Reynolds employed in his Discourses effectively subjected styles of painting to his system of classification and attendant valuation.⁹ If Reynolds was not the first to undertake such a task, he was unquestionably the first in England to do it with such inveterate authority. Even though

⁸ Shanhagan, 51-52.

⁹ The expression "balance sheet of plusses and missuses" is borrowed from Lawrence Lipking, The Ordering of the Arts in Eighteenth-Century England (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970) 197-202.

his criticism is addressed almost exclusively to historical art of the near or distant past, his qualitative rhetorical mode complicated matters for ambitious artists in England: adhering to or emulating one style rather than another, or devising one's own from a compilation of past and contemporary manners could no longer be deemed an impartial or spontaneous gesture. Reynolds' stylistic classifications are riddled with implicit and unequivocal value judgements -- judgements which are perhaps all the more forceful as a consequence of his ostensible objectivity in addition to his unchallenged omnipotence as the Academy's first and foremost theoretician. Style, therefore, became a nexus for assigning artistic allegiances with past artists and schools, as well as a way of identifying marks of originality and articulating features of novelty. And, just as Reynolds found features to praise and censure in virtually all the historical styles he discusses, he consigned both admiration and admonition to signs of originality and novelty in individual artists both past and present.

Balancing the positive and negative characteristics of a specific style or painter is an overriding feature of the Discourses. Lawrence Lipking has described this heuristic device as Reynolds' "pendulums," which is a vivid and appropriate term that calls attention to the dialectical swings of his arguments.¹⁰ In the fourteenth Discourse, a

¹⁰ Ibid., 200.

lecture dedicated to Gainsborough and delivered four months after his death, Reynolds employs this method with such finely-tuned rhetorical rigor that his critical analysis of a fellow founding member of the Academy concludes in a particularly cryptic conundrum.¹¹ The fourteenth Discourse is Reynolds' only piece of extended criticism on the work of a contemporary artist, as well as the first and longest single discussion of Gainsborough's art. These facts alone have warranted the close scrutiny of the Reynolds' text for its intimate and articulate discussion of Gainsborough's strengths and deficiencies.

In his dissertation, "The Critical Responses to Thomas Gainsborough's Painting: A Study of the Contemporary Perception and Materiality of Gainsborough's Art," David Brenneman highlights the importance of the fourteenth Discourse in establishing the critical tone for subsequent analyses of Gainsborough's work. Brenneman argues that political intrigues and affiliations dictated and demanded the qualified language of Reynolds' public dedicatory lecture on a prominent (albeit impudent) founding member of the Royal Academy -- a conspiratorial thesis which is intriguing. There

¹¹ Lipking concludes that Reynolds' fourteenth Discourse is so precisely tuned, or so evenly balanced, that the ultimate conclusion is left to the judgement of the reader. See also Brenneman, 180-208, on the rhetorical twists and turns of the fourteenth Discourse and a summarization of the historiography of the President's dedicatory lecture. I agree with Brenneman's assertion that Reynolds' piece on Gainsborough is not as objective (or balanced) as Lipking claims it to be. (p. 199)

is, however, another angle from which to view the President's hedging evaluation of Gainsborough's merit: through the refraction of a deeply personal anxiety toward the work of a contemporary who for more than a decade hence had been generally considered to be his closest contender. Reynolds states, for instance, that

the peculiarity of his [Gainsborough's] manner, or style, or we may call it -- the language in which he expressed his ideas, has been considered by many as his greatest defect. [...] whether this peculiarity was a defect or not, intermixed, as it was, with great beauties, of some of which it was probably the cause, it becomes a proper subject of criticism and enquiry to a painter.¹²

Here Reynolds hesitates to describe the peculiarity of Gainsborough's style as beautiful; suggesting instead that the overabundance of "great beauties" is the probable cause of the greatest defect of his pictures. "Great beauties," Reynolds seems to be warning, become defective beauty. Continuing on the subject of style, Reynolds raises a point which critics had so often underscored in relation to Gainsborough's exhibited pictures:

A novelty and peculiarity of manner, as it is often a cause of our approbation, so likewise it is often a ground of censure; as being contrary to the practice of other painters, in whose manner we have been initiated, and in whose favour we have perhaps been prepossessed from our infancy, for, fond as we are of novelty, we are upon the whole creatures of habit. However, it is certain, that all those odd scratches and marks, which on a close examination, are so observable in Gainsborough's pictures, and which even to experienced painters appear rather the effect of accident than design; this chaos, this uncouth and shapeless appearance, by a kind of magick, at a certain distance assumes form, and all the parts seem to drop into their proper places, so that we

¹² Reynolds, 312.

can hardly refuse acknowledging the full effect of diligence, under the appearance of chance and hasty negligence. That Gainsborough himself considered this peculiarity in his manner, and the power it possesses of exciting surprise, as a beauty in his works, I think may be inferred from the eager desire which we know he always expressed, that his pictures, at the Exhibition, should be seen near, as well as at a distance.¹³

Ironically, the "magick" to which Reynolds refers -- that unique quality of Gainsborough's pictures to allow the eye to perform the transformation from chaos to order, shapelessness to form, as one steps back into the proper viewing position -- was one which the Royal Academy had sabotaged a mere four years earlier when the Hanging Committee refused to comply with the painter's demands. A few lines later, Reynolds again qualifies the powerful effect of Gainsborough's pictures by stating that

the methods he used for producing effect, had very much the appearance of the work of an artist who had never learned from others the usual and regular practice belonging to the art; but still, like a man of strong intuitive perception of what was required, he found out a way of his own to accomplish his purpose. (emphasis mine)¹⁴

In short, the rhetorical maneuvers that weave through the fourteenth Discourse are a playing out of an anxiety about style.

As the adjudicator of the merits of his nemesis, the President's rhetorical machinations bear the marks of psychic displacements in the guise of a much qualified eulogy. Always the ardent pedagogue, Reynolds introduces his lecture entitled

¹³ Ibid., 312-313.

¹⁴ Ibid., 313.

"Character of Gainsborough: His Excellencies and Defects" by stating his aim:

In discoursing therefore on the talents of the late Mr Gainsborough, my object is, not so much to praise or to blame him, as to draw from his excellencies and defects, matter of instruction to the Students in our Academy.¹⁵

In his review of Reynolds' fourteenth Discourse, the generally incredulous Henry Fuseli surprisingly takes the President's stated objective at face value:

Among the series of discourses composed and delivered by the president, for the instruction of academic youth, this is the sole one dedicated to the memory of one of their own body, a deceased member; which tho' not biographical, draws its mass of precepts and inferences chiefly from the habits and practice of an individual; and if the dextrous singularities of original talent are among the proper objects to which the eye of youth ought to be directed, what could more properly command the attention of an auditory of artists and students, (no matter of what nation) than the name and example of our lamented Gainsborough?¹⁶

Balancing admiration for the "customs and habits" that brought Gainsborough's art "to that high degree of excellence" with doubts as to their expediency as guidelines for impressionable young Academicians is customary to the rhetoric of the Discourses. Yet, in the case of the fourteenth Discourse there was much more at stake for Reynolds than there was in his judgements of the Roman, Venetian, or Flemish schools. Reynolds was no doubt the best and worst possible judge of a contemporary who was so near him in excellency and so far from

¹⁵ Ibid., 301.

¹⁶ [Henry Fuseli], "A Discourse delivered to the Students of the Royal Academy, on the Distribution of the Prizes, 10 December 1788," Analytical Review 5 (September 1789): 38.

him in style.¹⁷ He constructs Gainsborough as a "natural" painter with a "strong intuitive perception," which is to place him at the opposite pole of his own learned approach to painting and his "Grand Style" -- so opposite, one suspects, that the President wished to deflect, with his ponderous rhetoric, the inevitable contrast between himself and Gainsborough. Reynolds' language is far too carefully wrought to allow rhizomatous anxieties to surface too clearly, but the subtle strikes against Gainsborough are sufficient to render him impotent as a contender for the highest artistic laurels, or in any case undeserving of them. Gainsborough's "natural" approach to art, according to Reynolds, was the artist's way of compensating for his "lack of academical training." His "strong intuitive perception," however admirable, cannot compare with the resolute intellectual conception that Reynolds (and by extension the Academy) clearly values above all in art.¹⁸ Only once in the fourteenth Discourse does Reynolds come near to revealing how heavily he has stacked the

¹⁷ On how Reynolds' technique was so different from that of Gainsborough, see David Bomford, Ashok Roy and David Saunders, "Gainsborough's Dr Ralph Schomberg," National Gallery Technical Bulletin 12 (1988): 44-57.

¹⁸ Later observers would see the characteristics Reynolds attributes to Gainsborough in a fully positive light. Richard and Samuel Redgrave provide a good example of the radical move away from the aesthetics that dominated the Academy in the eighteenth century: "the fact that he was never warped by foreign study, and the independent bent of his own character, kept him from following any of the old methods, and left him free to adopt a style and manner entirely his own." They go on to contrast Gainsborough and Reynolds, concluding that "Gainsborough had more executive power than his critic." A Century of British Painters (London, 1866) 68-69.

deck against Gainsborough; but as with any anxious gambler, feigned fairness masks the disingenuousness of the cardplayer who knows he holds the winning hand:

I am well aware how I lay myself open to the censure and ridicule of the academical professors of other nations, in preferring the humble attempts of Gainsborough to the works of those regular graduates in the great historical style. But we have the sanction of all mankind in preferring genius in a lower rank of art, to feebleness and insipidity in the highest.¹⁹

Reynolds gives his rival the honor of "genius," but by a chicane twist he minimizes it for it is exhibited only "in a lower rank of art." The hierarchy is restored and the true honor of genius rests in the great historical style and its great practitioners.

An anonymous reviewer for the Morning Post not only accepted Reynolds' analysis of Gainsborough as perfectly well intentioned but announced that the President "entirely effaced the opinion [...] that a mean jealousy subsisted between him and Gainsborough...."²⁰ The rivalry between the two may not have reached the pitch of "mean jealousy," but there is ample evidence that each was keenly aware of other's artistic strengths and weaknesses. Reynolds had the opportunity to outline his cool-headed observations in detail before an attentive audience and to document them for posterity. Gainsborough was perhaps content to express his envious

¹⁹ Reynolds, 302-303.

²⁰ Anon., "Royal Academy. The Discourse," Morning Post 12 December 1788: 3.

admiration for Reynolds' artistic agility by cursing him in private: "D--m him, how various he is."²¹

Gainsborough was right to admire Reynolds' variousness, for the President was a liberal and deft borrower of motifs and mannerism, as well as an amateur alchemist of sorts, more often to the detriment of the longevity and stability of his pigments, and to the horrors of conservators.²² Gainsborough displayed greater "variousness" in his works on paper than on canvas, especially those drawings in which he combined different media for heightened effect, which was the productive playing field for the formal ideas he subsequently brought to his commissioned portraits.²³ If variousness better applies to Gainsborough's drawings than his paintings, "uniformity" and "facility" were terms frequently used to describe his style of execution in both drawing and painting.²⁴ The characteristic feature of uniformity of style in Gainsborough's portraits of women was a rallying point for Shanahan just as "facility" was for Jackson the epitome of Gainsborough's unique skill as a draughtsman:

²¹ Quoted in Gainsborough and Reynolds: Contrasts in Royal Patronage (London: The Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace, 1994) 8.

²² M. Kirby Talley Jr., "All Good Pictures Crack:" Sir Joshua Reynolds' Practice and Studio," Reynolds, ed. Nicholas Penny (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1986), 55-70.

²³ See Derow, 259-271.

²⁴ On "facility" as it pertains to Gainsborough, see Jackson, 158-159.

Many of his pictures have no other merit than this facility; and yet, having it, are undoubtedly valuable. His drawings almost rest on this quality alone for their value; but possessing it in an eminent degree (and as no drawing can have any merit where it is wanting) his works, therefore, in this branch of the art, approach nearer to perfection than his paintings.²⁵

Jackson, a close friend of the painter, likely possessed examples of Gainsborough's drawings since, as stated by Bate, "the few [drawings] he parted with during his life were either gifts to very particular friends, or select persons of fashion;...he could never be prevailed upon to receive money for those effusions of his genius."²⁶ However, Gainsborough's submission of two series of landscapes drawings "in imitation of oil painting" to the Academy in 1772 as well as a book of drawings he had submitted for exhibition two years earlier is evidence that the painter was more eager to publicize his drawings than his alleged modesty about them might otherwise suggest.²⁷ While Gainsborough's drawings did not attract much critical notice in their day, Jackson made this assessment of the artist's facility in execution -- that which delivers "the superiority of pleasure" -- ten years after Gainsborough's death. His predilection for the artist's drawings may well have been a response to the surge of interest in the sketch towards the end of the century, due in part to the rise of the

²⁵ Ibid., 158.

²⁶ Bate, The Morning Herald 10 October 1788. See also Whitley, Gainsborough 315-316.

²⁷ Gainsborough sold his drawings through the dealer Panton Betew while in London during the early 1740s. Hayes and Stainton, Gainsborough Drawings 2.

theory of the picturesque for which the sketch and the rapidly executed watercolor were the preferred media. The contrast between Bate's flattering description of them as "effusions of his genius" and the satirical though curiously vivid description of them as "moppings" by another contemporary, the gossip-writer Henry Angelo, is evidence that the artistic status of Gainsborough's sketches was still subject to debate during and for some time after the artist's life.²⁸

Based on the principle of transforming nature into art according to a series of aesthetisizing manipulations of a natural scene, the picturesque proposed correct ways to experience the native landscape in both its "original" and its "copied" form. The Reverend William Gilpin's (1724-1804) Three Essays: On Picturesque Beauty; on Picturesque Travel; and On Sketching Landscape, published in 1792, characterized the picturesque in terms of a kind of visual beauty found in nature, a manner of experiencing the rural landscape, and a practice of sketching the landscape out of doors.²⁹ Although Gilpin's influential compilation of three essays was not published until after Gainsborough's death, the author's theoretical writings on picturesque tours within Britain began appearing in 1782, and his unpublished manuscripts on the

²⁸ I suspect that Henry Angelo, the son of Domenico Angelo who was a friend of Gainsborough, used the term "moppings" somewhat affectionately. Quoted in Hayes and Stainton, 8.

²⁹ Gilpin, Three Essays. On the popularization of the picturesque, see Bermingham, Landscape and Ideology 83-85.

subject also had attracted a small readership of artists and connoisseurs before its publication.³⁰

Uvedale Price (1749-1829) further theorized the picturesque landscape in his Essay on the Picturesque, published a few years after Gilpin's Three Essays; but, as a gentleman farmer, his focus was less the aestheticization of uncultivated vistas than the private estate garden.³¹ While in Bath, Gainsborough befriended Price and visited him at the family's Foxley estate, in Herefordshire, where the young Price lived with his grandfather, Sir Uvedale Tomkyns Price (1685-1764). Shortly after his arrival at Bath, Gainsborough painted a three-quarter length portrait of Tomkyns Price which depicts the sitter not within a landscape setting but rather surrounded by signifiers of his interest in the depicted landscape (fig. 34). In his left hand he holds a drawing of a landscape and in the other a drawing instrument. Positioned at the same latitudinal plane near the bottom frame of the picture, and poised as virtual mirror reflections of each other in the manner in which they hold the tool for drawing

³⁰ The first of Gilpin's "Tours," a tour of the Wye Valley, was published with sepia illustrations in 1782. See From Gainsborough to Constable: The Emergence of Naturalism in British Landscape Painting 1750-1810 (Sudbury: Gainsborough's House; London: The Leger Galleries, 1991) 54. Barrell, Dark Side of the Landscape 167 (footnote 58), suggests that Gilpin's writings had a negligible impact among painters of his generation. But my point is that there is a complimentary fit between the emerging discourse of the picturesque and certain aspects of Gainsborough's pictorial and formal strategies.

³¹ Price's essay was published in 1794-1798. See Birmingham, Landscape and Ideology, esp. 66-70.

and the product of its proficient application, the sitter is conveyed as a skilled draughtsman of landscape. Directly opposite the drawing in his hand hangs a large framed landscape, and two large folios, presumably filled with sketches, lean beneath it, suggesting that Price is also a collector and connoisseur of such rustic local scenes. The framed landscape on the wall is a drawing by Gainsborough and could well be one of the many drawings from nature he made during his visits to Foxley, and surely a sign of Price's taste to admire Gainsborough's picturesque scenery.³²

An old label once affixed to Gainsborough's drawing Beech Trees at Foxley, with Yazor Church in the Distance identifies it as "A study from nature, by Gainsborough when on a visit to Foxley..." (fig. 35). Indeed, Gainsborough went on landscape sketching excursions and produced a drawing of himself sitting on a grassy knoll, poised with sketch board balanced with one hand and pencil in the other, and gazing intently toward some natural ensemble beyond the frame (fig. 36).³³ Judging from Gainsborough's attire and youthful appearance the drawing probably dates from the early 1750s, when the practice of drawing out of doors was not yet valued as a picturesque endeavor.³⁴ An exceptionally large body of landscape drawings

³² Cormack, 70.

³³ Another drawing, conventionally titled Man with Claude Glass, may also be a self-portrait dating from the same period. See Hunt, Gardens and the Picturesque 174-175.

by Gainsborough exists, many of which, particularly among the earlier examples, are presumed to have been drawn directly from nature; however, the mixed media employed in the making of the image suggests a more involved process than that of a plein air sketch.³⁵ Consisting of brown chalk, watercolor and body color over pencil, and brought to a high finish that would become increasingly rare in his later landscape drawings, it seems safe to assume that while the drawing's basic forms may well have been copied from nature, they were completed in the studio. Contours of sprawling foreground shrubbery, rough stones scattered on the curving path, and the irregularly corrugated dead tree on the left are all rendered with fine, empirically descriptive lines. Yet the composition seems too perfect -- too "picturesque" -- to be a truthful copy of nature: a perfect balance between symmetry and asymmetry, contrived order and natural disorder, as well as a synthesis of classical Claudian principles of composition and seventeenth-century Dutch rustic naturalism. Dominating the foreground, raised on an ever-so-slightly uneven spherical hillock, is a pair of Beech trees, one leaning to the left and the other to the right. The curve of the path on the left is echoed by the rough diagonal of the sloping fence on the opposite side of the hillock, and the whole is framed on one side by a pair of contrasting trees and on the other by the

³⁴ Susan Foister, "Young Gainsborough and the English Taste for Dutch Landscape," Young Gainsborough (London: National Gallery, 1997) 8.

³⁵ Quoted in Cormack, 70.

atmospherically blurred bushy foliage of the tallest of a distant band of trees.

In its composition, the drawing appears to be an exercise in reconciling a variety of rules and motifs from different landscape traditions with the observation of an actual local scene -- an even humbler artistic endeavor, in the minds of most eighteenth-century aestheticians, than that of the Dutch landscapists of the previous century. By not subscribing to any one tradition, by not strictly imitating any one manner of depicting nature, Gainsborough conjures his own style of landscape image-making, and it is one remarkable for the balanced attention he gives to form and content: to the representational matter of forms and to the formal matters that constitute style. Beech Trees at Foxley is an excellent example of this balanced attention -- the crossbreeding of continental traditions with a decidedly English, though somewhat simulated, scene on the one hand and the mixing of different materials to produce pleasurable visual effects on the other. Contemporary with the drawing is an oil painting of the corresponding scene, only with the addition of some appropriately rustic staffage, which is not the only example of his duplicating the identical image in two separate media: varnished watercolor and oils.³⁶ In such cases it appears that what was represented was secondary to how it was

³⁶ For example, the oil painting Wooded Village Scene with Mounted Peasant, Figures, and Animals and the varnished and mounted on canvas watercolor Wooded Landscape with Village Scene. Derow, 269.

represented, for the aim seems to have been to compare the essential qualities, or the formal possibilities, of one medium against the other. Indeed, Gainsborough's portrait of Price, where the sitter is positioned indoors but everywhere framed by representations of the natural landscape, is all about this comparison. It is also a poignant example of the dialectical relationship between landscape and portraiture so central to Gainsborough's oeuvre.

Just as Gainsborough "imitated" the look of painting in the medium of drawing, he also transferred the technique of drawing and watercolor to the medium of oil painting. The complicated procedure he adopted for his varnished watercolors evinces his investment in producing formal effects through the experimental manipulation of materials. And it is interesting to note also that the methods and ideas developed in works done for pleasure were brought to his professional work done for commission and gain. This applies both to his landscape drawings and to his fashion plate drawings, both of which were "transferred" to his large-scale portrait paintings.

Fortunately, a letter written by Gainsborough to Jackson gives a detailed description of the artist's technique for producing varnished works on paper such as those "drawings in imitation of oil painting" he had exhibited the previous year.³⁷ The laborious procedure surely would have disinclined

³⁷ Derow has argued convincingly that Gainsborough's "drawings in imitation of oil paint" exhibited at the Academy

any timorous amateur. To summarize the main points of the procedure, special paper had to be cut, glued, let to dry, "stretched," dipped in skimmed milk, let to dry again, redipped in the same skimmed milk solution for more highlights, "floated" in gum water, dried again, and then varnished three times with spirit varnish.³⁸ Drawings produced in this manner, such as A Woodland Pool with Rocks and Plants dating from the latter 1760s, resulted in a glossy surface not characteristic of drawings and watercolors produced in the standard manner or with conventional materials (fig. 37). The letter ends with Gainsborough bidding Jackson to "Swear now never to impart my secret to any one living" -- a sure clue that the artist coveted this technical invention.

The salient qualities of Gainsborough's importation of drawing and watercolor methods to oil paint are twofold: pigments diluted with such a high concentration of turpentine that their consistency is much like that of watercolor washes, and an execution which is "sketch-like" and evidently carried out with great and confident speed. The latter quality would expose his finished oil paintings to censure as "unfinished." Years after his death, Margaret Gainsborough recalled her father's habit of using excessively thinned colors: "his colours were very liquid and if he did not hold the palette

in 1772 were executed according to the method the artist describes to Jackson.

³⁸ Letters of Thomas Gainsborough, 29 January 1773, Letter #103, 177-179.

right would run over."³⁹ Modern microscopic photography confirms her recollection, but the unaided eye is sufficient to detect the wash-like consistency of many of the passages of Gainsborough's landscapes and portraits in oil.⁴⁰ At the same time, however, it is a testament to the painter's sensitivity toward the effects which can be produced by varying the texture of his pigments that opaque ribbons of impasto intermingle with the broad, semi-transparent fields of color washes on the surface of his canvases.⁴¹

It seems reasonable to propose that what Jackson appreciated in Gainsborough's drawings was central to what was stylistically significant in his paintings also -- most especially in the execution of his landscape settings and fashionable accessories -- even if Jackson supposed the washy, hatching style of the drawings to be inappropriate for the medium of oil paint.⁴² To return to Jackson's praise for Gainsborough's drawings, "No man," he writes,

³⁹ Quoted in John Hayes, Thomas Gainsborough (London: Tate Gallery, 1980) 39.

⁴⁰ Bomford, Roy and Saunders, 45.

⁴¹ The original thicker paint textures of many of Gainsborough's paintings were destroyed during the nineteenth and early twentieth century when the relining of canvases generally involved heavy ironing, possibly along with high temperature. Pemberton-Pigott, 43.

⁴² This opinion was shared by Jackson: "The first consideration in a portrait, especially to the purchaser, is, that it be a perfect likeness of the sitter -- in this respect, his skill was unrivalled -- the next point is, that it is a good picture -- here, he has often failed as succeeded. [Gainsborough] has failed by affecting a thin washy colouring, and a hatching style of pencilling -- but when,

ever possessed methods so various in producing effect, and all excellent -- his washy, hatching style, was here in its proper element. The subject which is scarce enough for a picture, is sufficient for a drawing, and the hasty loose handling, which in painting is poor, is rich in a transparent wash of bistre and Indian ink. Perhaps the quickest effects ever produced, were in some of his drawings....⁴³

It is precisely this "hasty loose handling" and "washy, hatching style" which Gilpin promoted for the sketching of the picturesque landscape. What is perhaps implicit in Jackson's admiration for Gainsborough's drawings becomes, a few years later, explicit in Gilpin's published accounts of the picturesque sketch. Among the characteristics Gilpin commends in the sketched image is the trace of spontaneity and rapid execution which produces the effect of "that amusing indistinctness."⁴⁴ Furthermore, Gilpin's recommendation that "by aiming to give those bold, those strong characteristic touches which excite the imagination; and lead it to form half the picture itself" fits well with aspects of Gainsborough's style.

Detractors of Gainsborough's loose, sketchy technique and the resulting "unfinished" appearance of his paintings associated it with sloppiness and carelessness, whereas supporters of it associated it, as did Jackson in his

from accident or choice, he painted in the manly substantial style of Vandyke, he was very little, if at all, his inferior." (pp. 154-155)

⁴³ Jackson, 157.

⁴⁴ Gilpin, Observations Relative to Picturesque Beauty Made in the Year 1772, On Several Parts of England, Particularly the Mountains and Lakes of Cumberland and Westmoreland (London, 1786).

discussion of the artist's drawings, with great "facility" and the intuitive manipulation of materials, which increasingly were becoming positive artistic attributes in and of themselves. "Becoming" is the crux of the matter concerning the critical reception of Gainsborough's manner of execution. His mature production is situated at the historical juncture at which these qualities were beginning to be championed as evidence of the artist's individuality -- in short, as the direct indices of artistic genius. Objections to the aesthetic programs of Gainsborough's antithesis, Reynolds, would soon follow this shift in artistic valuation.

Reynolds' fourteenth Discourse provides a germane, if halting and qualified, contemporary insight into Gainsborough's distinctively loose brushwork and sketchy manner. After commending Gainsborough's handling, his "undetermined manner" from which "the imagination supplies the rest, and his "painter's eye for colouring," Reynolds concludes with a tempered warning to his audience:

Gainsborough possessed this quality of lightness of manner and effect, I think, to an unexampled degree of excellence; but it must be acknowledged, at the same time, that the sacrifice which he made to this ornament of our art, was too great; it was, in reality, preferring the lesser excellencies to the greater.⁴⁵

Echoing his criticism of Gainsborough's limitation to "a lower rank of art," Reynolds here enforces another hierarchy in which "ornament" -- that stylistic quality to which Gainsborough "sacrificed" himself -- is relegated to "lesser

⁴⁵ Reynolds, 314-316.

excellencies." Reynolds' choice of words indicates clearly his preference for the efforts of the mind over the pleasures of the eye.

The appearance of a spontaneous and rapid manner of execution would become a hallmark among British painters a generation after Gainsborough, but admiration for a style of painting which waived clarity of detail in favor of broad effects was already being voiced by a number of critics, connoisseurs, and theorists by the 1780s. Referring specifically to Gainsborough's landscape paintings in his An Essay on Landscape Painting of 1782, Joseph Holden Pott remarked that the early examples were "painted with a strict attention to truth." In discussing the later landscapes, however, he writes that

Nothing can be more charming, forcible, and harmonious than his colouring now is, his pencilling is broad and masterly, the light and shade wonderfully well managed, and the effect of his pictures not to be equalled by any master, antient [sic] or modern.⁴⁶

Gainsborough's mature drawings, watercolors, and oil paintings exhibit a commitment to the formal aspects of image making which has often been considered unequalled among British painters before Turner.⁴⁷ The end result of his images betrays the depth of this commitment as having been rather

⁴⁶ Joseph Holden Pott, An Essay on Landscape Painting (London, 1782) 74.

⁴⁷ For a discussion of this point, see Elizabeth Einberg, Manners and Morals, Hogarth and British Painting 1700-1760 (London: Tate Gallery, 1987) 166.

more erratic than consistent, and always tempered: in Gainsborough's work the magic of representation always overcomes the materials to which that magic owes its power. Yet, mimetic readability always mingles with formal allure, or the allure -- that is, with the informe quality of Gainsborough's paintings which Reynolds described as "chaos." It is precisely where the painterly "chaos" of Gainsborough's style makes the strongest challenge to representational mandate of his imagery that his distinctive style announces itself most forcefully, voluptuously, and perhaps even most boastfully.

For Gainsborough, the act of representing, be it in painting a portrait or a drawing a beech tree, at some level required working from a model.⁴⁸ An example of his need to work from a model is his use of lay figures for the painting of the figure, once the face of the sitter was sufficiently completed. This was not an uncommon practice among portraitists at the time.⁴⁹ Jackson uses the term "laymen" to refer to the small human figures, or dolls, that Gainsborough made himself for use as models: "He made little laymen for his figures. All the female figures in his Park-scene he drew

⁴⁸ And this included animals since Gainsborough reportedly brought pigs into his studio to paint Girl with Pigs. (See Whitley, Gainsborough 187.) Another report of bringing animals into the studio comes from Jackson: [Gainsborough] "never chose to paint anything from invention, when he could have the objects themselves. ...and many an ass has been led into his painting room." (footnote, 167-168)

⁴⁹ David Mannings, "At the Portrait Painter's," History Today 27 (May 1977): 286.

from a doll of his own creation."⁵⁰ This too was not altogether novel, though it was more commonplace in France than in England.⁵¹ Indeed, Gainsborough would have seen such mannequins in use at Gravelot's studio in the 1740s and Arthur Devis employed them for his conversation pieces. Gravelot, it should be remembered, was a student of Boucher and became an instructor at St Martin's Lane Academy during his years in London. His influence on Gainsborough while both artists were affiliated with that Academy, as well as his importance in importing and promoting a taste for early eighteenth-century French painting to England was decisive, although a recent analysis of the influence of French art on Gainsborough argues that the "Englishness" of his early work remains its most striking characteristic. Given that this view of Gainsborough's "Englishness" was published in an catalogue accompanying an exhibition at England's flagship art museum it may be more of a revelation about the deep nostalgia that penetrates national self-definition than a denial of the resonance of "Frenchness" in Gainsborough's imagery.⁵²

⁵⁰ Jackson, 167 (footnote). On the purchase of lay-figures by the Academy and the Incorporated Society ("upon which drapery could be arranged for the students to paint"), see Whitley, Artists and their Friends vol. 1, 278. Here Whitley also mentions that "Gainsborough's best lay-figure, for example, 'most ingeniously constructed with brass-work joints' was sold after the death of his widow for three pounds."

⁵¹ Mary Woodall, "Gainsborough's use of Models," Antiques 70 (October 1956): 364.

⁵² Olivier Meslay, "The Youthful Gainsborough and French Art", Young Gainsborough (London: National Gallery, 1997) 16.

According to Jackson, Gainsborough also made and used models of horses and cows in this manner, such as the plaster model of a stocky, stooping horse which is now in the collection of a descendant of John Constable.⁵³ Presumably these dolls and models allowed Gainsborough to work out a three-dimensional composition in miniature, making modifications and rearranging elements, before committing it to the two-dimensional page or canvas.

Gainsborough also made models of landscapes for the same purpose. These miniature landscape models consisted of pieces of the landscape itself. Reynolds describes Gainsborough's construction of these models in the fourteenth Discourse:

from the fields he brought into his painting-room, stumps of trees, weeds, and animals of various kinds; and designed them, not from memory, but immediately from the objects. He even framed a kind of model of landscapes on his table; composed of broken stones, dried herbs, and pieces of looking glass, which he magnified and improved into rocks, trees, and water.⁵⁴

Uvedale Price also recounts Gainsborough's making of such models,⁵⁵ and a third account, from an anonymous "Amateur of Painting," recalls having witnessed Gainsborough making

models -- or rather thoughts -- for landscape scenery on a little old-fashioned folding oak table, which stood under the kitchen dresser.... This table, held sacred for the purpose, he would order to be brought to his parlour, and thereon compose his designs. He would place cork or coal for his foregrounds; make middle grounds of

⁵³ Woodall, "Gainsborough's use of Models," 363.

⁵⁴ Reynolds, 304.

⁵⁵ Quoted in Hayes and Stainton, 116.

sand or clay, bushes of mosses and lichens, and set up the distant woods of broccoli.⁵⁶

The fact that Reynolds mentions Gainsborough's landscape models in the fourteenth Discourse suggests that he considered it particularly noteworthy -- although he warns that "Such methods may be nothing better than contemptible and mischievous trifling; or they may be aids."⁵⁷ The practice seems to have been less unusual and less contemptible a few decades later: Gainsborough's contemporary Paul Sandby made landscape models "to draw from," which were sold at Christie's in 1811 a few years after the painter's death.⁵⁸

In their narration of Gainsborough's miniature landscape productions, Reynolds and Price underline the artist's commitment to working from a model -- from some visual reference -- and on some level they are not incorrect in this assertion. However, what they fail to recognize is that over and above their ostensibly guileless purpose as "models," the significance of these sooty earth and vegetal ensembles is their role in the creative process, or rather the conceptual process, of art making. What they signal is the devotion to the study of how the essential properties of various media can be mixed, merged, manipulated to produce different effects within one work, and in two independent, yet related, works, or the same effect in different materials. His treatment of

⁵⁶ Somerset House Gazette (1824), 348. Quoted in Waterhouse, Gainsborough 16.

⁵⁷ Reynolds, 304.

⁵⁸ Hayes and Stainton, 116.

landscape models as the visual source for sketches and paintings was thus not unlike his treatment of fashionable clothing -- in the construction of a believable ensemble from the rendering of various textiles, trimmings, and accessories which related to actual objects but were simultaneously imaginary and idealized. An analogy might be the playing and replaying of the identical musical composition on two different instruments, or two different instrumental ensembles: the same musical composition played first by a few string instruments and then by a full orchestra. Such an analogy would have pleased Gainsborough.⁵⁹ In his "Character of Gainsborough" Jackson drew a parallel between "the superiority of pleasure which arises from the execution of Cramer" on the violin and what "is enjoyed from the facility of a Gainsborough."⁶⁰ An essay on Gainsborough and his musical friends, written two centuries after Jackson's account, makes a bold statement about the parallel between music and Gainsborough's landscapes: "If music is the most abstract of the arts, it is true also that Gainsborough's landscapes are as nearly abstract as any in the eighteenth century."⁶¹ In Jackson's view, what is most "musical" about

⁵⁹ On Gainsborough's interest in music, see Brenneman, 110-136; and Lindsay Stainton, Gainsborough and his Musical Friends (London: Greater London Council, 1977).

⁶⁰ Jackson, 158.

⁶¹ Stainton, Gainsborough and his Musical Friends n/p. Stainton's essay also discusses Gainsborough's "musical" commissions, such as his contribution to the decoration of

Gainsborough's landscapes -- and by extension the most "abstract" -- is "the beauty and harmony of their forms and colouring," which is to say, those formal characteristics that constitute Gainsborough's distinctive style.

One further example of Gainsborough's experimentation in the genre of landscape imagery should be noted: the transparencies he painted for his show-box, more often referred to as his "peepshow box."⁶² Best described as a rudimentary slide projector, or, as Whitley describes it, "a little theater," the peepshow box magnified small scale landscape paintings on glass through a lense for that purpose and illuminated them from behind with candles.⁶³ Six of the extremely delicate glass paintings as well as the peepshow box produced for their viewing are extant and housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum. The clever optical device had a precedent in the transparent shades Philippe de Loutherbourg produced in 1773 while a scene-master at Drury Lane.⁶⁴ Gainsborough began his peepshow project shortly after Loutherbourg's completion of his Eidophusikon in 1781, which

Johann Christian Bach's and Carl Friedrich Abel's new concert room in London, which opened in 1775.

⁶² On Gainsborough's peep-show box, see Jonathan Mayne, "Thomas Gainsborough's Exhibition Box," Victoria and Albert Museum Bulletin 1 (July 1965): 17-24.

⁶³ Whitley, Gainsborough 370. On the growing fascination with optical devices, see Jonathan Crary, Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century (Cambridge Mass.: MIT Press, 1990).

⁶⁴ Mentioned in Waterhouse, Gainsborough 25.

Gainsborough visited repeatedly and where he is reported to have assisted as a kind of "stage hand."⁶⁵

Although the great currency Gainsborough invested in the formal aspects of painting may solicit the projection of notions of a precocious leaning toward abstraction onto his paintings, to do so would be to miss the fundamental enigma of his mature production: that he pushes the limits of his materials while he simultaneously pushes the limits of representation. The watery colors and rhythmic strokes invite the viewer to take pleasure in how the image is made, but we never lose sight of what is represented in the image. This is not to say that Gainsborough did not go far enough, but rather that the object of representation -- the image as a totality or the objects that in their totality comprise the image -- was both the vehicle and the limitation of his formal innovation and technical experimentation. His production and use of models -- dolls for his fancy pictures and maquettes for his landscapes -- is telling proof of this apparent contradiction. By making models and remaking the "image" of them into another image, Gainsborough was essentially making and remaking the same image, translating it from three-dimensionality to two, from one set of materials to another altogether different medium or media. In that translation mimetic integrity is maintained, but formal possibilities are

⁶⁵ Interestingly, the paintings Gainsborough and other artists were commissioned to produce for Bach's and Abel's new London concert room were also backlit with candles. Waterhouse, Gainsborough 25 and 33.

enacted. Characteristics of this formalistic motive were fundamental to Gainsborough's portrait studio practice as well.

The methods employed by Gainsborough in his production of portraits are described in the memoirs of Ozias Humphry (1742-1810), a Royal Academician who resided in Bath in the early 1760 during which time he became acquainted with Gainsborough. Gainsborough's "Painting Room," he writes, "even by Day (a kind of darkened Twilight) had scarcely any Light; and our young Friend has seen him, whilst his Subjects have been sitting to him, when neither they or their pictures were scarcely discernible." He continues to describe how the canvas was

so placed upon the Eisel [sic] as to be close to the Subject he was painting, which gave him the Opportunity (as he commonly painted standing) of comparing the Dimensions and Effects of the Copy, with the original both near and at a distance; and by this method (with incessant study and exertion) he acquired the power of giving the Masses, and general Forms of his models with the utmost exactness. Having thus settled the Ground Work of his Portraits, he let in (of necessity) more light, for the finishing of them; but his correct preparation was of the last Importance, and enabled him to secure the proportions of his Features as well as the general Contours of Objects with uncommon Truth.⁶⁶

John Thomas Smith added to Humphry's description, stating that Gainsborough painted

with pencils on sticks full six feet in length, and his method of using them was this: he placed himself and his

⁶⁶ Ozias Humphry, "Biographical Memoir", MSS., c.1802 (Original Correspondence of Ozias Humphry, R.A. vol. 1: Royal Academy Library).

canvas at a right angle with the sitter, so that he stood still, and touched the features of his picture exactly at the same distance at which he viewed his sitter.⁶⁷

A number of curious ideas arise from these accounts, the most obvious of which is the high premium Gainsborough put on capturing a likeness: that he should see the copy developing on the canvas -- coming to light -- in the same way that the sitter would become increasingly clear to the eye as light was let into the room. The result, according to these observers, was an "uncommon Truth," an uncommon resemblance between the "original" and its "copy" -- two physical entities towards which Gainsborough seems to have wished to establish a similar physical relationship.

These passages also suggest why Gainsborough would have been so deeply concerned with the hanging of his pictures, not only in the context of the Academy but also when portraits were delivered to their owners. Already in 1757, before his reputation as a portraitist was secure, he advised a patron on how his portrait should be hung: "I should be glad [if] you'd place your picture as far from the light as possible; observing to let the light fall from the left."⁶⁸ This concern would eventually become a zealous preoccupation culminating in Gainsborough's ultimatum to the Royal Academy over the issue of hanging in 1784. Sympathetic critics

⁶⁷ John Thomas Smith, Nollekens and his Times, Comprehending a Life of that Celebrated Sculptor and memoirs of Several Contemporary Artists vol. 1 (London, 1828) 186.

⁶⁸ Gainsborough to a client in Colchester (probably Robert Edgar), Letters of Thomas Gainsborough, Letter #24, 24 February 1757, 61.

repeatedly mentioned the harm inappropriate hanging at the Academy did to the delicately crafted effects of Gainsborough's painting. Several reviews of the 1781 exhibition mention the problem of poor hanging in specific reference to Gainsborough's submissions. The reviewer for The London Courant, and Westminster Chronicle, for example, singles out Gainsborough's landscape for compliment but laments that "his pictures can never be seen to advantage when the room is filled with company, as they are hung much too near the eye."⁶⁹ Another review makes a similar complaint: "The landscape with cattle passing a bridge, is equally fine; but the effect of it, like that of [Gainsborough's] other productions, is shamefully destroyed, by the picture being hung almost close to the ground."⁷⁰ Still another, wrote that Gainsborough's landscapes

are full of the cheerfulness of the best Flemish painters, the elegance and grace of the first Italian artists, and have as much truth and correctness as has fallen to the share of any subjects of this sort; yet they appear, when near, like mere sketches, and everything is found in their effect.⁷¹

These and other reviewers of that year's exhibition recognized "effect" as a characteristic feature of Gainsborough's paintings, both of his landscapes and his portraits.

⁶⁹ London Courant, and Westminster Chronicle 3 May 1781: 1.

⁷⁰ Whitehall Evening-Post 1-3 May 1781: 2.

⁷¹ Morning Chronicle 5 May 1781: 2.

Gainsborough's painting methods -- from the preparation of his canvas, to the grinding of his pigments, the manner in which he arranged sitter and canvas, controlled the light in his studio, and finally to his stress on correct viewing conditions -- were fundamentally concerned with creating strong visual effects and with ensuring that the full range of his carefully crafted effects would retain their integrity. His disapproval of assistants can surely be interpreted as another manifestation of his insistence upon carrying through his method of creating effects -- his style -- not only from start to finish but also throughout the entire surface of the canvas. The canvas was to bear his, and only his, signature throughout.

To begin, so to speak, from the ground up, already before his move to Bath, Gainsborough customarily used a warm red ground (or priming) followed by a thin layer of silvery grey underpaint. His portrait of Mary Howe has been examined with the aid of X-ray photography and bears out this procedure. Warm red grounds were a key feature of Venetian painting as well as the ground coloring favored by Watteau, but Gainsborough's use of red grounds (sometimes veering toward a pinkish tone and at other times toward an orange one) sets him apart from British painters of his generation, who generally elected to use the more neutral shades of cool grey or beige generally recommended in contemporary technical manuals.⁷²

⁷² My discussion of Gainsborough's oil painting technique draws liberally on the research of Pemberton-Pigott, "The

After his return to London he elected to use the conventional neutral shades of ground, sometimes adding a warm pink wash, which may indicate that he bought ready-prepared canvases whereas he had to prime his own canvases while outside the metropolis. When he had to prepare his own canvases, however, he seems, with few exceptions, to have chosen red for his grounds.

As in so many of Gainsborough's paintings, the thin consistency of subsequent layers of pigment provide a "window" into the preparatory layers of his canvases.⁷³ The exploitation of ground coloring as a half tone was not unusual among eighteenth-century portraitists in England; however, Gainsborough's watery pigments and "wash" technique facilitated this use of the ground coloring to a greater degree.

As for Gainsborough's choice of pigments, recent analysis by Rica Jones of his early production has yielded more evidence of Gainsborough's non-conformity to conventional methods of his day.⁷⁴ Unfortunately, no similarly detailed analysis of the composition of his materials, based on

Development of the Portrait of Countess Howe," and Rica Jones, "Gainsborough's Materials and Methods," Young Gainsborough (London: National Gallery, 1997).

⁷³ To quote a pithy statement by the London art critic Richard Dorment: "through his use of dead coloring for underpaint\priming and the application of colors so thin and liquid that the underpaint shows through "creating a gorgeous effect of colour changeant." "The Battle of the royal rivals," Daily Telegraph 30 March 1994: 22.

⁷⁴ Jones, "Gainsborough's Materials and Methods," 19-26.

scrapings of pigment and examination of the ground layer, has been undertaken on Gainsborough's later work, but it can be assumed that he continued to employ many of the procedures of these early works. The first observation, which is evident to the unaided eye and confirmed by modern methods of photographic and microscopic analysis, is that his paint is translucent to a far greater degree than that of portraitists of his generation, who tended to use more opaque paints. This is significant in itself but it points to another unique feature of Gainsborough's paints, one which explains their unusual "sparkling" quality. By the second quarter of the eighteenth century, English portraitists were in the habit of painting in one layer, that is, wet-in-wet. Consequently, colors were composed of mixtures of opaque and translucent pigments as well as extenders or fillers (transparent particles) of various consistencies ranging in texture from fine to coarse. The purpose of adding these extenders to the paint is to increase the workability of the medium and to allow light into the paint layer. What Jones' detailed investigation has revealed is Gainsborough's use of a relatively large ratio of translucent varieties of paint for most of his mixtures and the unusually coarse consistency of his extenders. Among the extenders Gainsborough mixed with his paints is ground glass, which had been used by seventeenth-century Dutch painters, among others, but is not recommended in eighteenth-century sources.⁷⁵ One function of

ground glass as an extender is as a drier for oil paint with the advantage of being less yellow than the more common method of using drying oil for that purpose. Its second function is to add sparkle to the paint. Furthermore, the high proportion of coarse pigments used by Gainsborough is often mixed in a dry state into the medium. This, according to Jones, is unique to Gainsborough in relation to his contemporaries.⁷⁶

As we know, Gainsborough's investment in landscape as well as his sensitivity toward fashion made these pictorial parts vital rather than merely subsidiary to the portrait image as a whole. The use of drapery and background painters was conventional practice among portraitists of his stature in the eighteenth century and he is one of the rare exceptions to this rule.⁷⁷ Yet, given his working methods, his emphasis on the formal aspects of painting and interest in costumes and backgrounds, it should come as no surprise that he elected not to use them. He expressed strong reservations about the matter to Jackson:

There is a branch of painting next in profit to Portrait and quite in your power without any more drawing than I'll answer for your having, which is Drapery and

⁷⁵ Melanie Gifford, A Technical Investigation of Some Dutch Seventeenth-Century Tonal Landscapes (A.I.C. Preprints, Baltimore, 1983), 39-49.

⁷⁶ From discussions with Rica Jones on this specific subject.

⁷⁷ Besides Gainsborough, the few English portraitists of stature who did not use drapery painters or landscape painters are William Hogarth, Jonathan Richardson, and Joseph Highmore. Mannings, "At the Portrait Painter's," 281. See also Waterhouse, Gainsborough 22-23, on the possibility of Gainsborough's limited use of assistants.

Landscape backgrounds. Perhaps you don't know that whilst a Face painter is harassed to death the drapery painter sits and earns 5 or 6 hundred a year, and laughs all the while...⁷⁸

Envy spurs his resentment over what he considers the charmed situation of the drapery and landscape painter who earns a good annual salary without the harrassment of patrons. But to have hired out his portraits to be finished by assistants would have been to sacrifice what was unique to his offerings as a portrait painter. Whether or not it was a priority among eighteenth-century patrons to commission a portrait that had been painted solely by the hand of the artist is difficult to determine, but the fact that Thicknesse remarked on it already in 1770 suggests that it was an issue of note in some circles. "Mr Gainsborough," he writes,

not only paints the face; but finishes, with his own hands, every part of the drapery; this, however trifling a matter it may be to some, is of great importance to the picture. The other eminent painters either cannot or will not be at that trouble.⁷⁹

One of those eminent painters, who "either cannot or will not be at that trouble," was of course Reynolds. Thicknesse's point seems to be that if you commission Gainsborough for a portrait you will get nothing but Gainsborough -- you will get "A Gainsborough." Again, whether patrons at the time laid much store in who assisted in painting what in the paintings

⁷⁸ Letter to Jackson, quoted in Mannings, "At the Portrait Painter's," 281.

⁷⁹ Anon. [Thicknesse], Sketches and Characters of the most Eminent and most Singular Persons now LIVING (Bristol, 1770) 96.

they purchases is less the issue than the fact that Gainsborough clearly did.

Gainsborough did, however, have one assistant, his nephew Gainsborough Dupont (1754-97) and the rather bleak story of Dupont's artistic dependence upon the example set by his uncle is revealing of Gainsborough's uncompromising stylistic independence.⁸⁰ Dupont, the son of Gainsborough's sister Sarah Dupont, was officially apprenticed to his uncle in 1772 after having lived with the artist's family for some years.⁸¹ In 1772 Gainsborough was still stationed in Bath and very busy with his successful portrait business. The assistance of his nephew would have been an asset, even if it generally was relegated to the more mundane tasks of the studio. Yet we find from James Northcote's "Conversations," for example, that Dupont was given the important task of assisting Gainsborough in the painting of the elaborate confection of a costume for the full-length portrait of Queen Charlotte, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1781 (fig. 38). He describes the portrait as

actual motion and done with such a light, airy facility. Oh! it delighted me when I saw it. The drapery was done in one night by Gainsborough and his nephew, Gainsborough Dupont; they sat up all night, and painted it by lamp-light. This, in my opinion, constitutes the essence of

⁸⁰ Gainsborough scholars are now in general agreement that Gainsborough had no other assistants than Dupont, although a document of payment to the drapery painter Peter Toms, a payment of twenty guineas, has for some time fed the possibility that he might have, on occasion used assistants of this nature. Hayes, The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough 187-188.

⁸¹ Waterhouse, Gainsborough 41; and Belsey, Gainsborough's Family 34-37 and 64.

genius, the making beautiful things from unlikely subjects.⁸²

Unlike the "sweet subjects" Shanhagan had described as mirrors of Gainsborough's painted "beauties," the job of capturing the likeness of the Queen required ingenuity, a "light, airy facility" to compensate for the sitter's shortcomings. An interesting thought, but the point here is that Dupont was trusted with assisting on this very important, high-profile, large scale work destined to be noted by all visitors to the Academy. The second point has to do with the remarkable speed with which four hands completed the picture -- more remarkable even than the impressive speed of execution conveyed in Gainsborough's complaint to Unwin that painting the full-length pendant portraits of the Ligoniers would take him "prisoner for a month's work."⁸³

Dupont would have learned the rudiments of Gainsborough's methods and techniques, but he also had the advantage of some formal training at the Royal Academy schools, which he entered in 1775.⁸⁴ This does not seem to have provided him with the tools to overcome the strong influence of his uncle's "unacademic" style in which he was initially trained. Attribution for some of Dupont's paintings have been

⁸² Conversations of James Northcote R.A. with James Ward on Art and Artists, ed. Ernest Fletcher (London: Methuen, 1901) 160-161.

⁸³ Gainsborough to James Unwin, Letters of Thomas Gainsborough, Letter #90, 10 July 1770, 165-167.

⁸⁴ Sidney Hutchison, "The Royal Academy Schools, 1768-1830," The Walpole Society 38 (1962): 141.

reattributed to Gainsborough and vice versa.⁸⁵ This indicates, quite unsurprisingly, that the younger man was deeply influenced by his uncle's manner of painting during the sixteen years he worked for him. But the influence seems to have been so overpowering that it stifled Dupont's creative powers and foreclosed the possibility of artistic autonomy, both before and after Gainsborough's death. Once his mentor was no longer present to guide and inspire him, Dupont's productions become rather sorry imitations -- ghostly replicas -- of his uncle's style. Much of what Dupont produced first as an assistant and then for five years as an independent portraitist working from the premises of his deceased uncle's studio at Schomberg House, was done with the expectation that he would imitate the style of his famous uncle.⁸⁶ As an assistant his duties included making copies of Gainsborough's paintings, after which engravings were made. And, when he assisted his uncle on the painting or finishing of a portrait he naturally would have been obliged to work as closely to his manner as possible, and confusions over attribution confirm that he was capable of duplicating and maintaining the formal integrity of his uncle's manner.⁸⁷ The specter of Gainsborough in some ways only became more oppressive after

⁸⁵ Waterhouse, Gainsborough 41.

⁸⁶ Whitley, Gainsborough 395.

⁸⁷ In 1793 Gainsborough's wife moved to Sloan Street at which time Dupont moved to another studio address. Hayes, The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough 187.

his death since his unsold paintings were kept at Schomberg House -- a constant reminder of the standard to which Dupont should strive. Dupont continued to paint portraits and landscapes after 1788 and exhibited nine paintings (eight of which were portraits) at the Academy between 1790 and 1795.⁸⁸ Among these is the portrait of his uncle in 1790, which was, ironically, poorly hung.⁸⁹

What becomes clear from contemporary accounts of Gainsborough's studio technique -- his experimentation with materials in an effort to discover the range of their effects and his preference for completing his canvases himself or with the aid of his unfortunate mimic, Dupont -- is that his aim was to punctuate his works with the mark of his particular manner, his individual style. His great investment in the matter of style, however, equalled his concern for mimetic truth -- the matter of representation. Shanahan was an astute observer of this fact, even if he presented his observation in the guise of a satirical review of an imaginary exhibition. Richard and Samuel Redgrave, in A Century of British Painters, also made note of Gainsborough's commitment to the manner and matter of painting, which they highlight as

⁸⁸ On Dupont's production, see John Hayes, "The Trinity House Group Portrait," Burlington Magazine 106 (July 1964): 309-316; and, by the same author, "The Drawings of Gainsborough Dupont," Master Drawings 3 (1965): 243-256 and "The Problem of Gainsborough Dupont," in The Landscape Paintings of Thomas Gainsborough vol. 1, 187-236.

⁸⁹ This was commented upon by Bate (quoted in Whitley, Thomas Gainsborough 131).

the special feature of the painter's work: "there is no doubt that the mind of a man of genius is as much shown in his executive handing as in the treatment of his subject, and that it is a part of his individuality."⁹⁰ "Individuality" is a word not much used in writings on art until the very end of the eighteenth century, precisely when style begins to be viewed as intrinsically connected to artistic individuality, to the artist's artistic persona. It is the curious feature of Gainsborough's art that subject and style simultaneously facilitate and fetter each other.

It seems appropriate to end this chapter, as it began, with a piece of satirical art criticism: Anthony Pasquin's, "The Royal Academicians. A Farce. As it was performed to the Astonishment of Mankind by His Majesty's Servants, at the Stone House, in Utopia, in the Summer of 1786."⁹¹ Among the Dramatis Personae are the Academicians Sir Varnish Dundizzy (Sir Joshua Reynolds), Benjamin East (Benjamin West), Secretary Prig (Francis Milner Newton, R.A. secretary), Charles Coachpannel (Charles Catton, George III's coach-painter), Sir William Doric (the architect Sir William Chambers), John Swinesflesh (John Bacon), and Thomas Daubborough (Thomas Gainsborough). Half way through the farce Secretary Prig enters, inquiring about the pictures

⁹⁰ Redgrave, A Century of British Painters 68.

⁹¹ Anthony Pasquin [John Williams], The Royal Academicians. A Farce. As it was performed to the Astonishment of Mankind, by His Majesty's Servants, at the STONE HOUSE, in UTOPIA, in the Summer of 1786 (London, 1786).

Daubborough requested be returned to him because they had not been hung to his specifications:

Have you sent those pictures back to that damn'd fellow? an impudent scoundrel, to have the assurance to prate to me about his merit! an insolent puppy! -- damme! but the rascal deserves to be drown'd in an ocean of turpentine, or choaked to death with a pound brush -- how the devil does he think I should ever have been Secretary to the Royal Academy, if merit had any thing to do in the business? Doctor Rock, Doctor Graham, or Herald Bate Slash'em himself never thought of such pretensions -- damm!...⁹²

"Herald Bate Slash'em" is, of course, the Reverend Henry Bate, owner of the Morning Herald, professional art critic and amateur boxer, great supporter of Gainsborough and scathing critic of the Academy. His professional relationship with Gainsborough will figure prominently in the next and concluding chapter.

⁹² Pasquin, The Royal Academicians 15.

CHAPTER FIVE
THE BUSINESS OF ART: MAKING ONE'S MARK

When Gainsborough resumed exhibiting at the Academy in 1777, contrasting his portraits with those of the President was an established trope among art critics, many of whom described the artistic relationship between these premier painters as a two-person rivalry in which no other contemporary could compete: "there was no other painter of the time whose name could be mentioned with those of the two leaders."¹ Reynolds had a formidable advantage over Gainsborough. Superior positioning within the Academy bequeathed him institutional kudos both artistically and intellectually. The edge Gainsborough had over Reynolds, on the other hand, was his staunch support from the enterprising newspaper publisher and art critic Henry Bate (1745-1824).

At least within the British context, the supportive alliance between Bate the critic and Gainsborough the painter was unprecedented.² A few details about Bate's career are in order to give a sense of his relationship with his favorite painter as well as his influence as a newspaper journalist and

¹ The best source on Henry Bate, who became Bate-Dudley in 1784 after an inheritance of property, is Whitley, "An Eighteenth-century Art Chronicler." (quotation appears on page 33)

² Although Gainsborough would have been known to London audiences before his relocation there in 1774, his affiliation with Bate surely made the painter's introduction to London society smoother. The daunting task of establishing oneself as a portrait painter in London during the last decades of the eighteenth century is discussed at length in Pointon, *Hanging the Head* 36-52.

entrepreneur. He began contributing to various journals in 1766,³ and continued to pursue a literary career after he was successfully nominated to the post of Rector of North Fambridge in Essex, which had been left vacant upon the death of his father in 1770.⁴ Two years later he was appointed the first Editor of the newly founded London daily the Morning Post, a position he held until 1780. Under his able and ambitious eight-year leadership, the Morning Post became known for its "scandal-mongering style" of journalism which undoubtedly contributed to its appeal as well as to Bate's subsequent, unsavory nickname: the "Reverend Reputation-Butcher." He was also popularly known as "The Fighting Parson," a moniker that may well have had roots in the event in which he allegedly boxed a paid bully senseless in 1773.⁵ The duel is said to have been instigated by a group of military macaronis whose offensive comments were directed toward the actress Elizabeth Hartley whom Bate was escorting through Vauxhall Gardens. Reluctant to take on the Parson themselves, the well-dressed taunters are said to have put a brawny Irishman in their pay for the deed. Elizabeth Hartley was by 1773 a star of the stage and Reynolds' portrait of her,

³ Including "The Philosopher and the Glow Worm," a fable in verse, for the upscale Gentleman's Magazine in November 1766.

⁴ At which time he became responsible for his numerous younger siblings while their mother continued to work in the millinery trade.

⁵ The event is narrated in Whitley, Gainsborough 131-132; and Whitley, "An Eighteenth-century Art Chronicler," 28-29.

then titled A Nymph with Young Bacchus, was exhibited at the Royal Academy in the same year. A few weeks after the affray Bate married Mary Hartley, Elizabeth's sister.

The Vauxhall incident was one of a number of occasions in which Bate allegedly raised his fists in defense of honor, although in most cases his own caustic statements in print, not his dignified acts of chivalry in society, were the cause of provocation.⁶ Fearlessness, both physical and ethical, was a positive trait Dr Johnson attributed to Bate -- in fact, it was the only positive trait he conceded to him.⁷ By the time Bate sold his share in the Morning Post in the fall of 1780 it had the greatest circulation among the London dailies.⁸ From the beginning, the Morning Post demonstrated its interest in the fine arts by publishing more extensive reviews of the exhibitions of the Royal Academy and the Incorporated Society of Artists than had appeared hitherto in the London press.⁹ Bate maintained this interest in art criticism when he founded the Morning Herald, of which he was the sole proprietor as well as editor, in November of 1780. His extraordinary management of publicity coupled with his acerbic style of journalism made his second newspaper venture even more successful than his first, much to the envy and chagrin of his

⁶ Whitley, Gainsborough 131-135.

⁷ Whitley, "An Eighteenth-century Art Chronicler," 25-26.

⁸ Ibid., 40.

⁹ Ibid., 28.

competitors, especially his former partners at the Morning Post.

A few months before Bate embarked on his second newspaper venture, Gainsborough expressed his gratitude to his great supporter by painting his portrait in full-length, which was exhibited at the Academy in 1780 (fig. 39). The portrait is a pictorial panegyric to his loyal friend and ardent advocate -- a pictorial response to, and fulfillment of Bate's narrations of the painter's talents. The robust figure is dressed in black, grey, and white, unobtrusive colors appropriate to Bate's station as a clergyman. His fashionable tricorne hat, cream-colored kid-gloves, walking stick, ruffled shirt, "furry" cream vest, and powdered wig, however, designate him as a man of landed wealth, which by 1780 he had become. Interestingly, Thicknesse considered the portrait of Bate, in which the sitter is dressed and poised as a gentleman, a perfect likeness, which counteracts the popular idea of the Editor as a brawler. The comfortable, slightly contrapposto, positioning of the figure, with raised chin and alert eyes directed to some object of interest outside the frame, convey an air of general self-assurance which is complemented by the collared, shaggy dog looking up at his master, ready to obey his command. As was Gainsborough's rarely strayed-from custom for full-length portraits by this time, the figure is situated in a landscape, and the teal, turquoise, and mulberry blues of the surrounding sky and foliage are woven into the grey of his waistcoat in bold calligraphic strokes, just as the grey-blue

of the clouds is feathered into the strands of the figure's powdered wig. Despite the subdued color scheme of his costume, "The Fighting Parson" is one of Gainsborough's best dressed men. One suspects that had the mature Gainsborough undertaken a life-size full-length of himself, he would have pictured himself in a similar attitude: a figure possessing self-assuredness, fashionable elegance and nonchalant poise. Bate is wrapped in the distinctive style of the painter he admired above all others; he stands as the painterly embodiment of the style he had eloquently eulogized in print. The circularity of this double transcription of one's subjectivity onto the other is particularly charged in Gainsborough's portrait of Bate, a portrait which is a manifestation of the mutual admiration between the painter and his sitter. The sitter becomes the embodiment of the painter's style, and the painter creates his artistic self by displacing his subjectivity onto the stylistically singular markings from whence the representation of his complementary other (and his complimentary author) emerges.

A similar kind of double identification is enacted also in Gainsborough's portraits of men whom he admired for their musical talents and with whom he was on close, friendly terms: Friedrich Abel and Johann Christian Fischer, for example (figs. 40 and 41). Both portraits were exhibited at the Academy, Abel's in 1777 and Fischer's three years later. Gainsborough surely sent the portraits to the Academy as "showpieces," hoping to profit from the added attention they

would receive because of the celebrity of the sitters. Abel and Fischer are shown with the attributes of their profession and are dressed in richly colored costumes: Abel in a chestnut-brown waistcoat trimmed with glittering yellow-gold tassels that match his gold-colored silk vest; Fischer in a sumptuous salmon-red velvet ensemble offset by white hose below and ruffled white shirt above. Although both figures are placed in interior settings, the stunning, massive swatch of brilliant shamrock-green drapery behind Abel, and the dark emerald-green, tassel-bordered drapery that wraps around Fischer and his "harpsichord-cum-piano," act as surrogates for the landscape setting Gainsborough forfeited in order to show the men at their work. Indeed, the rich, animated green background draperies seems almost to function as the color field substitutes for nature. Although there are passages in both these portraits in which the crafting of paint exceeds the task of representation (notably in the costumes and background drapery), they are more highly finished than Gainsborough's portraits-in-landscapes tended to be. This is evident when Fischer's portrait is contrasted with Bate's; as both portraits were exhibited at the Academy in the same year, visitors had the opportunity to do just that. The portrait of the art critic is strikingly more "Gainsboroughesque" than the portrait of the musician, and the landscape background is largely responsible for this. It is fitting that Gainsborough would place his literary parallel (his authorial other) into his most customary frame -- a frame that transformed the

"Fighting Parson" into a fashionable, refined, landed gentleman; a frame that displayed the singular features of his painterly style in the best possible light; and a frame that transformed Bate into "a Gainsborough." It is also fitting, or rather remarkably calculating, that Gainsborough waited until 1777, when he had a number of stunning portraits of a famous musician (Able), a Royal couple (the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland), a dashing society beauty (Mary Graham), and a large-scale Rubensian landscape (The Watering Place), and, most importantly, powerful press backup from Bate, to resume exhibiting at the Academy.

The timing of Bate's commencement as Gainsborough's public supporter could hardly have been more expedient. Bate was denied the opportunity to praise the painter's work until 1777 since a disagreement between Gainsborough and the Academy in 1773 had kept the painter from submitting works for exhibition for four years.¹⁰ But from 1777 onward, Bate was Gainsborough's loyal champion. It is also to Bate that we are indebted for intimate details of Gainsborough's career in London since the two men shared a friendly as well as professional relationship. After Gainsborough's final break

¹⁰ Gainsborough's submissions of that year were: pendant portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Cumberland, both full-length; portrait of Lord Gage, full-length; two smaller portraits of unidentified young gentlemen; a full-length portrait of Mary Graham in Van Dyck dress and situated in a landscape; full-length portrait of Friedrich Able; and a large landscape.

with the Academy in 1784 Bate helped keep his name topical by publishing news on his progress on important commissions and writing praisefull reports on his private exhibition at Schomberg House.¹¹

In Bate's review of the 1777 exhibition the critic estimates Gainsborough's contributions to be superior to those of Reynolds. In justification of his first-ranking of Gainsborough, Bate boldly announces that "As the pencil of this gentleman has evidently entitled him to the distinction, we have impartially placed him at the head of the artists we are about the review."¹² Following his glowing review of Gainsborough's contributions, Bate introduces his discussion of Reynolds' paintings with weighty words of reproach and disappointment:

It is with reluctance we observe, that Sir Joshua Reynolds' present productions are by no means equal in point of merit, to those which he has formerly exhibited upon a similar occasion. The critics have long found fault with his style of colouring, asserting, that its brilliancy must soon fly off....¹³

Not only was this the first newspaper challenge to Reynolds' reign over the Academy exhibitions, but the mention of colors flying off was also a reference to the impermanence of his pigments -- a shortcoming of the President's paintings which

¹¹ Bate also assisted Gainsborough's widow by advertising the private sales of the painter's unsold works, and published endorsements of Gainsborough Dupont who for some time continued to operate from his uncle and mentor's studio. Worman, 130.

¹² [Bate], Morning Post Friday 25 April 1777: 4.

¹³ Ibid.

was a routine target of satirists' witticisms. Juxtaposing his disappointment over the President's faulty, "flying colors" with his praise for Gainsborough's "style of colouring, that bespeaks the great master," the glories of Gainsborough's colors are made to shine even brighter. In his description of Gainsborough's "large landscape" Bate has only words of praise: "A Rural scene from nature, which discovers Mr. Gainsborough's superior taste and execution in the landscape way; -- it is confessedly a master-piece of its kind".¹⁴ Regrettable hanging was the only hint of objection in Bate's otherwise rave review.¹⁵

The subjection of Gainsborough's pictures to poor hanging at the Academy would again become an issue of concern six years later. Gainsborough complained directly to the Academy in 1783 about the placement of his pictures, threatening his defection from the Academy unless his series of fifteen bust-length portraits of the Royal Family were moved to a more favorable location. "Mr. Gainsborough," he writes,

presents his compliments to the Gentlemen appointed to hand the pictures at the Royal Academy; and begs leave to hint to them that if the Royal Family, which he has sent for this Exhibition (being smaller than three quarters) are hung above the line with full-lengths, he never more,

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Bate was not the only critic to call attention to the lamentable positioning of Gainsborough's paintings at the Academy's Exhibitions: poor hanging was often cited in reviews as a deterrence to the proper viewing of Gainsborough's pictures and there are many examples of such complaints to be found among the Academy reviews.

whilst he breathes, will send another picture to the Exhibition. -- This he swears by God.¹⁶

The series of portraits display a confident crafting in paint, harmonious blending and layering of color, and emphatically loose crisscrossing of gestural brushwork, although these features of loose brushy handling are much more evident in the heads of the Royal women and children than men. Just how deeply Gainsborough was committed to the visual integrity of these subtle stylistic traits is underscored by the fact that Gainsborough was willing to bet his future as a contributing Academician in order that they not be effaced by disadvantageous hanging.

The "line" to which Gainsborough refers relates to is the narrow ledge which ran around the perimeter of the so-called Great Room (the main exhibition room) at Somerset House at approximately eight and a half feet from the floor.¹⁷ The customary arrangement of large canvases above the designation of "the line" is clearly visible in J.H. Ramberg's 1787 engraving of the Great Room (fig. 42). Although the group of fifteen portraits added up to one large compilation -- and Gainsborough evidently intended them to be seen as "a constellation of youthful beauty" -- each portrait measured only 59 by 44 centimeters.¹⁸ His demand that they not be hung

¹⁶ Quoted in Whitley, Gainsborough 195.

¹⁷ Hutchison, The History of the Royal Academy 108.

¹⁸ According to the recollections of the art critic Henry Angelo, when his father Domenico viewed the portraits together with his friend Gainsborough, the painter "was all but raving mad with ecstasy in beholding such a constellation of youthful

among the full-lengths was thus a valid one in this case. Moreover, the royal portraits surely were entitled to special treatment because of the importance of the sitters. His demand was promptly met, and his portraits of the King, Queen, and thirteen of their children were lowered from their "skied" position. The portraits were also arranged according to Gainsborough's wishes, in three horizontal rows of five each, as specified in a sketch he sent to the Academy Secretary, F.M. Newton. But his demands did not stop there. Above the sketch of the desired manner of their arrangement, Gainsborough gave further instructions: "hang my Dogs and my landscape in the great Room."¹⁹ The "Dogs" he wished to have hung in the Great Room were those in his large-scale fancy picture, Shepherd Boys with Fighting Dogs, which was one of the most admired pictures of that year's exhibition. No doubt delighted over the enthusiastic reception of the picture, Gainsborough wrote to the Academy's treasurer Sir William Chambers: "I have sent my fighting dogs to divert you. I believe next exhibition I shall make the boys fighting and the dogs looking on...." Gainsborough never painted such a picture, but he did indeed find himself in another affray with

beauty." Henry Angelo, Reminiscences vol. 1 (London, 1828) 191-193. The satirist Peter Pinder described them rather differently, referring to the series as "a nest of Royal Heads." Quoted in Fulcher, Life of Thomas Gainsborough 126.

¹⁹ Gainsborough's letter to the Academy with the sketch of the portrait arrangement is in the archives of the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

the Academy over the issue of hanging in the following year, with the Press looking on.

Gainsborough's fiasco with the Hanging Committee in 1784, however, was neither as clear-cut as the previous year's skirmish with the Academy had been, nor was its outcome as amenable to the painter's demands. The letters exchanged between the two parties are recorded in the Royal Academy Council Minutes of 1784 and they reveal a mutually stubborn unwillingness to compromise. The root of the altercation between Gainsborough and the Hanging Committee was the manner in which the full-length portrait of the three eldest Princesses had been hung in the exhibition rooms at Somerset House, the new location of the Academy's exhibitions. Gainsborough requested that his portrait of the Princesses be exempted from the Academy's rule regarding hanging full-lengths above the line, arguing that the portrait was painted for a lower viewing position. The third-person voice in which he addressed the Council underlines the unyielding tone of his letter, in which the fiery threat of the previous year's correspondence is replaced by a rather more resolutely cool-headed one:

Mr. Gainsborough's compliments to the gentlemen of the Committee, and begs pardon for giving them so much trouble, but as he has painted the picture of the Princesses in so tender a light, that notwithstanding he approves very much of the established line for strong effects, he cannot possibly consent to have it placed higher than five feet and a half, because the likenesses and work of the picture will not be seen any higher; therefore at a word he will not trouble the gentlemen

against their inclination, but will beg the rest of his pictures back again. Saturday evening.²⁰

The letter was sent to Somerset House two weeks before the opening of the exhibition, on the evening that the Royal Academy was in session. It was read in the presence of the Council members, which included Reynolds, Chambers, the Reverend M.W. Peters, George Dance, J.I. Richards, Benjamin West, John Copley, and James Barry. The Council responded immediately and decisively: "Sir, -- In compliance with your request the Council have ordered your pictures to be taken down, and to be delivered to your order whenever you send for them."²¹

It would not have been exceptional for the Academy to bend its hanging policy in the case of a portrait of members of the Royal family.²² That it would not, and did not in this case, was seen as scandalous disregard for Gainsborough by a number of commentators, but none rallied to the painter's cause more zealously than did Bate.

In his notoriously pithy and "slashing" mode of delivering sentence to the guilty or inept, Bate referred to the Hanging Committee as the "Inquisition."²³ Quite a strong word -- "Inquisition" -- probably not intended to slander the

²⁰ Letter dated 9 April 1784, Collection of the Royal Academy of Arts, London.

²¹ 10 April 1784, Saturday evening, nine o'clock, Royal Academy Minutes, vol. 1, 358.

²² Rosenthal, "Gainsborough's Diana and Actaeon", 187, makes this point.

²³ [Bate], Morning Herald 23 April 1784: 2.

Academy decision makers as Catholics but rather as aesthetically unenlightened connoisseur pretenders unable to grasp that the signifiers of painterly affect were fundamental to a full appreciation of Gainsborough's painting of the Princesses. Bate's version of the quarrel, published in the Morning Herald two days before the opening of the exhibition, states his allegiance with the slighted painter in no uncertain terms:

Mr. Gainsborough's picture, which the Royal Academy INQUISITION have refused to hang agreeable to his wishes, contains the portraits of the Princess Royal, Princess Augusta, and Princess Elizabeth at full length. It was painted for the Prince of Wales's state-room in Carleton palace, for a height already ascertained, as the frame which is to receive it is formed in the pannels [sic]. The requisition the artist made to hang it, at the same height in the exhibition room, ought surely to have been attended to in so particular an instance, particularly when it is remembered that the colouring is tender and delicate, that the effect must be destroyed by an injurious elevation.²⁴

When Gainsborough's removal from that year's exhibition was made public the critics were divided in their sympathies. Some supported the Committee, believing that its august authority should not be undermined. Others agreed with Gainsborough that the portrait's carefully orchestrated "effect" required it to be hung at the height for it was intended. One critic, using the pseudonym "Timothy Tickle," peppered his insightful prose with piercing wit and raised the suspicion that rivalry was at the root of the controversy:

Mr. Gainsborough's pictures are said to possess one quality in common with those of Vandyke; they may be

²⁴ [Bate], Morning Herald 24 April 1784: 3.

viewed at three, or thirty feet distance with the same effect on the spectator's eye. The works of his rival, the President, are strangers to this qualification. If, therefore, Gainsborough's requisition had been complied with, one of Reynolds' pictures must have been placed in a similar situation, in which case it would have resembled the lime and the rough cast upon a country hovel when compared with nature, or with Gainsborough, and the President's assumed superiority would have suffered by comparison. If Reynolds was not placed in that situation, it would have been supposed that he dared not abide the comparison, and conclusions equally unfavorable would have been drawn; it therefore became necessary to drive Gainsborough from the advantageous position it deserved, and made that very picture the means of his disgrace.²⁵

A letter published in the St. James's Chronicle, which is signed "A Lover of the Arts" but which Whitley suggests was penned by Gainsborough's former friend and advocate Thicknesse, gives a curious contemporary account of the dispute. After expressing his mortification upon discovering that Gainsborough's pictures had been withdrawn, the author purports to comprehend the underpinnings of "this awkward business":

The cause of this awkward business I understand to be that the Exhibition Committee have drawn a line to which all full-length pictures are to be mounted, and consequently all judicious artists adapt their lights and shades according to this appointed line and the degree of light. But suppose the portrait of a lovely woman of the highest rank, whose fair complexion and tender features required the softest pencil and the lightest shades, and that infinite pains had been taken by the artist, at the request of a person of still higher rank, so to combine the colouring as to suit a particular destination, very different from the line drawn by the Committee. I say, suppose this to be the case, let me ask those gentlemen artists whether the line may not, nay ought not, to be broken to gratify the eye of the public, to do justice to distinguished merit, and to show respect to their First Patron?... As the case now stands, were I to draw Mr.

²⁵ "Timothy Tickle," "To the Painter of the Public Advertiser. Letter III," Public Advertiser 26 May 1785: 2.

Gainsborough's future line it should be never more to send out the handbills of his art. Men of true taste know where they might see his paintings in such lights as he wishes to place them; and let those who are true judges say who can place them in any light (ay, there's the sting) in which they will not appear in a splendour not to be equalled by any living artist nor to be put out of countenance by any of the ancients.²⁶

The author of the letter points out the injuriousness of the Academy's unwillingness to bend its rules with regards to Gainsborough's painting in which "infinite pains" have been taken to render "tender features" in the "softest shades." Questions of royal patronage and political motivations are also raised with the suggestion that by denying Gainsborough's flattering image of the Princesses to be properly viewed the Academy is not only insulting the painter and his royal sitters but also the King and its royal patron.

Although the triple portrait was cut down during Queen Victoria's reign in order to fit as an overdoor at Windsor Castle, its present three-quarter configuration evinces the balance between variety and unity that surely characterized the original full-length format -- a format that provided the painterly latitude of an expansive landscape background and a variety of fabrics and fashionable accessories (fig. 43). The pale tones of the standing Princesses' silk dresses (one wearing in a peach-colored dress articulated by a black waistbelt and black wrist-bands, the other in a yellow dress with a glimmering sash) find their darker chromatic-equivalent in orange-red drapery and the gold highlights of the setting

²⁶ [Thicknesse ?] St James's Chronicle, quoted in full in Whitley, Gainsborough 217-218.

sun. The clear aqua-blue of the dress worn by the youngest Princess seated on the right is balanced by the triangle of indigo on the upper-left corner, with lighter shades of indigo streaked through the evening sky. The painterly workmanship is evident in the rendering of the crisp silks, diaphanous sleeves and veils, lace trimmings, and glittering pearls braided into their lightly powdered hair. Meticulously fine, virtually invisible, brushwork is employed in the rendering of the figures' ivory complexions, highlighted with a touch of rouge, and contrasts sharply with the animated marks of paint application elsewhere -- in the clothes and background drapery most especially -- and the thin, washy technique used in the evening sky and shadowy foliage is a demonstration of yet another type of application.²⁷ Indeed, the painting seems to speak for the painter's desire: "look at how I paint."

Just as in the previous year's dispute with the Academy, what was at issue for the painter was the perceptibility of the distinctive marks of his labor -- his labor in paint -- wherein reside the painter's performance and indeed the painter's persona. That trace functions as the painter's signature, and the distinctive markings that transform a portrait of anyone into a painting by Gainsborough. To allow the painting to be skied was to relinquish the opportunity to

²⁷ This observation is made also by Jean Clay, *Romanticism*, trans. Daniel Wheeler and Craig Owen (Secaucus, NY: Chartwell Books, 1981) 100.

show the sitters and the painter to their best advantage: to suffer a bad performance.

Elsewhere in the letter, the "Lover of the Arts" blames "envy, ignorance, incapacity, or obstinacy" as the grounds for the regretful absence of Gainsborough from the exhibition. Similar conclusions were drawn by other commentators who sided with Gainsborough.²⁸ Notable in the author's string of conjectures is the highlighting of how the absent picture's manner of execution matches and enhances the subjects represented by it -- an observation registered in Shanahan's review of Gainsborough's portraits of women at the "imaginary" Academy exhibition several years earlier.

Although acknowledging his absence as a loss, there were critics who did not sympathize with Gainsborough and judged the Academy's decision a fair one. The reviewer for the Whitehall Evening-Post, for example, was of that camp:

That the Exhibition should be deprived of the Landscape Pencil of such a Painter as Gainsborough, is not a little to be lamented: but although the misfortune may be ours,

²⁸ The reviewer for the Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser 27 April 1784, blames "miserable envy" for driving Gainsborough and others from the Academy. Another reviewer, writing for the same press three days earlier, sides with Gainsborough and criticizes the Academy's "wretched rule" of the full-length line. The reviewer for the Morning Chronicle 27 April 1784: 3, contends that had Gainsborough not had his submissions removed he would "doubtless, have shared the prize of publick applause with the President." An acerbic, satirical view of the situation is provided by a writer for the Gazetteer and New Daily Advertiser 8 May 1784: 2. Signing himself "Timothy Ticklepitcher," the author detects "a very prevailing tint of the green eyed mother, jealousy and envy, upon the face of many of your [the Academy's] proceedings," but, without mentioning names, cites vanity, prejudice, interest and ambition as the fault of the opposite party.

the fault is his own. He is too fastidious, too tenacious of his claims, which probably were exorbitant.²⁹

The review proceeds to give its version of the events leading up to the withdrawal of Gainsborough's pictures, but what is curious about the quotation above is the reviewer's faulting of Gainsborough for his characteristic fastidiousness and tenacity: criticizing the painter rather than the products of his brush. Curious too is the fact that the reviewer laments the absence of Gainsborough's capacity as a landscapist when in fact the overwhelming majority of his submissions that year were portraits. Indeed, the dispute was instigated by a portrait -- a portrait that was the result of a particularly important royal commission and one that gave full license to Gainsborough's performance as a painter of fashion, fabrics, and not one but three "lovely" women "of the highest rank." It is almost as though the writer noted, and then masked, what was at stake for the picture and for the painter: the perceptual integrity of the picture, and, by extension, the painter's own artistic integrity. In short, what Gainsborough could not afford to surrender was the readability, the recognizability, of the formal aspects of the medium which he had constructed with utmost fastidiousness. The stakes were even greater given that the battle was being waged over a portrait was one which belonged to the highest order of the

²⁹ Whitehall Evening-Post 22-24 April 1784: 3. The reviewer for the Morning Post 26 April 1784: 3, and another writing for the same daily on 28 April 1784: 2, also sided with the Academy's decision.

genre: a royal portrait. He thus chose to move his future performance elsewhere, to a more amenable stage than the one the Academy had become.³⁰

Gainsborough substituted the public visibility of his pictures at the Academy with private exhibitions in his studio at Schomberg House, in Pall Mall, where The Three Eldest Princesses was shown less than three months after it was removed from the Academy. The exhibition opened in July of 1784, when the ill-fated triple portrait was shown along with nine additional full-lengths, twelve half- or three-quarter lengths, two fancy pictures, and one landscape. The exhibition remained in existence, with occasional substitutions and new additions, until Gainsborough's death in 1788. At Schomberg House Gainsborough fully controlled the conditions of display and viewership. He was, essentially his own curator. He may have had a hand in its publicity too, for it has been suggested that he collaborated with Bate in drafting the announcements for the exhibition.³¹ Surely it was this exhibition to which the "Lover of the Arts" alluded

³⁰ It would not be the last time the painting would suffer from malapropos treatment for it was cut down during the reign of Queen Victoria to accommodate a position as an overdoor at Windsor Castle. The decision to alter the canvas was made by the Inspector of Household Deliveries. Redgrave, A Century of British Painters 73. The original composition of the triple portrait is documented in a mezzotint by Gainsborough Dupont which shows that the canvas had been cut from the top as well as from the bottom.

³¹ Whitley, Gainsborough 226.

when he wrote that "Men of true taste know where they may see his paintings in such a light as he wishes to place them" -- for "men of true taste" will surely be cognizant of those finer points of painting with which the painter himself was so concerned. Despite Bate's regular "puffs" in the press, the exhibition seems to have been poorly attended due in part to bad timing: its late-July opening coincided with the season during which members of fashionable generally left London.³²

The specific events leading up to Gainsborough's private exhibitions were indeed exceptional, but such solo, self-curated exhibitions had various sundry precedents in eighteenth-century England, some of which were tremendously popular and financially successful. It was conventional at the time for established painters to have a room that was expressly for the display of their pictures for which there was sometimes a fee for admission.³³ Gainsborough had had such a showroom in both his Abbey Churchyard and Circus studios in Bath; George Romney spent a small fortune building a show room for displaying pictures when he moved from Hampstead into the West End in 1796; and Reynolds had a very

³² On Gainsborough's private exhibitions at Schomberg House see Whitley, "An Eighteenth-Century Art Chronicler," 51-58. The phenomenon of "puffing" -- paid advertisements written by supporters and sometimes written and paid for by the artists themselves -- clearly demonstrates how the press provided a space for gainful self-promotion. On the rise of art journalism in England, see Bennett, "Anthony Pasquin and the Function of Art Journalism in Late Eighteenth-Century England," 197-207.

³³ Sloman, "Artists' Picture Rooms in Eighteenth-Century Bath," 132-154.

deluxe gallery added to his studio and residence in Leicester Fields, which he opened with the fanfare of a grand ball.³⁴ Thomas Rowlandson's watercolor of 1809, A Portrait Painter's Ante-Room, shows an example of such a showroom, populated by his customary motley crew of caricatured social and physical types including red-nosed, pot-bellied gentleman and youthful, streamlined women dressed in clingy gowns (fig. 44). A humpbacked footman opens the door into the adjacent painter's studio, and we see the painter, who has been spared the caricaturist's excesses, before his easel. This arrangement of rooms was probably not unlike that of Gainsborough's second studio in Bath, in the Circus. Writing to the preacher Dr William Dodd in 1773, whose portrait Gainsborough was then displaying in his showroom, Gainsborough reports what he had heard said about Dodd's portrait:

the ladies say it is very handsome as it is; for I peep & listen through the keyhole of the door of the painting room on purpose to see how you touch them out of the pulpit as well as in it. Lord! says one, what a lively eye that gentleman has!³⁵

Such showrooms functioned as self-promoting venues for the artists -- a way of displaying the breadth of their talents to prospective patrons. They were also fashionable meeting places. One suspects that Gainsborough's Schomberg House

³⁴ Pointon, Hanging the Head 44. On Reynolds' ball, see John Hayes, The Portrait in British Art: Masterpieces bought with the help of the National Art Collection Fund (London: National Portrait Gallery, 1991) 20.

³⁵ Sloman, "Artists' Picture Rooms in Eighteenth-Century Bath," 145-146.

gallery had particular allure not only because of his prominent status as a portraitist but also because of neighboring attractions in the fashionable Pall Mall area. Just as his show room in Bath had benefitted from the fashionable flourish and sweet scents provided by his sister's adjacent millinery shop, Gainsborough's Schomberg address was shared by Dr Graham's Temple of Health, known for its "Celestial Bed," mud baths, and variety of dubious health-giving elixirs.³⁶ The entrance to Graham's "Temple" is said to have been adorned with a statue of Venus. This marble figure of the goddess of love was the pseudo-antique complement to the doctor's flesh and blood "Goddess of Health" and high-profile endorser, Emma Hart (later Lady Hamilton), who was then much admired for her wholesome beauty.³⁷

In addition to the customary showrooms of portrait painters, history painters such as John Copley and Benjamin West occasionally held exhibitions of their paintings, reaping fortunes from admission fees and from engraving subscriptions.³⁸ Furthermore, ambitious entrepreneurs such as

³⁶ Mentioned in Woodall, Thomas Gainsborough 68; and Gainsborough and Reynolds: Contrasts in Royal Patronage 14.

³⁷ Worman, 91; and Woodall Thomas Gainsborough 68.

³⁸ Such exhibitions, organized by the artists themselves, sometimes with the assistant of a publisher or dealer, are discussed in Burke, English Art 246-247, 256-257 and 272-313. In 1781 Copley hired a space in Spring Gardens to exhibit his Death of Chatham. Some twenty thousand visitors paid to see it but the bulk of his profits came from the sale of engravings. In 1799 he held a retrospective solo-exhibition which featured three of his grand history paintings, and this, too, was an unqualified financial success. West did not show his Death of

the publisher-Alderman John Boydell and the bookseller Thomas Macklin launched exhibition gallery and print ventures in the late 1780s, the Shakespeare Gallery and the Poets Gallery respectively, which involved commissioning contributions from the most renowned British painters including Academicians simultaneously showing their works at the Academy.³⁹ For the most part, these private exhibitions were financially successful, at least initially.⁴⁰ They were also explicitly commercial enterprises intended to draw profits from admission fees, print subscriptions, and the sale of individual paintings. According to its founder and financial backer, the aim of the Shakespeare Gallery was to foster a native school of history painting, but there was no need for him to conceal his equally strong commercial aims; he was honored by none other than the Royal heir apparent for his accomplishments on both those fronts. At the annual dinner of the Royal Academy

Wolfe in a private gallery but rather at the Royal Academy in 1771, where it was a tremendous success. In league with the publisher Boydell and an engraver, the painting was engraved, and in 1790 Boydell reported that his share of the earnings from the enterprise was 15,000 pounds. West and the engraver of the print would have earned comparable sums from the venture. See also Craske, Art in Europe 1700-1830, for an excellent analysis of the relationship between art and commerce in various European centers in the eighteenth century.

³⁹ Richard Altick, Paintings from Books (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1985) 51-52. On Reynolds' participation in these ventures, see Postle, Sir Joshua Reynolds 234-272.

⁴⁰ The sudden financial difficulties experienced by Boydell and Macklin in the mid-1790s was largely caused by the war with France and the consequent collapse of the print market. Burke, English Art 256.

in 1789 the Prince of Wales toasted Boydell, praising him as "an English tradesman who patronizes the art better than the Grand Monarque, Alderman Boydell, the Commercial Maecenas."⁴¹ In Britain, commerce was the welcome and benevolent counterpart of the arts.⁴²

In contrast, participation in flagrantly commercial activities was looked upon with deep disdain in France at the time.⁴³ There, at least in theory, commerce mixed with art only among the lower artistic echelons of craftspeople.⁴⁴ However, the fact that French academicians were forbidden by the Royal Academy of Painting and Sculpture from engaging in the commerce of art makes one suspect that such liaisons were frequent and required policing in order to protect the privileged status of the Academy and its members.⁴⁵ But there was no such policing by the Academy across the channel, where even the President of the Academy himself did business with Macklin and Boydell.⁴⁶

⁴¹ Whitley, Artists and Their Friends vol. 2, 112-113.

⁴² It should be noted, however, that the great majority of the paintings on display at the Academy were not for sale. On average, only ten percent of the exhibited works are marked with the asterisk which indicates their status as "for sale." See Ellis Waterhouse, "Portraiture from Kneller to Lawrence," The Listener 43, 11 May 1950: 945.

⁴³ For an illuminating discussion of the differences between Continental Academies and the London Academy see Bignamini and Postle, eds. The Artist's Model.

⁴⁴ See Crow, Painters and Public Life, esp. 23-28.

⁴⁵ My thanks to John Goodman for sharing with me his vast knowledge on this subject.

The artistic milieu in late eighteenth-century Britain, with London as its bustling hub, was indeed unique: institutionally nurtured, commercially driven, discursively lively and undiluted by censorship. With regards to the institutional constituent, Britain would seem not to be exceptional among other leading art centers on the Continent except for the fact that the Royal Academy was a latecomer. Several attempts to establish an official academy had been made as far back as the late-seventeenth century, but none came to fruition until 1768. While it was the primary institution of the plastic arts in Britain during the late-eighteenth century, it was too young to take its self-congratulating dominance for granted. Although I would emphasize other factors than does David Solkin, I ultimately agree with his conclusion that "The Academy...simply arrived too late."⁴⁷ The Academy arrived just when it became unequivocal that painters were indeed "painting for money." Not that this had not been the case in previous eras of art-making, but in the context of late eighteenth-century Britain

⁴⁶ Gainsborough, too, just before his death, contributed one painting to Macklin's Gallery, Young Hobbino and Gandaretta. As its title indicates, the subject derives from William Sommersville's comic pastoral poem Hobbino, but the picture acquired this literary title only when it hung at the Poet's Gallery. One suspects that the young "king and queen of May" began as ordinary peasant children, such as those which appear in many of Gainsborough's "fancy pictures" of the 1780s since, by his own admission, literary subjects were not his forte. Altick, Paintings from Books 29.

⁴⁷ Solkin, Painting for Money 274.

-- relatively prosperous, officially Protestant, pseudo-bourgeois, and forging toward industrialization -- the commercial impetus behind art making, selling, auctioning, exhibiting, and collecting was more pronounced. Moreover, with the virtual nonexistence of church and state commissions, artists were compelled to entice private patronage in ever more novel and assertive ways, and this is intimately connected to the general commercialization of exhibiting, promoting and selling art in Britain. Individuals involved in the commerce of art -- be they entrepreneurs such as Boydell and Macklin, Academicians such as West, Copley, Henry Fuseli, and Loutherbourog with his travelling Eidophusikon, or manufacturers such as the fabulously successful and industrious Joshua Wedgewood⁴⁸ -- were vastly more creative and sophisticated in their multi-faceted business operations than art entrepreneurs elsewhere. The fact that they had the good fortune of selling their various (and variously priced) kinds of commodities to a relatively broad and well-to-do clientele is a factor to take into consideration, for this would seem to parallel the socioeconomic makeup of the Protestant Dutch Republic a century and a half earlier. Curiously enough, portraiture had also been in great demand in seventeenth-century Holland, requiring painters such as Frans Hals, Gerard ter Borch, and Rembrandt, to name just a few, to come up with highly individual stylistic responses to the

⁴⁸ Boime, Art in the Age of Revolution 87-93.

genre. The differences between these two wealthy Protestant contexts, however, seem rather more striking than do their similarities. Another factor that makes the situation in late eighteenth-century Britain exceptional is the peculiar nature of the public discourse on art: a discourse which was, despite its "gentlemanly" subject, often spiced with indignant innuendo, scathing satire, pointed denunciations, and paid "puffs."

Together, this constellation of historical factors was formative to the development of unprecedented notions of artistic authorship and commercially minded professionalism in the prestige arts. This, too, is part of the "modernity" of late eighteenth-century British art. As far as painting was concerned, late eighteenth-century London was a "buyer's market" which, as Pointon has astutely observed, put particular strains on the artist:

The highly competitive market and the dominance of the Royal Academy as a forum for display and publicity made it imperative for artists to develop an individual and readily identifiable formula as quickly as possible. Thus one might say that the more Reynolds succeeded with florid men, the more Gainsborough was impelled to produce depictions of ephemeral women. Portrait painting in the 1780s was a highly developed business in a buyer's market.⁴⁹

Pointon concludes her analysis of the market for portrait-painting in London during the 1780s with the above statement, one with which I fully concur. Gainsborough, as Pointon recognized, made his mark in the market for portraiture with

⁴⁹ Pointon, Hanging the Head 52.

"ephemeral women", but he did so also in his distinctive ephemeral style which was the principle basis of his idiosyncratic manner of painting, his original approach to form -- a style that was most germane to feminine subjects, feminine fashion, and romantic landscapes. The argument here is circuitous: style suits the subject just as the matter of representation is enhanced by the manner of execution. It was not a style that suited all his sitters -- or appealed to all patrons -- but Gainsborough's great success as a portrait painter evinces that his mode of representational illusionism and means of stylistic expression provided an evocative, desirable, adequately mimetic yet sufficiently elusive screen of mediated subjectivity and artistic transformation.

Under the circumstances it was of paramount importance that artists construct and convey their artistic persona, their originality, through the medium of an original, singular style.⁵⁰ Artistic style and artistic persona become conflated; become mutual signifiers of each other. An original "Gainsborough" -- an originality authenticated by the scopical voyage over the topography of his canvases -- proves the originality of the painter, Gainsborough.⁵¹ This

⁵⁰ On the emergence of the positive notion of originality in art, see Richard Schiff, "Originality," in Critical Terms for Art History, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (London and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 103-115.

⁵¹ The development of the aesthetic appreciation of artistic originality as located in the strictly formal aspects of art making -- an interest that emerges with some force in the eighteenth century and culminates in the Romanticism of

originality, this uniqueness, became marketable, which is to say desirable, by virtue of the recognizability of the inimitable mark, the mark of rarity and value in and of itself. Indeed, it was the mark of the most precious of commodities, a site of the artist's obsession with the mastery of paint and self-mastery in paint, and a site of aesthetic valuation.

The original mark thus becomes the optical matrix of aesthetic fetishization. And it is precisely this aesthetic fetishization that cultivates the enormous signvalue of objects of art within a market-oriented art world -- especially on those objects which epitomize the stylistic singularity of the original artist.⁵²

The milieu in which Gainsborough worked -- one characterized by the increasing spectacularization and commodification of art -- seems to provide a picture perfect example of the Marxist notion of commodity fetishization: a

the nineteenth -- has been brilliantly analyzed and eloquently articulated in Clay, Romanticism.

The Pre-Raphaelite painter Edward Burne-Jones, Burne-Jones Talking. His Conversations 1895-1898 Preserved by his Studio Assistant Thomas Rooke, ed. Mary Lago (London: John Murray, 1982), voiced his antagonism towards just those features I am arguing are the matter of Gainsborough's distinctive style:

"I can't stand the humbug of Gainsborough anymore. Reynolds is all right, he's got no ideas but he can paint -- Gainsborough's simply an imposter. He just scratches on the canvas over loose flimsy stains and puts markings in black around them. The only thing he paints solidly are the scarlet coats [such as the coat worn by Ligonier, perhaps?], and they're just simply crude vermillion." (p. 101)

⁵² Schiff, "Originality," 108.

historical turning point when works of art become objects of "quasi-mystical overvaluation," which is to say valued far beyond their use value.⁵³ Under the circumstances of the commodification and commercialization of art in Britain, individual style became a strategy for marketing oneself; in the process of honing a recognizable style one also converted oneself into a commodity.⁵⁴ No doubt this helped foster the remarkable proliferation of idiosyncratic styles in England during the latter part of the eighteenth century.

Indeed, there is no single style that can stand as the stylistic "sign of the times" in Britain during this time (or a single "ruling" and a single "oppositional" one). Looking at appropriations of classical forms and themes in the works of Angelica Kauffmann, Henry Fuseli, Benjamin West, James Barry, Richard Wilson, for instance, one is struck by the utter dissonance between the styles of these contemporaneous Neoclassicists and Academy members. Stylistic non-uniformity

⁵³ The key essay on this subject is Karl Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," The Portable Karl Marx, trans. Eugene Kamenka (Middlesex: Penguin, 1983) 444-461.

⁵⁴ This is not to say that painters on the Continent did not share the aims and strategies of their British contemporaries, but rather that the pressures for individualizing self-definition through recognizable style were significantly more pronounced in Britain. The title of Thomas Crow's study of the studio of Jacques-Louis Louis David, Emulation: Making Artists for Revolutionary France (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1995), indicated the pressure on artists in France to imitate the manner of their master. However, central to Crow's examination of the anxieties of the master (and the anxieties between his pupils) is the problem of students following him too closely, or not closely enough.

is even more pronounced in British romanticism: "mad" John Martin's panoramic apocalyptic landscapes, William Blake's netherworldly visions, George Stubb's ferocious contests in exotic settings, Gainsborough's contemplative women in stormy landscapes, and Fuseli's anti-heroes (for Fuseli's style had always been a frenzied fusion of stylistic mannerisms). The most successful and prominent painters of the period had their copiers and imitators, but an ambitious painter's aim was to invent him or herself through the medium of a distinctive style. In essence, style became a potent sign of artistic individuality and originality, and by extension the immutable index of authenticity and value.

Gainsborough responded to this situation by developing a highly individual style of his own, one which came to fruition upon his move to Bath and one that was reiterated until it belonged to him alone, until he "owned" it as his personal style. His distinctive manner was also one that engaged a particular kind of aesthetic fascination with the doubleness of the mark. Its ideal viewer was one who could take pleasure in the topographical inscription of the aesthetic object over and above the exigencies of representation. And it was this kind of aesthetic-sensitive viewer who emerged in the eighteenth century alongside the emergence of a sophisticated discourse on aesthetics, a term which first comes into usage in the 1750s.⁵⁵ To such a viewer, the authentic, rarified

mark of the painter could itself provide aesthetic wonder even if the representation (or at least the content of the representation) left something to be desired.

My claim for the importance of Gainsborough's mature work to the history of British art is that more than those of any of his contemporaries in Britain his paintings solicit an awareness of the means by which illusion is crafted. The painter himself must have understood the power that this promise of visual pleasure had over those who saw his pictures in the proper circumstances. Others, in particular Reynolds, must also have been cognizant of the "magic" oscillation of Gainsborough's paintings between the clarity of the objects of representation and the lucidity of marks per se cautiously liberated from their servitude to the representation. Reynolds' perceptive description in the fourteenth Discourse of the "novelty and peculiarity" of Gainsborough's manner betrays his acknowledgement of the elusive "magick" of Gainsborough's mark:

all those odd scratches and marks, which on a close examination, are so observable in Gainsborough's pictures, and which even to experienced painters appear rather the effect of accident than design; this chaos, this uncouth and shapeless appearance, by a kind of magick [sic], at a certain distance assumes form, and all the parts seem to drop into their proper places, so that

⁵⁵ I am referring to Alexander Gottlieb Baumgarten's unfinished volumes entitled *Aesthetica* (Hildesheim: G. Olms, 1961), which were originally published in German in the 1750s. The literature on the subject of the emergence of the discourse (and discipline) of aesthetics is vast, but William Pietz's excellent essay "Fetish," in *Critical Terms for Art History*, eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Schiff (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1996) 197-207, gives an excellent and succinct account of the origins of aesthetics.

we can hardly refuse acknowledging the full effect of diligence, under the appearance of chance and hasty negligence. That Gainsborough himself considered this peculiarity in his manner and the power it possesses of exciting surprise, as a beauty in his works, I think may be inferred from the eager desire which we know he always expressed, that his pictures, at the Exhibition, should be seen near, as well as at a distance.⁵⁶

Reynolds' description is perceptive, and it is almost exclusively about perception -- about how one perceives Gainsborough's paintings. On the surface of it, the description seems laudatory, but it also denigrates Gainsborough's style as limited to the realm of the senses, at least that is the dialectic Reynolds enacts. In doing so, Reynolds seems to be protecting himself, masking his own anxiety over the success and originality of the style of his rival. The President, he protests too much.

The erasure of the marks of production or labor is one of the key defining features of the commodity under capitalism;⁵⁷ but, as we have seen, Gainsborough highlights the marks of his labor. Inscribed over the topography of his canvases, they are the site of "exciting surprise," to use Reynolds' expression. Marks of his labor are not hidden by the glittering nature of the commodity; rather the painter's labor is highlighted in the glittering individualized marks -- they are what stand out in relief as the denotative capacity of the mimetic subject subsides in relation to the ocular advance and retreat of the viewer's gaze. In essence they are the

⁵⁶ Reynolds, 312-313.

⁵⁷ Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof."

embodiment of the artist as commodity, and the currency of pure sign value.⁵⁸

It is this which Gainsborough sells. Indeed, he sells himself: he has himself become a commodity and whatever he produces becomes a relic of himself, enshrined in the marks of his own design. This, we might well see as a version of the "mist-enveloped regions," not of the religious world, but of the bourgeois art world.⁵⁹ Gainsborough's style was perfectly adapted to the task.⁶⁰

⁵⁸ For my understanding of pure sign value I am indebted to Jean Baudrillard, For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign, trans. Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos Press, 1981). Guy Debord, Society of the Spectacle (1967; reprint, Detroit: Black and Red, 1983), has also provided some indirect yet relevant illuminations on the subject.

⁵⁹ Marx, "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," 447.

⁶⁰ I am borrowing the expression from Ernst Gombrich. Writing about a very different context of image making, Gombrich makes the pithy remark that encapsulates what I have argued for Gainsborough, his development of a distinctive style, his exploitation of his unique resources, and his astute adaptation to the circumstances of his particular historical context: "art has a history and artists need a style adapted to a task." (p. 106) "Truth and the Stereotype," The Essential Gombrich, ed. Richard Woodfield (London: Phaidon, 1996) 89-112.

POSTSCRIPT

Of all the portraits of men Gainsborough painted, his portrait of Henry Bate, the painter's close friend and great champion, comes closest to achieving the kind of nervous ephemeral touch and light, confident scumbled calligraphy that distinguishes his large-scale portraits of women in landscape settings. For both personal and professional reasons, it seems fitting that the figure of Bate would "become" the embodiment, or cipher, of Gainsborough's distinctive style. Seven years after Gainsborough painted Bate he painted a full-length of the critic's wife, Mary (fig. 45). Today the pendant portraits are again reunited and hang near each other at the Tate Gallery, providing the irresistible opportunity to study how Gainsborough's stylistic proclivities in portraiture are expressed differently on either side of the gender divide.

One caveat may be in order at this point with regards to my interpretation of the construction of gender as it is played out in Gainsborough's full-length portraits of Mr and Mrs Bate. Namely, I am most compelled by how the fashionable attributes of feminine display give way to the artist's own painterly display, and how the conventions of male dress and portraiture limited the scope of new plastic departures for the painter who relied so heavily on the matter of stylish dress to furnish his stylish manner of painting. This is not to say that I am entirely uninterested in how Gainsborough's investment in, and fascination with, female portrait subjects is suggestive of social historical factors regarding

portraiture's role in the construction of gendered subjectivities. I have banked this intricate and worthwhile question for a future writerly enterprise, investing here instead in the equally evocative and important issue of the construction of an artistic subjectivity -- that is, the construction of Gainsborough's subjective, singular style.

To return to the portraits of Henry and Mary Bate, certain of Gainsborough's full-length portrait conventions apply to both portraits: the slightly elevated vantage point, fashionable contemporary dress, landscape setting, the look away from the viewer, the employment of an upper light source that simultaneously endows the face with softened chiaroscuro effects and dramatizes the shadows and highlights of the sitter's costume and setting. If, however, Gainsborough's Henry Bate is, as I have argued it is, an embodiment of Gainsborough's style, then contrasting it with its female counterpart proves the restrictions male portraiture imposed on those objects and formal relationships which were the painter's most fruitful conduits for painterly innovation and stylistic self-ennunciation: the cornucopia of fabrics and the kaleidoscopic colors that provide the complementary play between luxurious clothes, lush foliage and prismatic clouds.

Note, first of all, the different overall palette of the canvases. Both incorporate warm and cool tones but the juxtaposition of spectral opposites is remarkably more daring in Mary Bate. Heavy summer foliage flutters above the figure and autumnal leaves and shrubs curl towards her from the

right. Pale pink flowers further confound the cyclic pattern of nature but they are there, no doubt, to urge the eye to travel diagonally across the canvas, to link its parts, and to suggestively merge its recessional planes from the washy patch of peachy-pink that articulates the division between earth and sky in the distance, to the twisted pink ribbons of paint that animate the opalescent whites of the figure's costume, and finally to the opaque daubs of glowing pink that punctuate the otherwise unilluminated, earthy monotone of the bottom right corner. The liberties the painter has taken in submitting to the mimetic truth of nature is indicative of the "intransitiveness" of his imagery and the precarious balance that his best pictures strike between the obligations of referentiality to the external world and formal concerns internal to the endeavor of picture making.¹ Measured against my own particular criteria, Mary Bate is the superior picture, the more "Gainsboroughesque" picture, because it is the more "intransitive" picture, the more precariously balanced picture, and the less mimetically truthful yet the more plastically candid picture.

To be fair, color also facilitates compositional complexity and unity in the portrait of Henry Bate -- note the "absorption" of all the warm tones of the ground and trees as well as the cool tones of the clouds and sky into the weave of the sitter's grey coat -- but, as is vividly announced in the

¹ The term, and its definition, is borrowed from Clay, Romanticism 4.

portrait of Mary Bate, the variegated colors and textures of feminine finery accommodate infinitely more theatrical formal ingenuity. The shimmering silk of her robin's-egg blue and ivory costume permeate the clouds and hilly landscape in the distance. The juxtaposition of her skirt with the haphazardly bunched overskirt spilling over the edge of the plinth displays a remarkable passage of materiality of pigment and the fabrication of light and shade from the substance of color. In the most dramatically lit area of the canvas, and near its center, the blue of the skirt becomes as white as the fabric next to it, while the creases of the white fabric are outlined with bluish grey.

Note too how the vertical and diagonal orientation of figure and framing objects are reversed in the two portraits. The slightly leaning birch tree framing Henry Bate has been replaced by a vertical arrangement of a sharp-edged plinth and a rounded urn in the portrait of his wife. The leaning tree emphasizes the erect and stable contrapposto of the male figure while the column and overhanging branch form a rough right angle into which the lithesome, leaning figure of Mary Bate is fitted. Gainsborough's customary motifs for occupying his sitter's hands are also employed, and here gender is decisive. As in many of Gainsborough's portraits of men, Henry Bate holds his hat in one hand and a walking cane in the other. Mary Bate fingers the fabric of her shawl with her right hand, calling the viewer's attention to the vivid colors and rich textures of her costume as well as the surface upon

which the painter has applied paint in a wide variety of washy and scumbled inscriptions. Yet with her left hand, poised in a mannered gesture, she draws attention back to the ostensible subject of the portrait: the face.

Mary Bate's hand gestures are particularly evocative of the dual interests and obligations that directed Gainsborough's depictions of female sitters. One hand, with index finger extended upward, points to the subject of the portrait: the face of the sitter which has been rendered with such fine, blended strokes that it evokes a reflection in a mirror rather than an image carefully constructed from layers of paint. The other hand holds the corner of the ephemeral shawl and points downward, again with index finger straightened, to the subject of the picture: the feathery yet bold marks of the painter. Mary Bate's hand gestures point, quite literally, to the two poles of the picture and to the two poles of Gainsborough's portrait practice. They are, however, also joined together in a particularly discreet manner by the transparent, tissuey shawl that winds around the figure's left thumb, loosely wraps around her head of thick, auburn curls, and cascades down along right shoulder, arm, and finally emerges from the relaxed grasp of her left hand. From hand to hand, the eye is led from face and costume, from the site of the iconic profile to the terrain of amorphic paint. Like twisting veins, threads of pink, blue, white, yellow, green and coral paint -- colors that all have their counterpart in the landscape -- form Mary Bate's wrapping

shawl, merging at one turn into her hair, at another into the clouds, into the grove of leafy trees, and then dissolving into the deep, shadowy blue of the figure's skirt. Here, precisely where the index finger has directed it, is where the eye finally rests: where artifice merges with nature, where the fascination with the stuff of feminine artifice meets the pleasure of paint, and where the edge of a sheer shawl suddenly appears to look like the tip of a painter's brush. How appropriate that the piece of fashion should double as the metonymical tool for painting, and be the place where the painter signs himself off as the most stylish of eighteenth-century British portraitists.

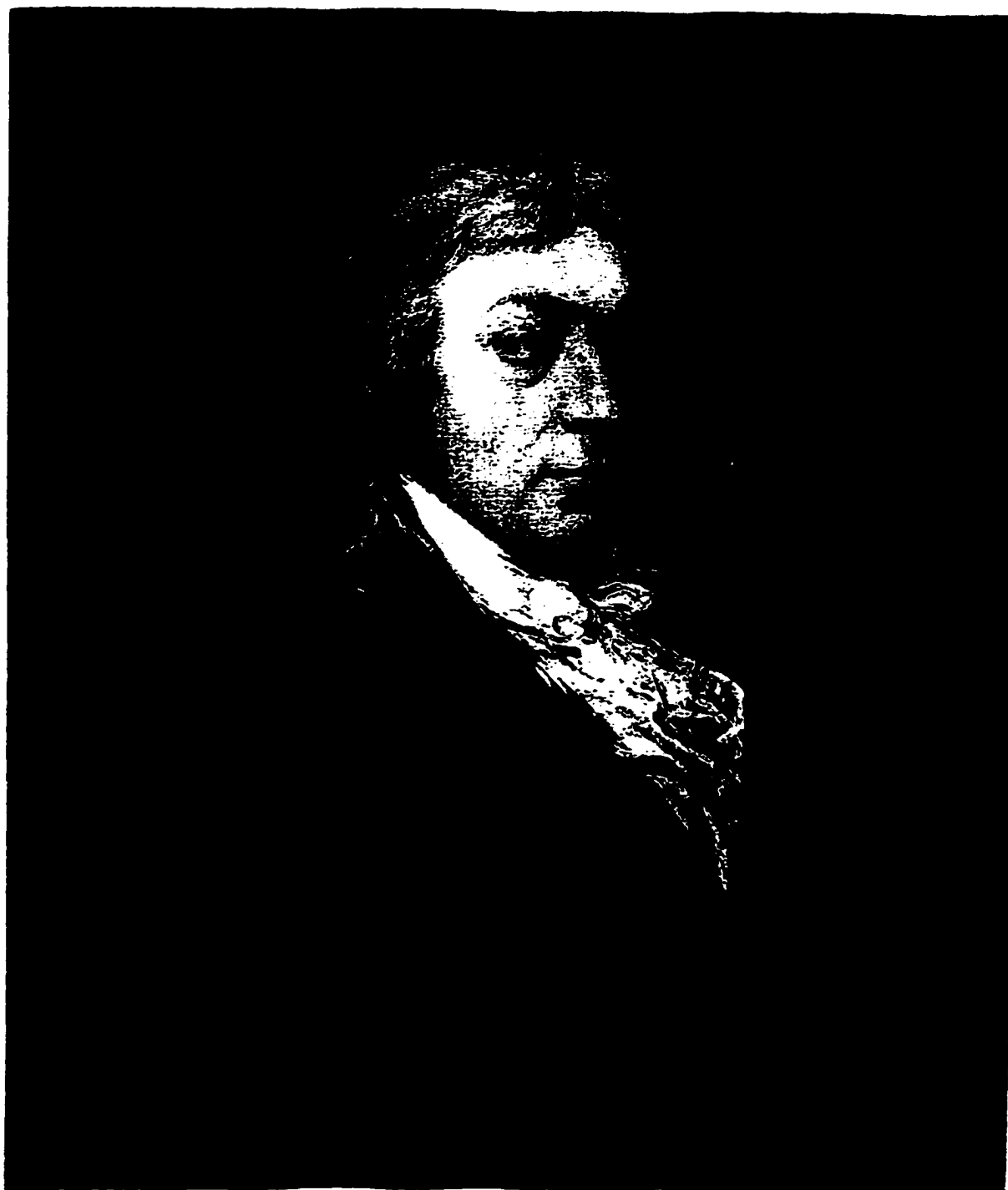


Fig. 1. Thomas Gainsborough, Self-Portrait, 1787. Oil on canvas, 74.9 x 61 cm. Royal Academy of Arts, London.



Fig. 2. Johann Zoffany, *The Academicians of the Royal Academy, R.A. 1772*. Oil on canvas, 100.7 x 147.3 cm. H.M. The Queen.



Fig. 3. Thomas Gainsborough, *Isabella, Countess of Sefton* (Lady Molneux), R.A. 1769. Oil on canvas, 239.2 x 156 cm. Earl of Sefton.



Fig. 4. Thomas Gainsborough, *The Three Eldest Princesses* (detail), 1784. Oil on canvas, 129.5 x 179.7 cm. H.M. The Queen.



Fig. 5. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mary Graham*, R.A. 1777. Oil on canvas, 237.5 x 154.3 cm. National Gallery of Scotland, Edinburgh.



Fig. 6. Joshua Reynolds, *Joanna Lloyd*, R.A. 1776. Oil on canvas, 236 x 146 cm. Private Collection.



Fig. 7. Thomas Gainsborough, *Grace Dalrymple Elliott*, 1778. Oil on canvas, 234.9 x 153.6 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.



Fig. 8. Joshua Reynolds, *The Montgomery Sisters*, "Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen," R.A. 1774. Oil on canvas, 233.6 x 291 cm. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 9. Thomas Gainsborough, Mr and Mrs John Gravenor and Their Daughters, c.1752-54. Oil on canvas, 90.1 x 90.1 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.



Fig. 10. Thomas Gainsborough, Portrait of the Artist with Wife and Daughter, c.1748. Oil on canvas, 92.1 x 70.5 cm. National Gallery, London.



Fig. 11. Thomas Gainsborough, Margaret Gainsborough, c.1778. Oil on canvas, 76.6 x 63.8 cm. Courtauld Institute Galleries, London.



Fig. 12. Johann Zoffany, Queen Charlotte with Members of her Family, R.A. 1773. Oil on canvas, 105.1 x 127 cm. H.M. The Queen.



Fig. 13. Thomas Gainsborough, *Mary, Countess Howe*, c.1763-64. Oil on canvas, 243.2 x 154.3 cm. Kenwood House, London.



Fig. 14. Thomas Gainsborough, Elizabeth and Mary Linley, R.A. 1772. Oil on canvas, 199 x 153.1 cm. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London.



Fig. 15. Thomas Gainsborough, *Sarah Siddons*, 1783-85. Oil on canvas, 221 x 152.7 cm. National Gallery, London.

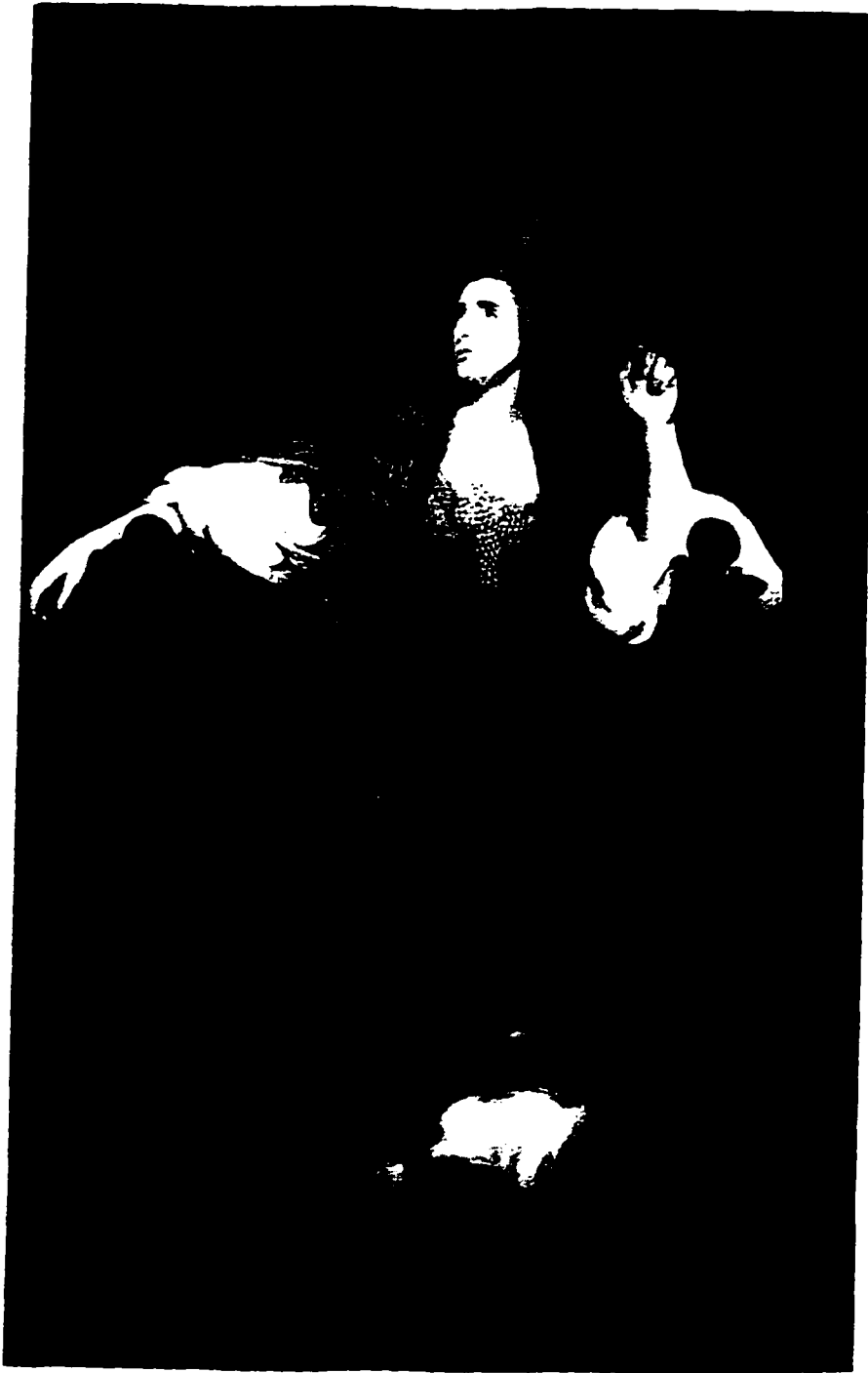


Fig. 16. Joshua Reynolds, Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse, R.A. 1784. Oil on canvas, 239.7 x 147.6 cm. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marin.



Fig. 17. Thomas Gainsborough, *Musidora*, c.1780-1788. Oil on canvas, 192.4 x 156.6 cm. Tate Gallery, London.



Fig. 18. Thomas Gainsborough, Diana and Actaeon, c.1785. Oil on canvas, 158.1 x 188 cm. H.M. The Queen.

*Whether deck'd in lace and ribbons
 Thou appear'st like Mrs Gibbons,
 Or the nymph of smiling look
 At Bath ye left Janetta Cook*



Fig. 19. Attributed to Reverend John Sneyd, Janetta Cook and Mrs Gibbons, c.1794. Pencil and watercolor, 28.6 x 18.2. Avon County Library, Bath.



Fig. 20. Thomas Gainsborough, Francis Catherine, Countess of Dartmouth, c.1769. Oil on canvas, 127.4 x 101.4 cm. On loan to Gainsborough's House, Sudbury.



Fig. 21. Thomas Gainsborough, Francis Catherine, Countess of Dartmouth, c.1771. Oil on canvas, 78 x 65 cm. Earl of Dartmouth.



Fig. 22. Thomas Gainsborough, *A Woman with a Rose*, c.1763-65. Black chalk and stump, heightened with white on greenish-buff paper, 46.6 x 33 cm. British Museum, London.



Fig. 23. Thomas Gainsborough, Study of a Woman Seen from Behind, c.1763-70. Black chalk and stump with white chalk on greenish-brown paper, 48.8 x 30.4 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 24. Thomas Gainsborough, Study for a Lady, for "The Richmond Water Walk" (?) I, c.1785. Black chalk and stump, heightened with white on buff paper, 48.4 x 31.3 cm. British Museum, London.



Fig. 25. Thomas Gainsborough, Study for a Lady, for "The Richmond Water Walk" (?) II, c.1785. Black chalk and stump, heightened with white on buff paper, 48.4 x 31.3 cm. British Museum, London.



Fig. 26. Thomas Gainsborough, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, c.1785. Oil on canvas, 130 x 104 cm. Chatsworth House Trust.



Fig. 27. Thomas Gainsborough, *The Mall*, 1783. Oil on canvas, 120.6 x 147 cm. Frick Collection, New York.



Fig. 28. Thomas Gainsborough, Elizabeth Brinsley Sheridan, 1785-1786. Oil on canvas, 219.7 x 153.7 cm. National Gallery, Washington.



Fig. 29. Thomas Gainsborough, *Penelope, Viscountess Ligonier*, R.A. 1771. Oil on canvas, 240 x 157.5 cm. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino.



Fig. 30. Thomas Gainsborough, Edward, 2nd Viscount Ligonier, R.A. 1771. Oil on canvas, 239 x 157.5 cm. Huntington Museum, San Marino.



Fig. 31. Thomas Gainsborough, William and Elizabeth Hallett, "The Morning Walk," 1785. Oil on canvas, 236.2 x 179.1 cm. National Gallery, London.



Fig. 32. Thomas Gainsborough, *Francis Duncombe*, c.1777. Oil on canvas, 233.7 x 155 cm. Frick Collection, New York.



Fig. 33. Thomas Gainsborough, *Giovanna Baccelli, R.A.* 1782.
Oil on canvas, 226.7 x 148.6 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

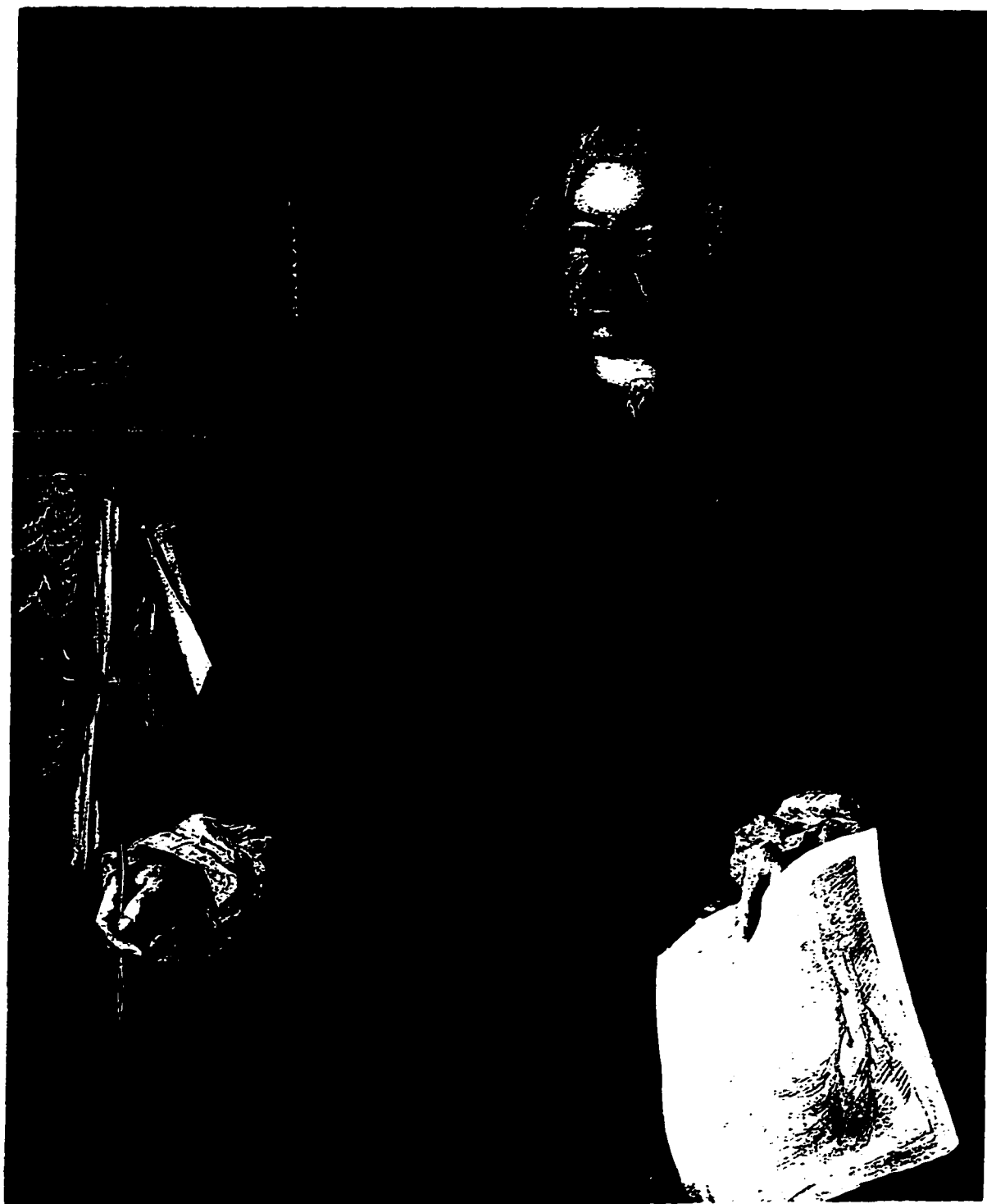


Fig. 34. Thomas Gainsborough, *Uvedale Tomkins Price*, c.1760. Oil on canvas, 124 x 99 cm. Staatsgemaldesammlung, Munich.

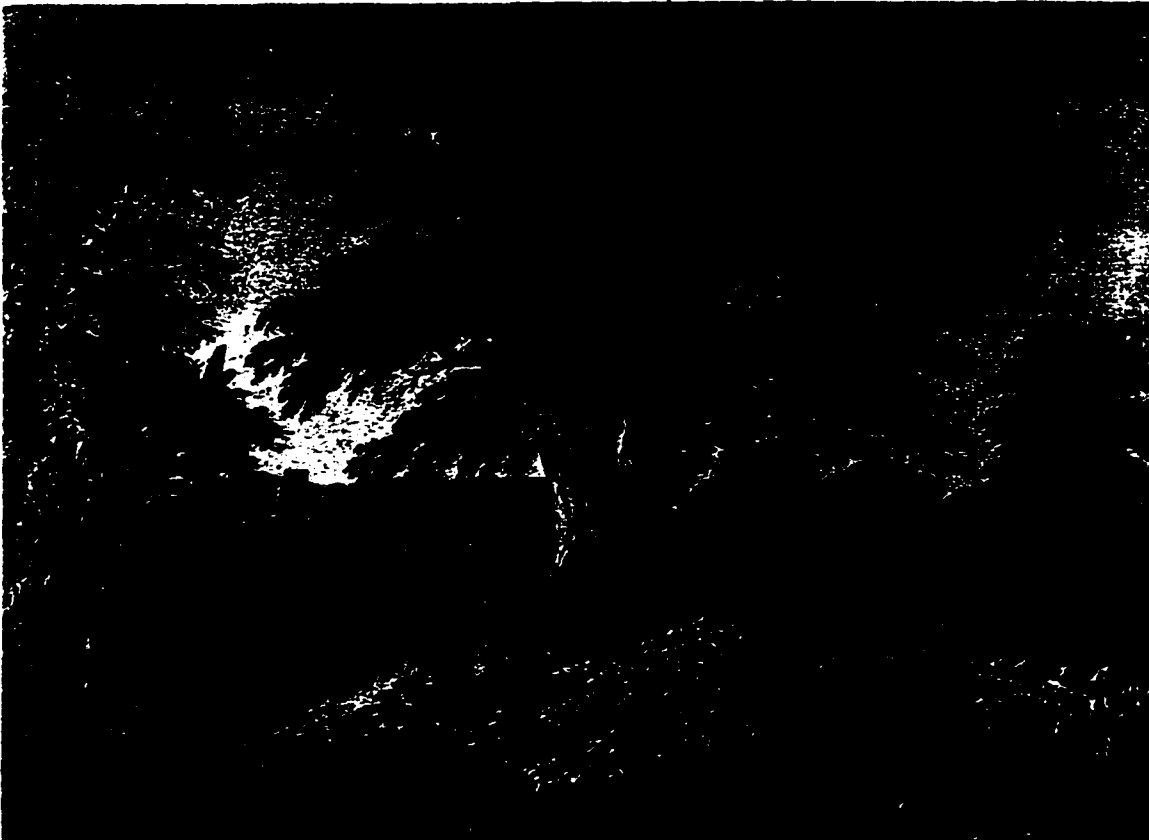


Fig. 35. Thomas Gainsborough, Beech Trees at Foxley, with Yazor Church in the Distance, 1760. Brown chalk, with watercolor and body color over pencil, 28.7 x 38.9 cm. Whitworth Art Gallery, University of Manchester.



Fig. 36. Thomas Gainsborough, Self-Portrait, c.1750-55. Pencil on paper, the figure cut out and laid down on a landscape background, 35.2 x 25.7 cm. British Museum, London.

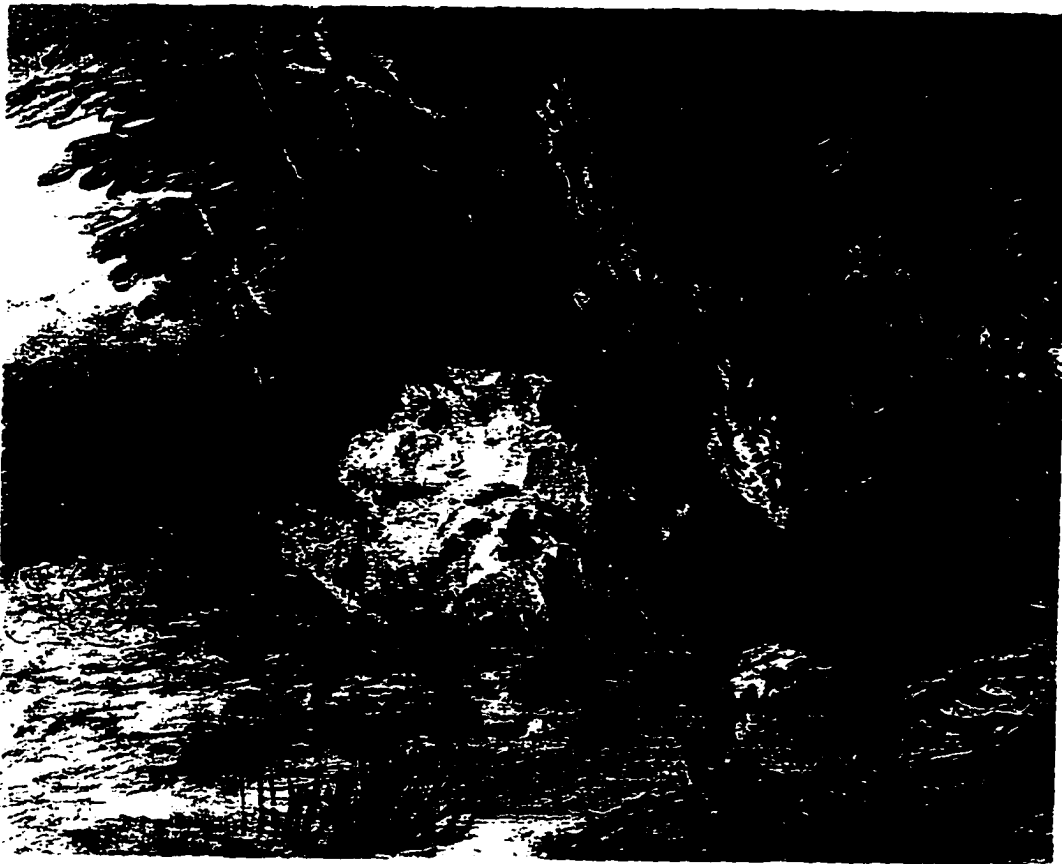


Fig. 37. Thomas Gainsborough, A Woodland Pool with Rocks and Plants, c.1765-70. Black chalk with watercolor and body color, varnished, 22.9 x 28.3 cm. Yale Center for British Art, New Haven.



Fig. 38. Thomas Gainsborough, Queen Charlotte, R.A. 1781. Oil on canvas, 238.8 x 158.7 cm. H.M. The Queen.



Fig. 39. Thomas Gainsborough, Henry Bate, R.A. 1780. Oil on canvas, 223.5 x 149.9 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

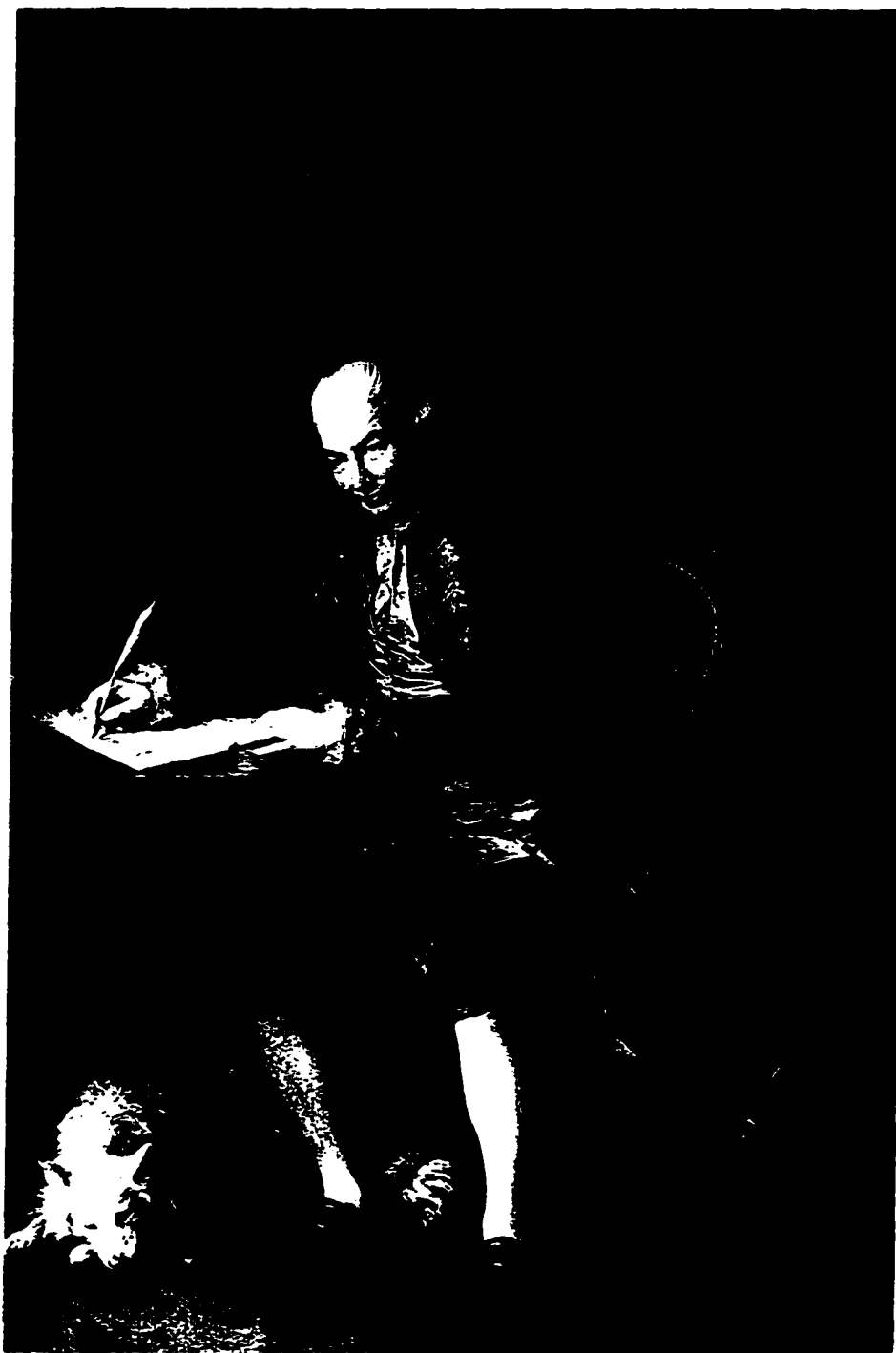


Fig. 40. Thomas Gainsborough, Carl Friedrich Abel, R.A. 1777. Oil on canvas, 223.5 x 147.3 cm. Huntington Library and Art Gallery, San Marino.



Fig. 41. Thomas Gainsborough, Johann Christian Fischer, R.A.
1780. Oil on canvas, 228.6 x 150.5 cm. H.M. The Queen.

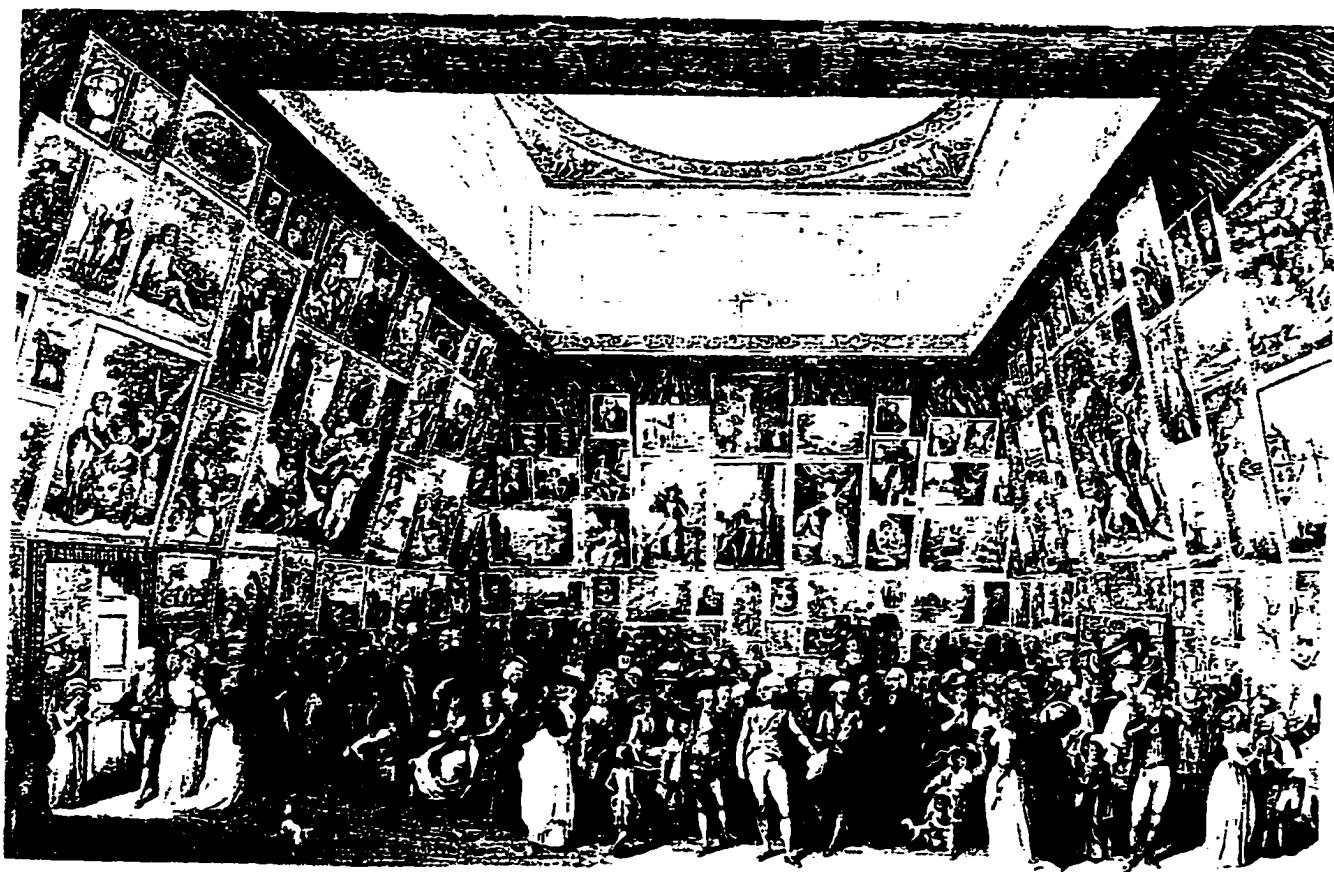


Fig. 42. After Johann Heinrich Ramberg, The Exhibition of the Royal Academy, 1787. Engraving by Pietro Antonio Martini, 37.9 x 52.5 cm.



Fig. 43. After Thomas Gainsborough, The Three Eldest Princesses, 1784. Mezzotint by Gainsborough Dupont, 66 x 45.5 cm; 2nd state. Published 2 September 1793.



Fig. 44. Thomas Rowlandson, A Portrait Painter's Ante-Room, 1809. Pen and watercolor, 12.4 x 20.1 cm. Ashmolean Museum, Oxford.



Fig. 45. Thomas Gainsborough, Mary Bate, 1787. Oil on canvas, 221 x 144.8 cm. Tate Gallery, London.

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