



ENGLISH PAINTING

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FROM KING GEORGE II TO QUEEN VICTORIA

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THE OLD MASTERS (1730-1850)

Is there an English school of painting at all?

Strictly speaking, the word school applies only in a very imperfect manner to the growth of painting in England. Generally it is used to designate a special collection of traditions and processes, a particular method, a peculiar style in design, and an equally peculiar taste in colouring – all contributing to the representation of a national ideal existing in the minds of the artists of the same country at the same time. In this sense, we speak of the Flemish school, the Dutch school, the Spanish school, several Italian schools, and the French school, but not of the English school. We cannot apply the word to English art, for it is just this absence of any national tradition that strikes one most forcibly in studying English painting. Each painter seems to stand by himself, and is, so to speak, isolated from his brother artists. No trace is to be found of any uniformity of method or of teaching, none of systematic instruction by the State, the Academy, or the Fine Art school. English art is free, and, on that very account, is infinitely varied, full of surprises, and unexpected originality.

But if, for the sake of brevity, we group together under the name of “school” all the separate manifestations which represent a nation’s art, and an art worthy of history, then certainly there is an English school.

Its rise dates nearly two centuries back, and, yet, it was quite unknown on the continent. It was not until the time of the Paris Exhibition in 1855, when the English artists of the day first sent their productions across the Channel, that foreigners became aware of its existence. There was great surprise in France when the walls of the little temporary building on Avenue Montaigne were lined with an extensive series of pictures belonging to no school familiar to French eyes. Until this time, not only genius, but even feeling – I mean practical art feeling – had been disallowed to the English.

It could not be denied that, if she had no great painters, England could boast distinguished amateurs; scholars and art-collectors well knew that the British aristocracy possessed very rich galleries of old masters, where the finest Poussins and most valuable Watteaus were gathered together, even when the France of David’s time held them in the profoundest contempt. Owing, perhaps, as much to astonishment as to genuine admiration, the school whose existence was so suddenly revealed in 1855 was extolled somewhat beyond its merits. Had the works of the English painters of the 18th century been exhibited at the same time, the revelation would have been still more startling, and more deserving of such an enthusiastic outburst of admiration. In the year 1725, England had been completely taken by surprise by the unexpected appearance of a genuine English artist. English in habits, disposition, and temperament, as well as by birth, his case was unprecedented, or nearly so. This artist was William Hogarth¹.

Up until his time, foreign artists, and particularly northern painters – Hans Holbein, Peter Paul Rubens, Van Dyck, Peter Lely, and Federigo Zuccaro – had been successively sent for by English sovereigns.

Anthony van Dyck,
Lady Anne Carr, Countess of Bedford, c. 1638.
Oil on canvas, 136.2 x 109 cm.
Petworth House, Sussex.

They were commissioned to decorate castles, palaces, and churches; they received, not only from the court, but also from the nobility, liberal commissions, which rendered their stay on British soil a continual triumph.

Pupils also studied under them, to whom they imparted as much of their art as they could teach; but it was not in their power to communicate their special gifts – their invention and imagination. Sir James Thornhill, sergeant-painter to King George I, a gentleman by birth and a member of Parliament, is perhaps the only one who, in his mural paintings at St Paul's and at Greenwich, has shown some artistic fire; but even he was not original. He carried on the style of the French painters of the 17th century, and the allegories of Charles Le Brun and Jean-Baptiste Jouvenet, with only a small touch of that life which emanates so abundantly from the brush of Rubens. The commencement of the English school is marked, really, by Hogarth; he is, so to speak, its Giotto, as was said of him with some magniloquence in the introduction to the report of the International Exhibition of 1862. But we must not be misled by these words, nor mistake their true import. Supposing there was really a British school of art, does it follow that it deserves to take rank amongst the great schools which, although widely differing from each other in style, we have been accustomed to reverence?

Portrait, Historical, and Genre Painting

Certainly it is possible to count a certain number of very distinguished artistic individualities in England, and among these some true masters. But, apart from a few brilliant stars, we are obliged to confess that the average of talent is below that of the Continental schools, and we will presently try to indicate the causes of this inferiority.

The enthusiasm excited by Hogarth's first humorous works had a decisive influence on the English school, which continues to cultivate even today, though with abated ardour, the ground on which this intelligent adventurer in art, at first ignored by all his fellow-artists, planted his tent of observation.

In an age like his, when the tone of the masses was low in the extreme, and the higher classes gave themselves up to frivolity and corruption, matter for satire could not be wanting to a right-feeling mind, aided by a keen and penetrating sense of humour. This Hogarth saw. He felt convinced that a faithful representation of the manners of his time, partly by the outcry of the enemies that he would thus create, and partly by the applause of the lower orders, could not fail to crown with success the man who was bold enough to point out to contemporary society its deformities, its weaknesses, and its vices. And his conviction was correct. He began by casting aside all academical work, and gave himself up to the study of the human physiognomy when animated by passion: in crowds, in taverns, in public places. Then he violently hurled from its pedestal the reputation of the fashionable painter, William Kent, who claimed to have discovered afresh – a century before Louis David – the one true, pure Greek style; a pretension especially ridiculous in connection with Kent's work, and utterly absurd at whatever time it manifests itself, or in whatever mind it takes rise, for it is but the pitiable aspiration of pedants, disguised by the double mask of Janus, but blind to everything before them, and with eyes only for the past.

Hogarth's chief weapon was a merciless truth. He was Anglo-Saxon in every sense of the word – an example is his self-portrait with his favourite dog, Trump.

Anthony van Dyck,

Charles I on Horseback, c. 1637-1637.

Oil on canvas, 367 x 292.1 cm.

The National Gallery, London.

William Hogarth,

The Wedding of Stephen and Mary Cox, 1729.

Oil on canvas, 128.3 x 102.9 cm.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (p. 10)

William Hogarth,

The Shrimp Girl, c. 1740-1745.

Oil on canvas, 63.5 x 52.5 cm.

The National Gallery, London. (p. 11)









The man and the dog are of the same type – and strictly faithful to the genius of his race; he utterly disdained, and, indeed, never understood, what we call the style and tradition of the great masters; that art which is as much in the conception as in the realistic representation. He was not sensitive to art. The external beauties of nature, the play of light on the human countenance, or on the vista of some deep valley, the changeful blue of the waves, the fanciful shapes of the clouds, these never for an instant attracted his attention. In short, he was but subordinately an artist; he was a moralist, and cared to be nothing more.

Herein lay his glory and his strength; in these days this fact would constitute his weakness if we were to judge him according to the strict rules of Continental taste. Still, no one can study nature as ardently as Hogarth did without showing as the result, even unconsciously to himself, certain beauties especially attractive, and marks of personal observation which at once arrest one's attention.

The story goes that one day, when Hogarth was strolling with a friend near some low neighbourhood, they saw two tipsy girls quarrelling. One of them, suddenly filling her mouth with gin, spat it in the eyes of the other. "Look, look!" cried Hogarth in astonishment, at the same time making a rapid sketch of the scene. This he afterwards introduced into a picture, *Modern Midnight Conversation*, in which he depicted the fearful spectacle of the vices of London. He never allowed any opportunity of studying character or customs to escape him; every face which attracted his attention he would catch at once with a few rapid strokes of the pencil, on his thumbnail if he had no paper handy. And thus in his works, the attitudes and action, wondrously life-like and inexhaustibly varied as they are, are not only correct and faithful in their most trivial details, but at times are also noble and touching.

There is a something in the faces of his women and children which Joshua Reynolds or Thomas Lawrence probably would never have seen; take, for example, the girl in the *Marriage à la Mode*, drying her tears in the quack doctor's study (No. 3 of the series). Look, again, at the young girl dressed in a pink petticoat and black mantle in Baring's picture, *The Conversation*. This figure is one of Hogarth's happiest combinations of colour.

As a painter he has left some good portraits, amongst others is one of Captain Thomas Coram, in the Foundling Hospital, of which the charitable philanthropist was the founder; one of John Wilkes, which Hogarth had exaggerated, and of which Wilkes himself nevertheless said, "I grow every day more like the portrait". Also, one of Henry Fielding, the celebrated author of *The History of Tom Jones, Foundling*; a posthumous portrait for which the English actor Garrick sat, giving to his own features, by a splendid power of mimicry, the habitual expression of the novelist; lastly, those of David Garrick himself as Richard III; of Lavinia Fenton as Polly Peachum in *The Beggar's Opera*, and that of his own wife.

In 1736, he tried his hand, with indifferent success, at painting on a large scale, and executed, on the immense walls of the staircase at St Bartholomew's Hospital, two Scripture scenes: *The Pool of Bethesda* and *The Good Samaritan*. The figures are seven feet high. But even in these serious subjects, he cannot dispense with humour and satire. In *The Pool of Bethesda* he represents a rich leper's servant driving away with a stick a poor wretch who has drawn near to bathe his sores in the health-giving pool. In another picture, representing Danaë, he has yielded to the same spirit, showing the distrustful old nurse testing a piece of gold with her teeth.

William Hogarth,
Marriage à la Mode: 1,
The Marriage Settlement, c. 1743.
 Oil on canvas, 69.9 x 90.8 cm.
 The National Gallery, London.

His most celebrated effort is *The Harlot's Progress*, a series of six paintings, in which he mingles romance with comedy, or rather Aristophanic satire. We can, indeed, recognise some contemporary characters – Colonel Francis Charteris, Parson Ford, Kate Hack – about, and a noted procuress, Mother Needham. The success of this series, which was considerable, was followed soon after by a still greater, when *The Rake's Progress* appeared. This set is composed on the plan of a drama in eight acts. A poor girl who is seduced in the first act, and abandoned, returns to him at the last, when he is in his turn forsaken by the crowd of parasites, swindlers, and prize-fighters, who have driven him to Bedlam. Hogarth painted some other sets, *The Elections* and *The Four Times of the Day*, but the most celebrated is the *Marriage à la Mode*, a set of six pictures.

We must not omit to notice the *March to Finchley*, a satirical picture of the panic which seized on the Royal Guards sent by King George II to stop the progress of the Pretender, Charles Edward. Hogarth dedicated it to the King, who after seeing it cried, "Do they dare laugh at my soldiers like that? Take it away! Take it away, the miserable thing!" Hogarth, in a fury, struck out the inscription, substituting the words, "To the King of Prussia!"

Although wanting in great artistic qualities, in spite of frequent faults of drawing, of a heavy, and, for the most part, sombre manner, William Hogarth's pictures rivet one's attention, and once seen, it is difficult to forget them. Their humour, animation, vigour, and bitterness of satirical firmly fix in the mind the works of this imperfect painter; but in an artist these are only secondary qualities. Let us add that Hogarth's pictures can be perfectly interpreted by engraving. Now, there is no work of a true master which can undergo such a process without its losing the chief part of its beauty.

In the history of French art, we have a painter who has devoted himself a good deal to the study of homely and domestic scenes, which he generally renders in the small dimensions adopted by William Hogarth. Although his humour is not of the same character, it is one peculiar to himself and attainable by none other. This artist is Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin. If one had to choose between one of Hogarth's complete works, and a single good picture of Chardin's, no one would hesitate to prefer the latter, for he could get an engraving of the English painter which would answer every purpose.

In England, however, they go so far as to compare Hogarth to Shakespeare, the poet, the painter of all that is splendid, all that is beautiful, the illustrator of every feeling, from the humblest to the most sublime.

"Which is your favourite author?" asked somebody one day of the humorist Charles Lamb. "Shakespeare," replied he. "And next?" "Hogarth."

So greatly did Lamb exalt the moral element in Hogarth to the detriment of the artistic. I prefer the opinion of Horace Walpole, who, however, was not one of Hogarth's friends: "The Rake's levée, the Earl's dining-room in the *Marriage à la Mode*, the apartments of the husband and wife, the drawing-room and bedroom, and twenty other pictures, are the truest representations that we shall have for a hundred years to come of our style of living." And he was right.

William Hogarth,
Marriage à la Mode: 6, The Lady's Death, c. 1743.
Oil on canvas, 69.9 x 90.8 cm.
The National Gallery, London.

Thomas Gainsborough,
Mr and Mrs Andrews, c. 1750.
Oil on canvas, 69.8 x 119.4 cm.
The National Gallery, London.(pp. 16-17)

Hogarth is, then, essentially a moralist painter. Reynolds and Gainsborough, on the contrary, his contemporaries in art, although his juniors by twenty years, are artists in the true sense of the word.









It would be difficult to find another example of two artists apparently so alike, and yet in reality so dissimilar when one studies them carefully. They were born around the same time, and led very similar lives. They trod the same path, side by side, each one courted and fêted by the English aristocracy, whose most refined and delicate types they have handed down to posterity, each in his way equally earnest. However, between the two there was a wide gulf, owing to the difference in their bringing up.

It was to his classical studies that Joshua Reynolds², the son of a country schoolmaster, owed his artistic tendencies. Among the woods and fields that surrounded his village, Thomas Gainsborough, on the contrary, open to all nature's impressions, which he eagerly sought after and drank in, owed to his father, who let him run free, the large extent of his artistic talent. And what charming anecdotes there are about him! One day, we are told, he caught, in a very few strokes of the pencil, the exact expression and bold attitude of a young urchin plundering a tree laden with pears, hanging over the garden wall where he – himself but a mere child – was drawing. Another time, it is said, a neighbour, deceived by the life-like appearance, called vehemently to a figure painted by the young artist, who had returned from London, disgusted with the schools and academies, where he had nevertheless learnt the rudiments of his art.

When Gainsborough returned to London much later on, he came straight from Suffolk, out of which he had not travelled, rich in abundant studies from nature, though as yet quite an unknown man, while Reynolds had already visited Spain, the coasts of the Mediterranean, and Italy. After having admired the works of Raphael and Titian, he had, by effort of will, thoroughly analysed and studied them in their separate parts; in the galleries of Rome and Venice he completed the education which had commenced on his bench at school with Jonathan Richardson's *Treatise on Painting*.

And thus Reynolds' talent is a magnificent victory of will; that of Gainsborough, the spontaneous unfolding of a flower accomplishing its natural transition, and ripening into fruit. It was a fruit of an exquisite savour. What Reynolds sets himself to learn, and learns without difficulty, owing to the keen intelligence with which he is gifted, Gainsborough in his Suffolk woods imagines, and creates for the satisfaction of his fancy.

Thus there is far more to be learnt from the works that Gainsborough has left us, than from the rules laid down in Reynolds' collection of Addresses to the Academy, wise and instructive though they may be. Even when painting the most graceful lady, the most English – in other words, the brightest and freshest – of boys, Reynolds never becomes so lost in his model as to forget the old masters. Take, as examples, *The Scholar*, which reminds us of Murillo; the portrait of Mrs Harley as a Bacchante (a picture known under the title of *Maternal Love*), in which the influence of Leonardo da Vinci is too often pointed out; and that portrait in the State Hermitage Museum (*The Snake in the Grass* or *Love Unloosing the Zone of Beauty*), a replica of which is in the National Gallery, in which he mingles his reminiscences of Titian with his own mannerisms. Similar recollections are still more apparent in the allegorical portrait of Mrs Siddons, and in the picture of Cymon and Iphigenia (a subject from Boccaccio), a feeble reminiscence of Titian.

But it would be unjust to linger too long over these slight defects, which are, indeed, only pointed out so that one may put one's finger, so to speak, on the more artificial parts of a talent so thoroughly of an acquired nature. Reynolds is none the less an artist worthy of the highest eulogium, and precisely because he has succeeded in artfully concealing and blending, in a unity entirely his own, the numerous contributions he has gathered for his palette.

William Hogarth,
The Graham Children (detail), 1742.
 Oil on canvas, 160.5 x 181 cm.
 The National Gallery, London.

His portraits are true pictures, and it matters little to know the persons whom they represent; they are sufficient of themselves as works of art. Reynolds has the secret of all the characteristic graces of women and children. He renders with astonishing facility the most fugitive freaks of fashion, giving them the immortal stamp of art. The innocent delight of the mother; the ingenuousness as well as the hidden passion of the maiden; the astonishment, the naïve awkwardness, the pretty, rebellious, and coaxing ways of the child, with its firm, rosy flesh – of all this he has gathered the charm and extracted the perfume.

It is the same in his dealing with men. Generally, his subjects are young, slight, of high ranking, and, in their lofty elegance of style, in no way belying their claim to aristocratic excellence. He never represents his characters in fixed postures, but rather in the midst of active life, as if simply interrupted by the artist's arrival. Look at the admirable portrait of Lord Heathfield. Lord Heathfield (then Lord Elliott), in the full uniform of a Lieutenant-General, is standing bareheaded amidst the smoke of battle; in his hand he holds the heavy key of the fortress of Gibraltar, which is shown in the background of the picture. This is in allusion to the celebrated defence (1779-1783), of which he was the hero. The attitude of the General, firm as a rock, the happy idea of the key as an accessory – these are the touches of genius, because they are so perfectly characteristic of the individual. Herein lies the secret of the lasting interest attached to so many of his works, which are yet only portraits.

But, what portraits! And to which could we decide to give the preference? Which one is more attractive than another? Is it the young and noble Marquis of Hastings, so perfectly at ease in his scarlet uniform, his sword at his side, his finger on his lip, in the attitude of one in a doubtful meditation – a sort of indecision just about to terminate and resolve itself into action; is it that wild little maiden, or that other, the *Age of Innocence*, calmly and quietly reposing on the breast of beneficent Nature? Or, again, the little Princess Sophia Mathilda, rolling on the greensward of a park with a puppy? Would it not rather be the beautiful Duchess of Devonshire, playfully struggling against the attacks of her little half-clothed daughter, whose destructive hand threatens to disturb the symmetry of her mother's coiffure; or the actress, Kitty Fisher, as Cleopatra, with languishing eyes, up-turned nose; and amorous lips, dropping a pearl, with a charming air of coquetry, into a carved goblet, too heavy for her hand; or Mrs Robinson, the actress at Covent Garden, with whom the Prince of Wales was so violently in love; or the tragedian, Mrs Siddons?

What life and spirit there is in the picture of Lady C. Spencer as an Amazon, with red over and under petticoats, and a white bodice, embroidered with gold and red; the position of the head, spirited, defiant, resolute; the face animated by the chase; the eyes wide open and full of fire; the short, curly hair as wild as a young boy's! With her gloved hand she strokes caressingly the head of her horse, which, but a moment ago, was bounding under his light and charming burden among the trees of the forest, where the noble lady halts for a moment. In fact, among all these female portraits one cannot tell which is the best.

Yes; there is a masterpiece – the picture of Nelly O'Brien, which I have not named before.

I have sought and seen many others of Reynolds' pictures – the beautiful portraits that I have just mentioned: *The Exile*, a dramatic figure; a *Holy Family*, somewhat commonplace – but among all the works of this artist I have found nothing to compare with this marvellous face.

Thomas Gainsborough,
The Painter's Daughters with a Cat (detail),
c. 1760-1761.
Oil on canvas, 75.6 x 62.9 cm.
The National Gallery, London.







Thomas Gainsborough,
Mary, Countess Howe, c. 1760.
 Oil on canvas, 244 x 152.4 cm.
 Kenwood House, London.

Joshua Reynolds,
*The Countess Spencer with her
 Daughter Georgiana*, 1760.
 Oil on canvas, 122 x 115 cm.
 Collection of Earl Spencer, Althorp.



In it, Reynolds incontestably asserts his claim to rank among the great masters, and if he had not painted any other picture than this one, he would thereby have certainly acquired a lasting fame.

From the executive point of view the picture shows no sign of weakness; nay, far from it. One remarks with what consummate skill the artist has blended, alternately shaded, and brought into relief, the whites, neutral colours, and reddish tints, of which the picture is exclusively composed. Let me observe, by the way, that Reynolds always avoids using a great number of colours in his paintings; three or four tints – or even less – indefinitely varied and blended, are enough for him; he has a great predilection for red, but in the portrait of Nelly O'Brien he has, in great measure, denied himself his favourite colour.

This masterpiece of Reynolds, which constitutes his greatest claim to glory, could only have been produced by the hand of an artist who had seen and studied, both in the North and South, so many of the sublime realisations of the great masters in every country where the genius of Art has planted her divine foot. Everything in this excellent painting belongs entirely to Reynolds, or, rather, he claimed all the ideas that he borrowed in his travels, from Leonardo da Vinci, Antonio da Correggio, Diego Velázquez, and Rembrandt.

But judging impartially this exquisite face, it must be said that, in comparison to any Italian masterpiece, *Nelly O'Brien* is an unhealthy work, produced by a deteriorated mind and a corrupted art. It is the result of an ultrarefined civilisation, forced in the temperature of a hot-house; a creation that Gainsborough, a son of the soil, strengthened by the freshening fragrance of the woods, could never have imagined, and was, fortunately, never able to understand.

Gainsborough³ has also his masterpiece, *The Blue Boy*, and other great works which I rank, in order, above those of Reynolds. But how can one possibly resist the powerful and mysterious attraction which holds one spellbound before the Nelly? Gainsborough has only painted a boy; why has he not also painted a woman? Then, no doubt, we should render the full justice due to him, maybe we should rank him with Reynolds, perhaps even consider him the superior.

Gainsborough, indeed, did not limit himself to rivalling Reynolds in depicting the haughty features of the English aristocracy; he was also a great landscape painter.

In spite of the demands on his time caused by a rapidly earned fame, once he decided to return to London, and even though he was scarcely able to satisfy the orders of his aristocratic clients, Gainsborough never forgot Nature, his earliest teacher. He frequently managed to secure leisure for country rambles. We shall by-and-by study him as a landscape painter, but it may as well here be said that he was the originator, the father, of modern landscape. Contented with the beauties that he discovered in his country home, he studied them in all their simplicity, which was more helpful to him than the finest inventions of academic geometry.

It is well to pay attention to this fact, as it shows in what respects Gainsborough as a portrait painter differs from his rival. Their dissimilarities are scarcely perceptible in their results; they are not of the kind which strike every eye, so as to place the artists in antagonism to one another.

Joseph Wright,

An Experiment on a Bird in the Air Pump (detail), 1768.

Oil on canvas, 183 x 244 cm.

The National Gallery, London.

Joshua Reynolds,

George Capel, Viscount Malden,

and Lady Elizabeth Capel, 1768.

Oil on canvas, 181.6 x 145.4 cm.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. (p. 26)

Thomas Gainsborough,

Mrs Siddons, 1785.

Oil on canvas, 126 x 99.5 cm.

The National Gallery, London. (p. 27)

