

Britain's Royal Academy of Art in the Late 1700s and Early 1800s

On 2 January 1769, under the patronage of King George III, the Royal Academy met for its first session. The official title of this elite institution is “Royal Academy in London for the Purpose of Cultivating and Improving the Arts of Painting, Sculpture, and Architecture,” but artists, then and now, simply call it “The R.A.” The painters among the R.A.’s founding members were its first president, Sir Joshua Reynolds; the portraitist Thomas Gainsborough; the landscapist Richard Wilson; and Benjamin West, a colonial American who became president upon Reynolds’ death in 1792.

The functions of the academy were many. It acted as a school to train young artists as well as a guild to govern the conduct and pricing of established masters. It mounted exhibitions to display recent work to fellow artists, critics, and collectors. And it presented lectures and published catalogues to elevate public taste. For more than a century, London’s Royal Academy established the highest cultural standards in the English-speaking world.

The Royal Academy's Summer Exhibitions

Opening in London in early May, the Royal Academy’s summer exhibitions have been held annually since 1769. Admission fees and catalogue sales for these popular events made the R.A. self-sustaining. Its financial success even allowed it to grant pensions to needy artists.

Each year, a screening committee would cull several hundred works of art for display from thousands of submitted entries. A hanging committee then arranged the exhibition. Much politicking was involved in the placement of paintings, especially for the best positions at eye level, or “on the line.”

To save wall space, pictures were hung frame-by-frame from chair rail to ceiling. The higher canvases, sometimes more than five tiers overhead, were tilted forward to enhance visibility and reduce glare. The huge, sky-lit galleries reverberated with the noise of the thronging crowds who, as usual at social occasions in Georgian England, brought their hunting hounds and lap dogs.

Until the late 1800s, almost every important artist in Britain was elected to the Royal Academy or, at least, occasionally displayed work at its annual exhibitions. (William Blake and Gilbert Stuart are among the many who exhibited but never became members.) There are only two major exceptions. The fashionable portraitist George Romney refused to resign from another artistic society, which violated the R.A.’s exclusive membership laws. And the bitter envy of other architects barred entry to Scotland’s neoclassical designer Robert Adam.



John Crome
British, 1768–1821

Moonlight on the Yare, about 1816/1817

Crome, from Norwich in east central England, learned to paint by copying pictures in local private collections. Landscapes by his countrymen Gainsborough and Wilson intrigued him, as did the Dutch old masters such as Hobbema and Van Goyen. Significantly, Rembrandt van Rijn’s famous *The Mill*, of around 1645, then belonged to a Norwich collector and was displayed twice in London during Crome’s life.

Moonlight on the Yare, which Crome probably exhibited at the Norwich Society of Artists in 1817, pays homage to Rembrandt’s *Mill* in both its rustic subject and its bold contrast of light and shadow. The eerie nocturnal radiance, however, owes more to Aert van der Neer. (*The Mill* and a moonlit scene by Van der Neer are usually on view in the National Gallery’s seventeenth-century Dutch rooms.) In composing his romantic view of a cloudy night over England’s River Yare, Crome followed his own advice: “Trifles in nature must be overlooked ... your composition forming one grand plan of light and shade.”

A lively wit with a good business sense, Crome augmented his successful career as a landscape painter by giving drawing lessons and acting as a picture restorer and art dealer. Crome was instrumental in founding the Norwich Society in 1803 and, after 1806, sometimes also sent paintings for exhibition at the Royal Academy in London.

Oil on canvas, 0.984 x 1.257 m (38 3/4 x 49 1/2 in.)
Paul Mellon Collection 1983.1.39



Thomas Gainsborough
British, 1727–1788

Seashore with Fisherman, about 1781/1782

Born in rural Suffolk, the largely self-taught Gainsborough established his reputation as a society portraitist at Bath, a popular resort, before moving to London in 1774. Despite his urban success, he never lost his love of the countryside and coastline, lamenting, “I’m sick of portraits and wish very much to ... walk off to some sweet village, where I can paint Landscips.”

Gainsborough’s landscapes, however, are seldom if ever of actual scenery. In accordance with much eighteenth-century art theory, he believed that nature itself was an unsuitable subject. Only after an artist had refined a scene through his sensibilities could he begin to paint it.

In the 1780s, Gainsborough experimented with a “peep-show box.” Using translucent paints, he created landscapes on sheets of glass that were then inserted into a shadow box. Backlit with candles, the miniature theatre permitted endless lighting schemes by means of changeable screens of colored silk. Depicting an imaginary seacoast, this canvas reveals the influence of Gainsborough’s viewing box. Framed by the dark beach and pale cliff, the sky and surf seem phosphorescent.

As usual, Gainsborough improvised as he worked. The boulder in the lower-right corner conceals two fishermen and an anchor that he later painted out.

Oil on canvas, 1.019 x 1.276 m (40 1/8 x 50 1/4 in.)
Ailsa Mellon Bruce Collection 1970.17.121



Thomas Gainsborough

Mountain Landscape with Bridge, about 1783/1784

Gainsborough increasingly strove to depict idyllic scenery and extraordinary colors. This picturesque vista of butter-yellow clouds floating in a mauve sky is far too perfect to exist in the real world. Gainsborough, however, required a tangible subject so that he could study and capture the shimmering effects of light upon surfaces.

Writing about some of Gainsborough’s landscapes, his rival Sir Joshua Reynolds revealed, “He even framed a kind of model of landskips, on his table; composed of broken stones, dried herbs, and pieces of looking glass, which he magnified and improved into rocks, trees, and water.” Here, shiny hard coal may have served for the wet banks of the brook, a crushed mirror for the glistening ripples, and broccoli and brussels sprouts for the forest. Thus, from a scale model, Gainsborough did indeed “magnify and improve” upon nature.

Liked and respected by his colleagues, Gainsborough developed a painting technique so personal that he had virtually no followers. He, in fact, embodies the notion of eccentric genius. In an age when a Grand Tour was considered a necessary part of one’s education, he never went abroad. Though a founding member of the Royal Academy in 1769, he ignored its business meetings and, following a quarrel over the hanging of his pictures, refused to exhibit there after 1783.

Oil on canvas, 1.130 x 1.334 m (44 1/2 x 52 1/2 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.107



Thomas Gainsborough

Miss Catherine Tatton, 1786

In 1786, at the age of eighteen, Catherine Tatton married James Drake-Brockman, who became High Sheriff of County Kent. This wedding portrait was commissioned by the Rev. John Lynch, Archdeacon of Canterbury, her uncle and the executor of her father's estate. Miss Tatton is fashionably attired with a wide-brimmed sun hat silhouetting the loose ringlets of her hair.

Gainsborough held his posing sessions during business hours, but Sir Joshua Reynolds also noted "his custom of painting by night" with candles under which "the flesh seems to take a higher and richer tone of colour." In addition to imitating the flattering glow of candlelight, Gainsborough is known to have used exceptionally long brushes that he wielded like fencers' foils, vivaciously touching in "odd scratches and marks." Such extreme sketchiness is apparent even in this bust-length portrait. Reynolds reluctantly admitted that "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 place."

Rather than working from extensive preliminary drawings — the academic practice advised by Reynolds — Gainsborough dashed off his portraits directly on the canvas. Here, the puff of the blue sash and the hand elegantly toying with it were afterthoughts.

Oil on canvas, 0.760 x 0.640 m (29 7/8 x 25 1/4 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.99



Sir Henry Raeburn

British, 1756–1823

David Anderson, 1790

The Scottish portraitist Henry Raeburn favored warm, dramatic illumination. Here the subject is bathed in twilight, his face half-lit, half-shaded. David Anderson stands proudly, holding an empty glove nonchalantly against his hip, while his bare hand holds his upturned hat. The portrait reveals no strain on Anderson's character even though it was created during a crisis in his career.

Anderson had served under the first governor-general of British India, Warren Hastings. Upon their return to Britain in 1785, Hastings agreed to commission his portrait from Sir Joshua Reynolds, London's court painter, as a gift to Anderson. In turn, Anderson sent this likeness by Raeburn, Edinburgh's leading artist, to Hastings in 1790. Therefore, in creating this portrait, Raeburn pitted his emerging reputation against that of Reynolds, under whom he had recently studied.

The exchanged tokens of friendship may have bolstered the sitters' spirits during one of the most infamous political scandals in British history — the Warren Hastings' Trial. A cabal of Englishmen, wishing to exploit India, had sullied Hastings' reputation by turning him into a scapegoat for their own greed. Although Hastings was exonerated in 1795, his impeachment proceedings had lasted seven years, during which time Raeburn portrayed Hastings' beleaguered associate.

Oil on canvas, 1.525 x 1.075 m (60 x 46 1/4 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.56



Sir Henry Raeburn

Miss Eleanor Urquhart, about 1793

This lovely Scottish woman was the eldest daughter of William Urquhart, 2d Laird of Craigston, Aberdeenshire. Her portrait and companion likenesses of her parents were paid for on 10 January 1794; the artist's receipt was preserved among Urquhart family papers.

It is unfortunate that nothing more is known of the sitter's life, because *Miss Eleanor Urquhart* is deemed by some connoisseurs to be Raeburn's masterpiece. The canvas resonates with cool grays and warm tans, the pale figure being set against the slightly darker tones of the background. Broad, loose strokes of the brush are applied with virtuoso flair. The soft sketchiness of the muslin dress and craggy mountains complements the fresh spontaneity of her face.

That this painting can be documented to just before 1794 is important because Raeburn did not keep studio account books and never dated any of his pictures. His style matured early, without much modification, after a few months in London and a year or two in Rome during the mid-1780s. So, it is difficult to establish a chronology for the more than one thousand portraits he made during a fifty-year career as Scotland's foremost painter. Although dedicated to his art, Raeburn need not have worked at all. At twenty-four, he had married a wealthy widow and become a member of Edinburgh society.

Oil on canvas, 0.750 x 0.620 m (29 1/2 x 24 3/8 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.101



Sir Joshua Reynolds

British, 1723–1792

Lady Caroline Howard, 1778

Reynolds' charming portrait of this seven-year-old aristocrat plucking a rosebud was commissioned by her father, the 5th Earl of Carlisle, who wrote that she was "always a great favourite" in spite of her headstrong character. Lady Caroline wears a cape and mittens to protect her peaches-and-cream complexion from the sunlight.

Whether the artist or the family chose the child's pose is unknown, but the act of sitting or kneeling upon the ground would have been immediately recognized by their contemporaries as a sign of unaffected simplicity. One newspaper critic, however, entirely missed the point, stating that "she seems to be curtsying to the Rose-Bush." As emblems of Venus, the goddess of love, the roses may allude to the promise of Lady Caroline's beauty and grace as an adult. Moreover, in reference to her youth, the flowers in this classical urn are in bud.

Lady Caroline wed at eighteen, and after her husband became the 1st Earl of Cawdor, this canvas was inscribed at bottom right with her maiden and married titles. (She, incidentally, was the niece of the mother depicted in Reynolds' *Lady Elizabeth Delmé and Her Children*, usually on view in the adjacent Gallery 59.) Following its exhibition at London's Royal Academy in 1779, *Lady Caroline Howard* hung in Yorkshire's Castle Howard, one of the largest country houses in England.

Oil on canvas, 1.430 x 1.130 m (56 1/4 x 44 1/2 in.)
Andrew W. Mellon Collection 1937.1.106



George Romney

British, 1734–1802

Mrs. Alexander Blair, 1787–1789

A configuration of linked ovals, this composition rises from the full skirt through a flounced bodice to a wide-brimmed bonnet that frames the sitter's face like a halo. The oval back of the chair and the pose of the raised wrist echo the flowing curves.

The equally masterful color scheme of variations on black, white, and red is now hard to appreciate because Romney used bitumen. A pigment derived from coal tar, bitumen gives lush depth to shadows, but rapidly decays, causing cracks to appear in the dark areas.

The sheet music and the books provide clues to Mary Johnson Blair's personality. She was a prominent London hostess with acquaintances in musical, literary, and aristocratic circles. The crimson drapery and fluted column are Grand Manner attributes of classical culture. Romney's studio appointment books indicate that Mrs. Blair sat seven times between 13 April 1787 and 4 May 1789.

Ironically, Romney's lifelong ambition to create monumental scenes from history and literature was thwarted by his own rejection of London's Royal Academy, England's only major avenue for exhibiting or selling such narrative pictures. Instead, he achieved fame and fortune for doing what he liked least — creating likenesses. Romney muttered about "this cursed portrait-painting! How I am shackled with it!"

Oil on canvas, 1.270 x 1.015 m (50 x 40 in.)
Widener Collection 1942.9.77