

THE CHARM OF REYNOLDS

By JAMES MASON

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Portrait of Two Gentlemen

(National Gallery)

This picture was given to the National Gallery in 1866. The figure on the left is the Rev Geo. Huddersford, who, before he took

orders, studied art with Sir Joshua. The other figure, with violin in right hand, is J. C. W. Bamfylde. It is a representative picture enough, showing how closely the painter observed his sitters and how complete and skilful was his characterisation.

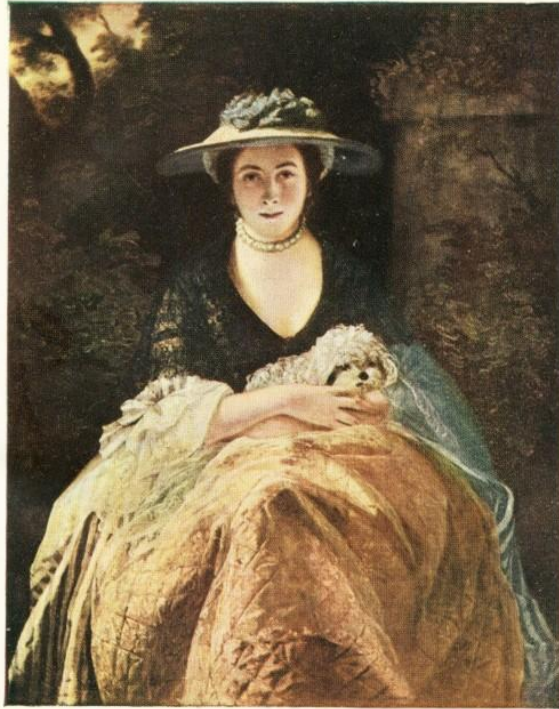
The Charm of Reynolds

I. HIS ART AND CHARACTER

Portraits painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds are a national asset, and appeal to the general public in this light almost as strongly as they appeal to the smaller section that takes a definite interest in pictures. The value of the portraits varies considerably; it is probable that the artist produced between four and five thousand in his time, sometimes completing three or four in a week for years on end, and even in his more leisured times producing six or seven per month, so it was of course inevitable that their value should not be equal. The very early work painted in Devonshire is of little worth. Italy opened the eyes of Joshua Reynolds as it has opened the eyes of so many British artists since his time. Fortunate in his life the painter was; in a certain sense, unfortunate in his art. The beauty he has committed to canvas had begun to pass before the artist's days were numbered, and many of his most successful works are to-day no more than a pale reflection of their former selves, a remnant most forlorn of what they were. One of his most painstaking biographers and soundest critics, Sir Walter Armstrong, has written, "Speaking roughly, Sir Joshua's early pictures darken, the works of his middle period fade, those of his late maturity crack."

"Despite these drawbacks, the painter's position is unassailable, for it appeals alike to the historian, to the philosopher who looks to the outward semblance for reflection of the spirit behind the mask, and to the artist who finds so much to delight him in the point of achievement to which Reynolds raised portrait painting and can appreciate the larger aspect of work that is visible in some degree to everybody.

The man was a sturdy Briton, he worked hard all the days of his life, he had a large measure of shrewd common sense, great gifts, high ideals, and sufficient human weakness to make him what the Spaniards call "hombre como alquier otro," a man like any other. His art may stand upon a pedestal but he never did, he was too busy and too unaffected to pose. "I'll be a painter if you'll give me a chance to be quite a good one," he is reported to have said, when a little boy, to his father, the Plympton school-master, and once a painter he worked on and on, enjoying life but never abusing it, until 1789, when he was sixty-six, and apparently in the mellow autumn of his days. Then as he was painting in his studio one July morning, the sight of one eye failed him suddenly. Quite quietly he laid his brushes down. "All things have an end," he said; "I have come to mine." Some two and a half years were left to him but he would not paint any more; he preferred to be judged by the tasks he had accomplished in the light of health. He continued to address the students of the Royal Academy; he consented to remain titular head of that body though Sir William Chambers and Benjamin West, who was regarded as a great painter in his day, looked after the actual work of the high office. He was not a mere cipher in the counsels of the Academy on that account; to the end he had his own way. Very masterful, very human, very kind, he stands out the most prominent figure in an age that produced both Gainsborough and Romney.



Nelly O'Brien

(Wallace Collection)

Reynolds painted three portraits of this famous courtesan, all of which have been engraved. The one reproduced here, in which she wears a straw hat that throws a skilfully expressed shadow over her face, and in which

she has a Maltese terrier on her lap, is said to be the best. It has been engraved at least three times.

The latter half of the eighteenth century owes a heavy debt to Sir Joshua, so too do we who turn to his many canvases for a glimpse of the men who bore rule and the women they delighted to honour—or dishonour. He has preserved for us all that was notable—statesmen, soldiers, sailors, churchmen, men of letters, actors, fair women, frail women, delightful children—they are all there, and if we cannot see them all quite in their habit as they lived, there is enough left to give a very fair idea. The modern market carefully nursed by a ring of astute professionals will give almost any price for portraits of fair women by Sir Joshua, though it may be suggested that his greatest success was in the treatment of men or at least that he saw far more in men than in women. But Reynolds had not studied classic figures for nothing, he could give his fair sitters some suggestion of direct association with those goddesses of old time whom he had admired in Italy, and to this treatment no exception was taken. It is very rarely that Reynolds makes his women human. Nellie O'Brien, whose portrait hangs in the Wallace Collection, is one of the exceptions, and an attempt is made to make the "Duchess of Devonshire and Child," now at Chatsworth, equally feminine, but one cannot escape the thought that the mother's gesture as expressed on the canvas is altogether exceptional. She could not have played for long with such a strong healthy baby without ruffling the delightful costume or the carefully arranged hair, and this, one feels, would have been unendurable. Turn, on the other hand, to the portraits of the men—how significantly their faces speak of their outstanding habits, labours or desires. Few people could see so closely into his sitters

as Sir Joshua did, though in very many cases they were not with him for more than a couple of days. Yet he seemed able in that short time to enter into their life history to produce something that was a fine portrait and yet more than a portrait—a psychological study, not over elaborated, not insisted upon, not in any way intruding upon the purely artistic side of the work, but there, nevertheless, to be seen to-day by those who have eyes to see. To quote his own words, he looked upon his sitters "with a dilated eye"; there was just enough imagination to give an attractive setting to the essentials; there was no need for the classical or symbolical background to whose doubtful charms the painter surrendered now and again, but we may consider that these affectations were a part of the art of his time, and that, while he left many conventions behind him, he could not trample upon them all.

It is well to remember that Sir Joshua was not a heaven-sent genius, and that he arrived at the perfection of his achievement by the addition of hard labour to a considerable natural gift. He started out with few advantages save those that come to the young man who finds a patron early in life; he had many natural errors of taste to correct. Students of his life and correspondence will find many evidences to prove that the first President of the Royal Academy mastered his self-control, taste, and bearing towards patrons as he mastered his art, slowly and not without difficulty, but that as soon as a lesson was mastered it was retained for all time. The raw country lad from Devonshire could not become all at once one of the prominent figures in the society of his time.

This is as it was bound to be—the people who make no mistakes, who say and do the right thing under all circumstances, who are, so to speak, ready made and with every modern equipment, are for the most part the creation of their biographers.

They have not and never had a real existence as paragons of progress and propriety. There was a time when Joshua Reynolds was not very competent, and but incompletely educated; he became highly accomplished and well read. There was a time when he exhibited the tendencies of a snob; he learned to lay them aside, and once abandoned he had no further use for them. Unceasing endeavour stimulated and refined him, he achieved greatness not for himself alone but also for British art. Before his day the most of the fashionable portrait painters were foreigners. Rubens and Van Dyck had many successors and followers though they had no peers, but after Reynolds had made his mark it was no longer considered necessary to employ foreign talent. The commanding ability of the painter was associated with the easy authority of the man of the world. Leaders of English society found that Sir Joshua, despite his deafness, was a fascinating companion. He shot and hunted with them, he ate and drank with them, he entertained them in fashion that smacked more of the country than of the town. Dr Johnson would suggest that he sometimes took more than was absolutely necessary for his well-being, but then the doctor thought that all drinking, save tea-drinking, was gross indulgence. From his close acquaintance with men of mark and women of social distinction came the intimacy that the portraits reveal, the quality that counts for so much in portraiture. There were other attractions greatly admired then and lost now, for Sir Joshua gave his pictures a fine glaze that is said to have added much to the beauty of the colouring, but was, alas, ephemeral. It was purely experimental, and when we consider the scientific resources of the middle eighteenth century it is hardly surprising to find that the charm did not endure. For all we know to the contrary this purely evanescent quality constituted one of the charms of Reynolds while he lived, but his fame rests upon more enduring

foundations. We look in vain to the spoken and written word or to the written word alone to sum up eighteenth century men of thought and action as clearly and definitely as Sir Joshua has done; his is a sincerity devoid of prejudice. We see men as they were even if the most of his women are seen as they would have wished to be. Here then is a part at least of the charm of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the man was very human and very discreet. He was by no means free from jealousy notably where Gainsborough and Romney were concerned; he knew well enough that they were great competitors and formidable. He lived a bachelor, and despite all the Paul Prys among his contemporaries the story of his amours (if any) remains untold. Here at least is a fine and ample discretion. It is with Angelica Kauffmann that his name has been associated. We know he was her friend and admirer, and that she was one of the two lady members of the Royal Academy as first constituted, but there is little more than this at the disposal of the conscientious biographer. Sir Joshua was not the only man to succumb to her charms; in years to come Goethe himself was to acknowledge them. It is pleasant to think that whatever the great painter's private affairs may have been, they have remained private for all time. What a wealth of moralising this condition has enabled us to escape! We are left to concern ourselves solely with his progress as artist and as man, and there is quite enough in this as may be gathered from study of the artist's leading biographers. Sir Walter Armstrong, Sir Claude Phillips among the moderns, and Northcote and Leslie and Taylor among those nearer to the artist, are men who have left little for those who endeavour to glean in the field of biography. They have done more than write the story of one man's life—they have given us a valuable glimpse of contemporary history. It is a grateful task to write at considerable length of Sir Joshua, because of his association with so many leaders of

contemporary thought and action. Detail is out of the question in this brief note, but the outlines of the strenuous and honourable life may be set out here.

II. HIS LIFE AND TIMES

Joshua Reynolds was born at Plympton in Devonshire in the month of July 1723. His father, the Rev. Samuel Reynolds, master of the local grammar school, was a scholar, and gave his boy the best education at his command, intending to make him a doctor when he grew up. But the lad's talent developed early, his hands were busy with the pencil at a very early age, and at a time when to most lads reading is a labour rather than a pastime, he was mastering the elements of perspective and studying a "Theory of Painting" by one Richardson. This precocious interest in art was not to be overlooked, and the Rev. Samuel Reynolds giving up the idea of the medical profession for his son, sent him in his seventeenth year to London as pupil to a portrait painter named Thomas Hudson, a man of some temporary repute. He stayed there for three years, and then a series of troubles with his master culminated in a final quarrel, and the boy, for he was hardly more, left London for his native county, and set up in Devonport as a portrait painter. His gift was already sufficient to gain recognition, and the patronage of local people was neither denied nor delayed. Among them was Lord Mount Edgcumbe, who was not content to have his portrait painted, but, being convinced that the young artist had talent, did all that in him lay to help its development. Portraits were painted in large numbers at Devonport, many are known to-day, but for the most part they are not classed with the master's great achievements. A natural gift and three years' association with Thomas Hudson could not make the Reynolds we know and admire. It was for Italy to do this and Lord Mount Edgcumbe made Italy possible by introducing his protégé to Commodore

Keppel, a distinguished sailor, who, on receiving a Mediterranean command in 1749, invited his clever friend to accompany him. Naturally the offer was not slighted; by the summer of 1749 the young painter was in the Eternal City copying masterpieces. But he did not copy in any slavish fashion; it was his firm belief, and one he was to expound to students in days to come, that copying is a delusive industry and keeps the gifts of composition and invention dormant, so that for lack of proper exercise they lose their vitality. His mind was at once synthetical and analytical; he set himself to discover the foundation of the excellence of the masterpieces, and many of his copies were in a sense mere notes for his own future guidance. He wanted assistance to develop himself; he had no wish to speak in the language of any of the mighty dead. Yet his power of making an effective copy must have been remarkable. Sir Walter Armstrong, to whose life of Reynolds reference has been made already, thinks that one of the Rembrandts in our National Gallery is no more than the copy by Sir Joshua of an original. For three years the painter laboured diligently, not only among the Michelangelos in Rome, but among the works of lesser men in Padua, Turin, Milan, and Paris. He had learned enough in England to call the old masters to his aid on the Continent, he could appreciate all their canvases could tell him and, when he returned home in his thirtieth year, he was fully equipped to take a high place among his fellow artists and to pave the way to a supremacy that only Gainsborough and Romney could challenge.

He had not come unscathed through more than three years of foreign travel, a fall from his horse in the island of Minorca left his face permanently scarred. Far more serious was the chill contracted in the Vatican that brought about the deafness from which he suffered for the rest of his life. He reached Devonshire in the

autumn of 1752, took a brief holiday there, and then, on the advice of his patron Lord Mount Edgecumbe, decided to try his fortune in London. Some of his biographers say he went to Great Newport Street, but it is more correct to say that his first studio was in St Martin's Street, from which he moved to Great Newport Street, staying there till 1760, when he made his last change to 47 Leicester Square, a house still standing and largely devoted to auction rooms to-day.



Age of Innocence

(National Gallery)

This delightful study of a little barefooted girl, wearing a white dress and seated on the grass, was bought for the Nation at the sale of Mr Harman's pictures. It has been engraved by S. W. Reynolds, Chas. Turner, and others, but the sitter has not been traced.

One of his first London portraits was a full length study of his sailor friend Keppel, and that piece of work seems to have been the foundation of his London fortunes; he never looked back. Soon the studio was crowded; one sitter succeeded another; the painter had no time to do more than work. His household affairs were watched by his sister Frances, who does not appear to have been an ideal housekeeper when the work of the house grew and it became necessary to entertain and be prepared to receive friends at any reasonable hour. The painter grew rich rapidly, and when he moved, in 1760, to the house in Leicester Square, sister Frances would drive about the town in a gilded coach with coachman and footman in staring liveries. Presumably the equipage served to advertise the painter's prosperity.

For many men the rapid success would not have been good, they would have ceased to strive and would have been content to repeat themselves, but Joshua Reynolds, with his high ideals and genuine enthusiasm for work, was only stimulated by prosperity; it was powerless to spoil him. While his work was increasing in power he was selecting friends from the ranks of the most distinguished scholars and thinkers in town, and while his labours

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