

Exhibition Guide

PLYMOUTH CITY MUSEUM AND ART GALLERY

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

THE ACQUISITION OF GENIUS

Introduction

Born in Plympton St Maurice in 1723, Joshua Reynolds went on to become England's most well-known and most fashionable portrait painter. He forged connections with some of the key public figures of his time and in so doing wove himself into the fabric of 18th century public life. As the founding President of the Royal Academy of Arts, he promoted the cause of art and helped to raise the public standing of the artist.

In his famous 'Discourses', delivered as lectures at the Royal Academy, he set out a comprehensive and influential theory of art. Reynolds believed that innate genius was not sufficient to form an artist, but genius could be 'acquired' through rigorous academic training. In this exhibition we follow his journey from Devon schoolboy to London celebrity, and beyond into art history.

Section 1 / Early Years: Plympton to Plymouth Dock

One of eleven children born to the Reverend Samuel Reynolds and his wife Theophila, Joshua Reynolds was born in Plympton on the 16th July 1723. From an early age, his father (a school master at Plympton's Grammar School) gave him access to the world of learning and scholarship, and encouraged his early "*great genius for drawing*".

In October 1740, the 17 year old Reynolds was apprenticed by his father to the Exeter-born portrait painter Thomas Hudson, an artist of some repute who was at the head of his profession in London.

After only three years with Hudson in London learning his trade, Reynolds was back in Devon following a dispute of some kind with his mentor. Reynolds continued to paint portraits, working between London and Plymouth where he painted local professionals such as surgeons, clergymen and politicians.

By the time of his father's death in 1745, Reynolds was running his own studio in Plymouth Dock, modern-day Devonport.

Dock was the centre of England's naval establishment at this time, and many senior ranking officers passed through his studio.

Reynolds was also beginning to attract members of the local wealthy Cornish and Devonian land-owning families such as the Eliots of Port Eliot and the Edgcumbes of Mount Edgcumbe.

Richard 1st Lord Edgcumbe in particular was to prove very important to Reynolds, opening many doors for the young artist following the death of his father.

Section 2 / Local Patronage: The Parkers of Saltram

Throughout Reynolds's life and career, the wealthy and important Parker family played a vital role.

Saltram House

George Parker bought the Saltram Estate on the outskirts of Plymouth in 1712 when the house was a Tudor mansion. No alterations were made to the house until the time of George's son and grandson (both named John Parker), who by the 1780s had transformed the house into a model of eighteenth-century taste, and left us with the house we know today.

The Parker Family

The first Lord John Parker and his wife Lady Catherine began to remodel Saltram House in 1743. Recent research has suggested that Reynolds may have been employed by the couple to find suitable paintings for their new scheme whilst he was in Rome in 1750/51.

The second Lord John Parker (c.1732 - 1788) inherited Saltram in 1768. He was a great friend of Reynolds and in the artist's appointment books from 1769 onwards he and his second wife Lady Therese Parker are often noted. They toured artists' studios together in London, Reynolds advising on whose work to buy and how to display them to best effect in their remodelled rooms at Saltram.

A dinner guest at Saltram described, [a] 'very choice and expensive collection of pictures, chiefly bought by Sir Joshua Reynolds; the old lord employing him to go to any price, provided a bad picture did not come into the house'.

A frequent guest at Saltram, Reynolds spent a great deal of leisure time with the Parkers, he gambled with John, hunted on the estate, and discussed potential art purchases with Therese.

Reynolds painted John, Therese and their children of the same names. The family's keen interest in these pictures is recorded in their letters, showing their pleasure in how well Reynolds had caught their likenesses.

Section 2 / Local Patronage: **The Eliots of Port Eliot**

The Eliot family were great supporters of Reynolds' talent, and were among his first and most important patrons in the South West. 'Ever upon the strictest terms of intimacy', Reynolds painted many of the family throughout his long career.

Port Eliot House

Port Eliot is the ancestral home of the Eliot family near St Germans in East Cornwall. Originally a monastery, the estate came to the Eliot family under John Eliot (1565 - 1577). At the end of the 18th century, the Eliots used their considerable wealth to remodel the house and park with the foremost talents of their day; Sir John Soane the architect and Humphrey Repton, landscape designer.

The Eliot Family

Following his aborted London apprenticeship to Hudson, the young Reynolds returned to Plymouth and was commissioned by Richard Eliot I to paint his young son (also called Richard) in 1743. New research suggests that this job was followed by a further commission around 1746 for The Eliot Family, an unusual group portrait of the Eliots and their closest friends.

In 1748, the panoramic view of Plymouth Sound (in Section 1 of this exhibition), was commissioned from Reynolds by the Eliots.

Reynolds became great friends with the eldest son, Edward 1st Baron Eliot, and frequently met up with him in London at their Literary Club. Reynolds painted Edward three times, chronicling him from his youth to maturity as a political figure at Parliament. He also painted Edward's mother, sisters, brothers, step-father and son. Many of these portraits are on show here.

When Reynolds died, Edward Eliot was one of the pall bearers for his coffin, a great tribute to a family friend.

The Orchards of Hartland Abbey

Situated on the north coast of Devon, west of Bideford, Hartland Abbey was built in the twelfth century to house an order of monks and was dissolved in 1539.

In Reynolds' time, the house was owned by Paul Orchard, MP for Callington and Colonel of the Northern Regiment of the Devon militia. Orchard had embarked on a major rebuilding project at Hartland, hiring the London architect John Meadows to remodel the medieval abbey in the fashionable 'Gothick' style of the day, to include a new suite of three reception rooms and bedrooms. The work was completed in 1779.

In the early 1770s Orchard commissioned Reynolds to paint portraits of himself, his wife and his then-deceased father. The three paintings were displayed together in Orchard's newly completed library, the whole ensemble demonstrating his advanced taste.

The Molesworths of Pencarrow House

The home of the Molesworth-St Aubyn family since the time of Queen Elizabeth I, Pencarrow lies to the north west of Bodmin in Cornwall. In the 1760s Sir John Molesworth (1729-75) employed Robert Allanson of York to remodel the house in Palladian style.

Sir John was MP for Cornwall. He commissioned Reynolds to paint his portrait three times in the 1750s and 1760s, including the picture exhibited here celebrating his marriage to Frances Smyth in 1755. Reynolds also painted the portraits of Sir John's brother, William, and Anne Smyth (both exhibited here) who married in 1756.

The Edgcumbes of Mount Edgumbe

The Edgcumbes had a pivotal role in Reynolds' early career. Before public exhibitions of art, newspaper reviews and an open marketplace, it was the power and influence of a painter's patrons that made their name.

Richard, George and 'Dick'

Richard, 1st Baron Edgcumbe (1680-1758) employed Reynolds at a time when he was little more than an apprentice, and in so doing attracted the attention of other rich clients such as the Dukes of Devonshire and Grafton. He also recommended Reynolds to Commodore Augustus Keppel whilst he was stationed at Dock, and this resulted in Reynolds's journey to Europe.

George and 'Dick' (Richard) Edgcumbe were the sons of the 1st Baron and good friends of Reynolds. Like so many siblings they were polar opposites; Dick was an inveterate gambler and *bon viveur*, George was a politician and naval commander. It was George who had Reynolds elected as Mayor of Plympton in 1773. Reynolds painted George and Dick, their families and friends many times.

Mount Edgcumbe House

Perched on the western bank of the Tamar above Plymouth Sound, Mount Edgcumbe house was built in the mid sixteenth century. It was almost destroyed by fire in 1941, but was rebuilt and remained the home of the Earls of Edgcumbe until it was sold to Plymouth City and Cornwall County Councils in 1971.

Section 3 / Journeys Abroad

'The good Face-Painter must have the Name of having travelled to Rome'

In Reynolds' time, the Grand Tour was a requirement for aristocratic young men, who visited the major European cities to absorb their classical and more recent cultural legacy.

The Tour was also a means for artists in training to examine the works of those painters and sculptors who had gone before them. With no public galleries of art in Britain, and with no regular access to aristocratic collections of the Old Masters, only foreign travel could give the young artist first-hand experience of the greatest art.

Not aristocratic by birth, Reynolds had the good fortune to have attracted the attention of the local Devon gentry, and particularly of Richard Lord Edgcumbe, who arranged his passage to Italy in 1749. Sailing out of Dock with Commodore Augustus Keppel, Reynolds was armed with Lord Edgcumbe's recommendation and this opened many doors for him.

In Italy Reynolds principally studied the work of great sixteenth and seventeenth-century painters whose 'Grand Style' he considered the greatest achievement of the arts. He also visited Paris in 1752 (on his way home from Italy), and again in 1768 and 1771 and made his first trip to the Netherlands and Flanders (modern Belgium) in 1781, returning to Flanders in 1785. By these means he acquired first-hand experience of four of the major European schools of painting (Italian, French, Dutch and Flemish).

Rather than making detailed copies of what he saw Reynolds tended to note the particular aspect that attracted him (a pose, a gesture, a way of combining figures). He was also deeply affected by the Old Masters' handling of colour - as seen especially in the work of Venetian painters like Titian and in the work of Rubens.

Section 4 / The Establishment of the Royal Academy

“One advantage, I will venture to affirm, we shall have in our academy, which no other nation can boast. We shall have nothing to unlearn...With us the exertions of genius will henceforward be directed to their proper objects”

As a leading portrait painter, Reynolds was active in the Society of Artists when it was created in 1759, drafting their policy documents, and submitting pictures to their annual exhibitions. By 1768 he was a Director, but his activity within the Society declined, as infighting amongst the artists caused great divisions.

The Royal Academy as we know it today was created by King George III in December 1768, after the quarrelling Society of Artists was disbanded. In the turbulent run-up to the death of the Society and the birth of the Royal Academy, Reynolds was in France. He had been passed over in favour of the painter Allan Ramsay for the position of Painter to the King in 1761, George III describing Reynolds as ‘poison in my sight’. It is small wonder that he was at first reluctant to take up the position of founding President.

However, once Reynolds realised that the King was indeed serious about granting licence to create the Academy, and to make him President, he seized the opportunity and was elected on 14th December 1768.

The Academy’s aim was (and still is) ‘to promote the arts of design’, in other words to foster debate about art, to teach methods of making art, and to exhibit art to the widest possible audience.

Reynolds became a passionate advocate of art education, and used his Presidency to advance his theories. The fifteen Discourses on Art which he delivered at the Academy from 1769 to 1790 were published to great acclaim, and many of them were translated into French, German and Italian during his lifetime.

Section 5 / In ‘The Club’: Reynolds the Celebrated Portraitist

“Instead of endeavouring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, he must endeavour to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas; instead of seeking praise, by deceiving the superficial sense of the spectator, he must strive for fame, by captivating the imagination”

Reynolds’ portraits were successful because he combined accuracy with imaginative devices, emulating the Old Masters or echoing poses from classical sculpture. In this way he raised the dignity of portraiture from simple ‘face-painting’ to a more refined art, where the real was combined with the ideal.

But Reynolds’ insistence on the grandeur of the artist’s ideas went along with a hard-headed understanding of the business side of portraiture. He managed his career to take full advantage of the more mobile social world in which he was working. The concept of ‘celebrity’ as we know it today has its roots in the eighteenth century and Reynolds produced portraits of many of the most notable members of society: aristocrats, politicians, intellectuals, artists, performers and courtesans. He capitalised on the fame or notoriety of such figures, who were as newsworthy in the eighteenth-century as our contemporary ‘celebrities’ are now.

Reynolds was adept at marketing his art. He worked with the best engravers, such as James McArdell, to produce ‘official’ prints of over 400 of his portraits, thereby ensuring that his work was effectively publicised. As his career developed Reynolds himself became something of a celebrity, commonly acknowledged to be at the head of his profession.

He began his own ‘Literary Club’ in 1764, the founding members including the poet Oliver Goldsmith and Samuel Johnson, the celebrated writer. The Club later admitted other members of the creative élite such as David Garrick, the most famous actor of his day.

Section 6 / Reynolds the Collector

Sir Joshua Reynolds' Collector's Mark



Reynolds believed that the work of his predecessors contained valuable lessons for the contemporary artist. As he said to the students of the Royal Academy in 1774:

“Study therefore the works of the great masters, for ever...Study nature attentively, but always with those masters in your company; consider them as models which you are to imitate, and at the same time as rivals with whom you are to contend”.

Following his own advice, he built up a collection of paintings, prints and drawings by the Old Masters which provided him with constant delight and inspiration.

All the prints and drawings exhibited in this room once belonged to Reynolds. Some of them are by very famous artists (e.g. Rubens, Van Dyck and Rembrandt); others are by relatively obscure painters whose work is scarcely known today. Although Reynolds was keen to acquire works by the greatest of the Old Masters, the variety of his collection shows that he had a very deep knowledge of the history of art and was interested first and foremost in artistic creativity rather than reputation for its own sake.

Reynolds' master, Thomas Hudson, had been a keen collector, as had Hudson's master, Jonathan Richardson, before him. Some of the drawings Reynolds owned had descended from collectors such as these, valued by successive generations. It was customary in this period for a collector's mark to be added to the works in his collection and a number of different collectors' marks are visible on the drawings.

After Reynolds died his collection of some 3000 prints and drawings was sold at auction and its contents are now scattered in museums around the world. The works on display here have been reunited to show something of the range and depth of his collection.

Section 7 / Legacy

“I do not feel my self possessed of that grandeur of soul sufficient to give me any pretensions of looking down with such philosophical contempt upon titles. Distinction is what we all seek after, and the world does set a value on them, and I go with the great stream of life”

On 23 February 1792, Sir Joshua Reynolds died in London. He was President of the Royal Academy, the author of the Discourses, a Knight of the realm and England’s foremost portrait painter. His loss was keenly felt amongst the Academicians, who laid out his body in state for a day at Somerset House before his funeral at St Paul’s Cathedral.

In 1813 a grand memorial to him by the sculptor John Flaxman, was erected in St Paul’s. In the same year a major exhibition of Reynolds’ work was held at the British Institution.

In Plymouth in 1860 the scholar and Reynolds enthusiast William Cotton of Ivybridge suggested a bust be commissioned for the Plymouth Public Library. Sixty guineas were quickly donated by the public - including the famous Victorian art critic John Ruskin. The bust is on display here today. Cotton had inherited the prints and drawings of Reynolds’ fellow collector, Charles Rogers. He added his collection of Reynolds’s paintings and related material and gifted it all to Plymouth in 1853. The Cottonian Collection is now permanently on display in this museum.

Although some nineteenth-century artists (notably William Blake and the young Pre-Raphaelites) criticised Reynolds’s approach to art and art theory, others found much to admire and to emulate. Reynolds’ historic importance for the development of British art was acknowledged by all. He had helped to raise the artist’s public profile, defending the contribution of artistic creativity to the contemporary social and cultural world.

Exhibition

21 November 2009 to 20 February 2010

In 2006 Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery was gifted a collection of paintings from the Port Eliot Estate in Cornwall through a Government Acceptance in Lieu Agreement. The exhibition marks this important acquisition for the nation and builds on previous Reynolds exhibitions held in Plymouth in 1953, 1973 and 1992.

A Paul Mellon Research Grant has enabled new research to be undertaken in partnership with the Art History Department of the University of Plymouth on Reynolds' early career and patronage in the South West and Reynolds as a collector.

The exhibition features work from the City's collections and over 100 items on loan from regional, national and international public and private collections. For further information please visit www.plymouth.gov.uk/sirjoshuareynolds



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