A PAINTER OF SOPHISTICATED LADIES AND EXUBERANT LANDSCAPES

Kamenko M. Markovic

The University of Pristina with a temporary settlement in Kosovska Mitrovica, Faculty of Philosophy, the Department of the History of Art
kamenkom@sbb.rs

Abstract

The paper is concentrated on the life and work of Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), the most significant English painter of the Rococo epoch. Analyzing Gainsborough’s artwork, the author unambiguously proves that the artist has introduced numerous innovations into the English portrait and landscape painting.

Key words: Thomas Gainsborough, Rococo, portrait, landscape, Mrs. Graham.

Thomas Gainsborough was born in 1727 in Sudbury. His father was a small factory worker in the weaving industry who did not pay much attention to the boy which, always roaming the fields, took great pleasure in observing nature. Upon turning fourteen, he joined an art studio of a French engraver, Hubert Gravelot, in London. He returned five years later and used his skill to work independently. In the beginning, he only did landscapes of his hometown. Despite a degree of naïveté, the paintings were completed in excellent quality. There is sincere youthful infatuation with one’s homeland and a lovely melancholy beaming from them. “The Harvest Wagon” (The National Gallery, London) is an admirable masterpiece. Not even after moving to Bath did his love of nature subside. He moved to live there between 1760 and 1774.

The works of Rubens’ most gifted of pupils, Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), provided Gainsborough with an artistic role model. He copied Dyck’s style, however, managed to remain self-reliant and authentic. From the enchanting, slightly naïve, early paintings, Gainsborough developed his own mark all the way to the ones gleaming with the height of impressionistic method of painting.

Being in possession of an amiable exterior, he married well, which granted him access to the higher circles and in 1768 he became a member of the newly founded Royal Academy. Once this non-conformist genius of English painting first moved to London, he was outshined by a more fortunate rival, Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), whose work contrasted his own greatly, being both a portraitist and a landscape artist. More of a theorist than an artist, consumed with Venetian color harmonies, Reynolds went so far as to analyse the sleeve of Titian’s “Ariosto” (The National Gallery, London) for years. Determined to unravel the secrets of Titian’s way of painting from his later years, Reynolds scraped some parts of the painting cover2.

Thomas Gainsborough was the exact opposite of Reynolds. Even though they were peers, portraitists and acquaintances, rather than actual friends, their aims and ambitions parted

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1 Specialized paper
2 Kamenko M. Markovic, About Painters And Other Stories, Sven, Nis, 2009, p. 110.
ways completely. What was in the core of their differences? One might call Reynolds a pure talent and Gainsborough a genius! While Reynolds puts up enormous amounts of effort, Gainsborough arrives at his goals with astonishing ease.

Gainsborough’s masterpiece of his early ‘Suffolk’ period is the composition “Mr. and Mrs. Andrews” (The National Gallery, London), the majestic poetic of which makes us think of the brilliant Jean-Antoine Watteau (1684-1721). “Captured with outstanding freshness, the young member of the gentry and his peevish wife are in contrast with a field which can rightly be called an exquisite example of a direct reaction to nature”\(^3\). Gainsborough never found it hard to pinpoint the ‘similarity’ – unlike his opponent, Reynolds. Gainsborough’s sensitivity to drapery carries a touch of Watteau’s sensibility and the boldness of his succeeding paintings such as “Mary, Countess of Howe” (Iveagh Bequest, Kenwood House) are an unexpected utter novelty to the English artwork.

Lady Howe, the wife of a famous sailor also portrayed by Gainsborough, is dressed for a stroll in the woods, wearing gloves and a wide-brimmed straw hat. Over her magnificently painted pink dress there is an almost translucent muslin apron, slightly wrinkled. A soft breeze appears to be curving the slender trees in a sophisticated landscape surrounding her. It is a canvas of indescribable splendour. The portrait of “Mrs. Siddons” (The National Gallery, London) is a masterpiece of portraiture, whereas the piece “The Painter’s Daughters Chasing a Butterfly” (The National Gallery, London) is a song celebrating carefree childhood.

Gainsborough’s indebtedness to Van Dyck has been needlessly emphasized through frequent quotations of his dying words directed at Reynolds: “We are all going to Heaven, and Vandyke is of the company”. A certain spiritual connection existed without a doubt between him and Anthony van Dyck, but it was one of a considerably lesser extent than what is commonly suspected. Gainsborough’s tone was spontaneously cheerful with a heartfelt depth of feeling which Van Dyck’s cold nature was lacking. In all truth though, “Mrs. Graham”, formerly Mary Cathcart, the second daughter to Charles, 9\(^{th}\) Lord Cathcart, posed for the natural size portrait to Thomas Gainsborough in 1775 right upon her return from a honeymoon trip across Europe. At the time when he was painting the portrait, Gainsborough had already been an experienced artist full of alacrity and eager to take his place in the capital with the position he was entitled to by his endowment. Mrs. Graham probably made the kind of model who offered him utter fulfillment and satisfaction, judging by his perpetual affectedness to female beauty. Her charming personality united all the elements that otherwise held sway over the painter’s inspiration – youth, beauty, freshness, blonde hair and a pale complexion, a poise of dignity and fine manners. Their encounter yielded a portrait which, in the genre, has never been outdone. Therefore, “Mrs. Graham” fully possesses the comeliness which is the symbol of Van Dyck’s “Mary Villiers”, the duchess of Richmond or “Martha, the Countess of Monmouth”, only she bears a sweet expression of subdued shyness which cannot be found on the faces of the other great ladies.

Needless to mince words when it comes to Gainsborough’s “Blue Boy” (the painting is part of a private collection in the USA) which he used to successfully ridicule Reynolds’ theories on account of the warm and cold tones according to which the color blue should be avoided in general and extremely so in portrait painting. “The Blue Boy” had been completed two years prior to the announcement of the ‘law’. However, it was six years later that Gainsborough truly “thoughtfully violated all the regulations set forth by Reynolds” with his “Mrs. Siddons” as noted in Sir Walter Armstrong’s opinion. In yet another one of his portraits well-known under the name of “Woman In Blue” (Hermitage, St. Petersburg) Gainsborough exposes the many flaws of Reynolds’ theories. The matter is indeed out of the

ordinary. Reynolds’s “Discourses” are worthy the attention of any one concerned with the study of painting, however far more so on account of their practical application rather than theoretical considerations. In practice, he completely abandons his theories to such a degree – and with such marvelous results – that the conflict gave way to a philosopher from the painter which he was.

Another difference between Thomas Gainsborough and Joshua Reynolds was in the fact that the former also painted landscapes alongside portraits. “I am a landscape artist,” he sounded off angrily to Lord Lancedon, “yet, they ask of me to paint portraits”. Ever since his childhood, he felt strongly tempted to relieve the love he had for the beauty of nature. While living in Bath particularly, he worked out the concept of weaving portraits into landscapes. He later on enjoyed painting half-invented landscapes comprised of branches and stones he would have arranged in his atelier. Eventually, he donned his landscapes with a magical mist. Almost simultaneously, his portraits got caught in the same kind of magic. The realistic depiction of the world was replaced with a soft enchanting interpretation in which trees are evenly dispersed and countrymen are given the loveliness of dancers. Those landscapes can easily be traced to Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732-1806) – whose artwork Gainsborough probably remained unaware of. Gainsborough’s painting contains elements which bring him into relation with Jean-Antoine Watteau, whose paintings he had had the opportunity to see, but also with Gianbattista Tiepolo (1696-1770), the greatest decorative painter of XVIII century, whose artwork he was familiar with.

Gainsborough’s magnificent landscapes are often too silky in appearance. However, he makes everything seem lavish luxurious and elegant – even the cattle. Horace Walpole called Gainsborough’s painting “The Watering Place” from 1777 (The National Gallery, London) “the most beautiful landscape ever painted in England”. That breathtaking painting is the combination of the ideal and the natural at its peak. “The Morning Walk” (The National Gallery, London) falls under the last of Gainsborough’s works of art and it portrays a young newlywed couple, Mrs. and Mr. William Hallett. They are taking a stroll along the woods which Gainsborough transforms into a bower of silk and feathers – like Mrs. Hallett’s plume and ribbon hat. One senses the gracefulness of the couple’s motion, pacing hand in hand, slowly, followed by an elegant silky haired dog. During the portraying, Gainsborough’s oil painting technique got even more perfect. The work was done using wide brushes while the effect appears as if it had been completed with daggers. This technique which represents a part of durable freshness of his paintings was beautifully and truthfully described by Reynolds in one of his ‘Discourses’ following Gainsborough’s death. Using his palette of green, light brown, blueish and grey embroidery tones, he discovered the specific nuances characterizing the region of his homeland and already here we are offered a glimpse into the very beginnings of the line which, through Constable’s painting, made such a profound impact on the development of the early modernist landscape on the continent.

Truth be said, the environment he was living in (London) was incapable of realizing the magnitude of Gainsborough’s art, especially his portraits which were painted in free light strokes, which makes some of them appear as if they were the creations of impressionism. (A century later in Amsterdam, the genius Rembrandt was also faced with the surroundings unable to catch up with his daring aspirations in painting). In London in Gainsborough’s time the English still used Van Dyck’s system to estimate paintings, and portraits in particular.

Thomas Gainsborough enjoyed respect and esteem among his colleagues, the members of the academy, however, his appraisal as an artist was unequal to Joshua Reynolds. During a toast to Gainsborough at one feast, Reynolds said: “Long live England’s greatest landscape artist”, and another landscape artist Richard Wilson (1714-1782) rejoined the toast: “Long live
Gainsborough, the greatest portraitist. “The greatest master of the English Rococo Thomas Gainsborough started his career as a landscape artist and finished it as the dearest portraitist of the English upper classes.” Thomas Gainsborough died on 2nd August, 1788 in London.

CONCLUSION

Thomas Gainsborough was a more versatile painter than Reynolds. His early paintings, (‘the Suffolk period’) was characterized by an equal distribution of light, whereas the other, more mature period sees him using rather a concentration of light thereby approaching Rembrandt’s conceptualization of painting. To Rembrandt, light was a drama that gave off a supernaturnal dimension to his inspired thoughts and feelings. To Gainsborough, it was a means of hearing the sound of color as clearly as possible and of grasping the clarity of sound. In those works, Gainsborough is able to extract a kind of melodiousness which he was then able to underline in his own language as a painter-musician.

In his essence, Gainsborough is a Rococo painter in tune with Jean-Antoine Watteau’s poetry, but in his landscapes one is able to detect the setting of an ‘intimate landscape’. His landscape differs from Watteau’s, as it is not a mere decorative background but a unit with a life of its own. The dissimilarity is also visible in the manner of painting. Gainsborough’s painting procedure is swift and liquid as his brush sails and flutters along the surface of the whole painting driven by passion. The scenery at the back of Gainsborough’s portraits deserves special attention on account of the miraculous taste with which its natural characteristics remain unaltered and at the same time the balance of the central figure stays unchanged. Treatment of the background presents one of the most notorious challenges for portraitists. Painters are persistent in avoiding the problem by setting the models against a plain wall or drapery or arranging them to fit an architectural grid. The backgrounds on a number of Gainsborough’s portraits are the fruit of his brilliant inspiration, the inspiration that only arose on exceptional occasions. Thomas Gainsborough has made an immense contribution to the pervading opinion that the XVIII century should be considered the greatest epoch of English painting.

REFERENCES


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4 H. W. Janson, History of Art, Yugoslavia, Belgrade, 1975, p. 452.
With his own reputation, Joshua Reynolds elevated the title of painter to enviable heights, as it had until his time been regarded as an occupation for ‘la bohème’. He was an acclaimed artist, designated as member of royalty, the first president of The Royal Academy founded in 1768 and contending with the Paris Academy; he authored the famous “Seven Discourses On Art” (issued in 1778). Prone to eclecticism, he traveled Italy, France and the Netherlands for his studies using and adapting whatever suited him from Bartholomeus van der Helst (1613-1670) and Rembrandt van Rijn (1606-1669) as well as Raffaello Santi (1483-1520) and Michelangelo Buonarotti (1475-1564). Many of Reynolds’ famous paintings cracked because he was using polish as the binding medium or they darkened due to the overuse of bitumen. His clients watched their paintings age before their eyes with disquietude. He was aware of his defects. At first the inadequacies bothered him but he eventually took to cynicism claiming that the best paintings are the ones that can crack! As the president of the Royal Academy he strove to subject all matters regarding painting instruction to rigid rules and schemas and to therefore utilize his theories into replanting “the grand painting” in England, namely, one combining mythological and historical themes. For centuries to come, painters and critics would continue to submit to the principles enclosed by Reynolds in the famous stance in the eight experiment: “One must without exception take care to appropriate light mass on the painting using warm gentle colors, the yellows, the reds or the yellowy-whites; and in contrast, not to use blue grey or green almost at all for these masses. Should this procedure become reversed, no art whatsoever would manage to make the painting glimmer in harmony, not even if it were made by Rubens’ or Titian’s hand”. Reynolds is the forefather of academic painting from the perspective of modern art, however, despite his many speeches, written works and discussions on the subject, his success was derived from the plethora of his portraits which show the craft learned from the old masters.