



Thomas Gainsborough



A self-portrait of the artist as a young man ©National Portrait Gallery

You might have noticed that there are a few places in the museum where you can try on items of fancy dress. Perhaps you put on one of our hats and stopped to take a selfie? Just like us, our ancestors wanted pictures of themselves. These would take pride of place in their homes or would be given to friends and loved ones.

Up until the 1700s only royalty and the extremely rich were able to afford portraits, but a period of prosperity in the 1700s meant that more of the upper classes could afford them. It became a sign of having money and good taste to commission the leading artists of the day to paint your likeness.

Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) was one of the most talented portrait and landscape painters working in England in the mid-to-late 1700s. Born in Sudbury, Suffolk to John Gainsborough, a cloth seller, and his wife Mary, he was the youngest of nine children.

Gainsborough spent his childhood painting and drawing in the countryside near his home. It is here that he began to develop the skill for capturing landscapes which would become one of his trademarks in later years.

His early talent was noticed, and at the age of just thirteen he moved to London and studied under the illustrator, Hubert-François Gravelot (1699-1773).



Margaret Gainsborough (from a family portrait) c.1748

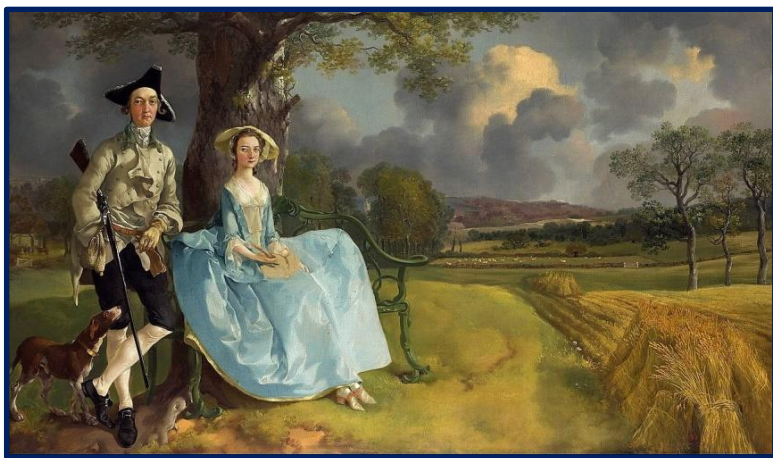
In 1746 Gainsborough married Margaret Burr (1728-1798), with whom he went on to have two daughters, who were often the subjects of his paintings.



'The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly'

Following their marriage, the Gainsboroughs moved back to Sudbury. Thomas made a living by painting portraits of rich locals. It was here that he painted one of his most famous works; *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, a double portrait of a newly married couple on the land they owned.

To us today, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* might not look unusual, but the combination of a formal portrait with a landscape painting was daring and new. Here, Gainsborough was able to showcase his talent for painting the natural world alongside the much better-paid skill of what he mockingly called “face painting.”



Mr and Mrs Andrews, c. 1750 © National Gallery

The Gainsboroughs moved from Sudbury to Ipswich for a while. A further move to fashionable Bath in 1759 allowed Gainsborough to attract high society, high paying clients.

He continued to build his reputation for lively, expressive yet delicate portraits painting the rich and famous people of Bath as well as his friends from the world of music and theatre. This reputation earned him a place as one of the founders of the Royal Academy of Arts in London.

However, by the time the Gainsboroughs had relocated to the capital in 1774, Thomas had fallen out with the other founders of the academy over the hanging of his paintings. He eventually stopped showing there altogether.

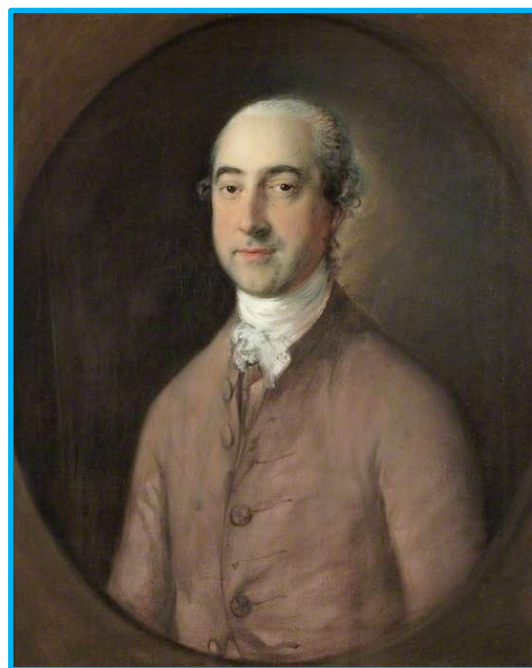
It was his time in London that really set him up as a rival to the other popular portrait artist of the era: Sir Joshua Reynolds.

Joshua Reynolds was President of the Royal Academy and had a very different style to Gainsborough - classical and precise compared to Gainsborough's lighter, more abstract touch.

Reynolds was the official painter to the Royal family, and his rivalry with Gainsborough grew when King George III asked Gainsborough to paint portraits of himself and the Queen.

It was during this era, around 1780, that Gainsborough painted portraits of Weston-super-Mare's very own Reverend Wadham Piggott, and John Piggott, both of which can be seen here at the museum.

The Piggott family, later to become the Smyth-Piggotts, were Lords of the Manor of the village of Weston-super-Mare. They owned so much land locally that it is said that at one time you could walk from Weston to Bristol without stepping foot off Smyth-Piggott land!



John Piggott © North Somerset Council

Gainsborough died in 1788 and was buried in Kew churchyard, London. He remains one of Britain's most celebrated artists.



Weston-super-Mare
Town Council