



Portrait of Mrs. Collins

Date

ca. 1770-1775

Primary Maker

Thomas Gainsborough

Medium

oil on canvas

Description

The taste for portraiture, which developed among the nobility in England in the 16th century, spread in the course of two centuries to the rest of the English upper class. By the 18th century there was an insatiable demand for portraiture, and it was the only branch of painting in which an artist of the period could achieve

prosperity. Alongside his bitter rival, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough was considered a leading portrait painter of his day. Gainsborough, who was born in the Suffolk countryside, trained in London and returned to his home around 1750. Although he began producing portraits in a French Rococo style, his preferred subject matter was landscape painting, modeled upon the work of such 17th century Dutch painters as Jacob van Ruisdael and Jan Wynants. In 1759 Gainsborough moved his studio to Bath, England's most fashionable winter resort; he remained until 1774, when the growing demand for his portraits led him to resettle in London. Painted in Bath in the same period as his famous full-length portrait Blue Boy (Huntington Library, San Marino, California), the Portrait of Mrs. Collins portrays the wife of a naval captain in the simple, bust-length format used for family keepsakes. The likeness is undoubtedly accurate, since Gainsborough never worked without the sitter in front of him. Her clothing and jewels are studio props (as is the costume used in Blue Boy), reminiscent of the "fancy dress" of Van Dyck's 17th century portraits. Van Dyck's work was also the source of inspiration for Gainsborough's portraits in regard to posture and gesture, and handling of light, color, and textures. The feigned oval used to frame the portrait of Mrs. Collins was a standard device frequently used by Gainsborough, but the background of the painting is somewhat unusual within his oeuvre; he normally employed a landscape backdrop only for large-scale portraits.

Dimensions

Sight: 29 3/8 x 24 3/8 in. (74.6 x 61.9 cm) Framed: 38 1/2 x 33 5/8 x 3 1/8 in. (97.8 x 85.4 x 7.9 cm)