

S P H I N X F I N E A R T



George Romney (Dalton 1734 - Kendal 1802)

Portrait of a Gentleman, Half-Length, Wearing a Dark Coat and White Stock

oil on canvas
76.2 x 63.5 cm (30 x 25 in)

Throughout the second half of the eighteenth century, George Romney was one of the most sought-after portraitists in Britain, though his portraits were not quite as dear as those by Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough he was nevertheless recognised as their only rival. In fact, as he was more inclined to Neoclassicism than many of his British contemporaries, at the height of his career Romney was the most fashionable portraitist in British society, with his sitters always appearing elegant and beautiful.

In *Portrait of a Gentleman, Half-Length, Wearing a Dark Coat and White Stock* one can see why Romney's services were so in demand. The gentleman sits, half turned towards the viewer, meeting our gaze calmly and confidently. His face is idealised, soft and unblemished, with his hair brushed back from his forehead, as was the fashion. His clothing is simple and fashionable and tells the viewer that we are looking at a tasteful, elegant and refined individual. By using such a dark, stark background, Romney focuses our attention onto his subject.

English portraiture flourished in the late eighteenth century, when not only aristocrats, but also lesser nobles, merchants and officers commissioned portraits of themselves, their wives and children. Therefore, in many of the portraits of the time we see not only the most important public figures, but also the lesser known characters from British society who still wished to have their portraits painted. *Portrait*

of a Gentleman, Half-Length, Wearing a Dark Coat and White Stock reflects this trend, and commissions similar to it are typical of much of Romney's work.

The present work is comparable to many of Romney's portraits, such as the Tate's [*William Pitt the Younger*](#). Neither work seeks to give an insight into the sitter's character or occupation, rather they are idealised likenesses, intended to flatter. In this sense Romney was an ideal fashionable portrait painter because, as Sir Ellis Waterhouse wrote in *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, he delighted in rendering 'all those neutral qualities which are valued by Society – health, youth, good looks, an air of breeding'.¹

Romney was born, trained, and began his career in the north of England before moving to London in 1762, where he exhibited at the Society of Arts and later at the Free Society and the Society of Artists. Romney may have been a prolific portrait painter, with over a thousand canvases scattered in private and public collections around the world, but he aspired to be a history painter. However, working for members of high society was far too financially profitable to ignore. In 1775 he charged fifteen guineas for a head and shoulders but by 1793 this had risen to thirty five guineas, his fees for half lengths were double these, and for full lengths double again. As a result, Romney's own successes as a history painter were limited, but he made many hundreds of pen and wash drawings illustrating subjects from the classics, Shakespeare, and Milton.

Romney was by nature sensitive and introspective. He held himself aloof from the Royal Academy and his fellow artists, making his friends in philosophical and literary circles. In 1782 he met Emma Hart (later Lady Hamilton), who exercised a morbid fascination over him. His 'divine Emma' appears in more than 50 paintings, in guises ranging from a bacchante to Joan of Arc. Almost all were painted from memory. Today he is remembered as one of the most significant portrait painters of his generation.

¹ Waterhouse, E., *Painting in Britain 1530-1790*, (Penguin, London, 1953) p. 222.

Provenance:

with Asscher & Welker, London 1936;
Wayne MacFarlane;
with Agnew's London, 1976;
private collection New York and by descent to the previous owner.

Exhibitions

Master Paintings Recent Acquisitions, Agnew's, May 18 - June 18 1976, no. 50.

Literature:

Alex Kidson, *George Romney: A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings* (Yale University Press, 2015), vol.iii, p.711, cat no.1545.

Artist description:

George Romney was a British painter—portraitist by profession but historical painter by inclination—who was born, trained, and began his career in the north of England. In 1762, he moved to London, where he exhibited at the Society of Arts and later at the Free Society and the Society of Artists. He was an assiduous student of prints after old masters and casts after the Antique; moreover, from 1773 to 1775 he was in Italy studying and copying old master paintings and classical sculptures in the original. These endeavours bore fruit in his portraits, which often contain discreet echoes of classical poses and draperies and of compositions by such painters as Raphael and Poussin. As he was more inclined to Neoclassicism than most British 18th-century portraitists, Romney's figures have long flowing contours and simple forms, which combined well with the demands of contemporary fashion, so that his sitters almost always appear elegant and beautiful.

Romney's 'other' life as a historical painter is reflected in his friendships with such radical and intense

figures as Flaxman and the poet William Haley; in 1790, he went with the latter to Paris, where they admired the latest works by Jacques-Louis David and met the painter. Romney's own successes as a history painter were limited, but he made many hundreds of wild pen and wash drawings illustrating subjects from the classics, Shakespeare, and Milton. Extravagantly over-valued for his flimsiest portraits 100 years ago, Romney is now seriously under-studied.

Romney was by nature sensitive and introspective. He held himself aloof from the Royal Academy and his fellow artists, making his friends in philosophical and literary circles. About 1781-82 he met Emma Hart (later Lady Hamilton), who exercised a morbid fascination over him. For Romney she became a means of escape into an imaginary, ideal world. His "divine Emma" appears in more than 50 paintings, in guises ranging from a bacchante to Joan of Arc. Almost all were painted from memory.

Collections

Romney is represented in the following collections: National Portrait Gallery, London; Royal Academy of Arts Collection, London; Tate Gallery, London; The Wallace Collection, London; Courtauld Institute of Art, London; Ashmolean Museum at the University of Oxford; National Galleries of Scotland, Edinburgh; Abbot Hall Art Gallery, Kendal, UK; The Louvre, Paris; Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg; Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles; Art Gallery of the University of Rochester, New York; Art Institute of Chicago Collection; Detroit Institute of Arts, Michigan; Fine Arts Museums of San Francisco; Indianapolis Museum of Art, Indiana; Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, Texas; Museum of Fine Arts, Boston; National Gallery of Art, Washington D.C.; National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa; Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia; Art Gallery of South Australia, amongst others.