

# 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)

**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.

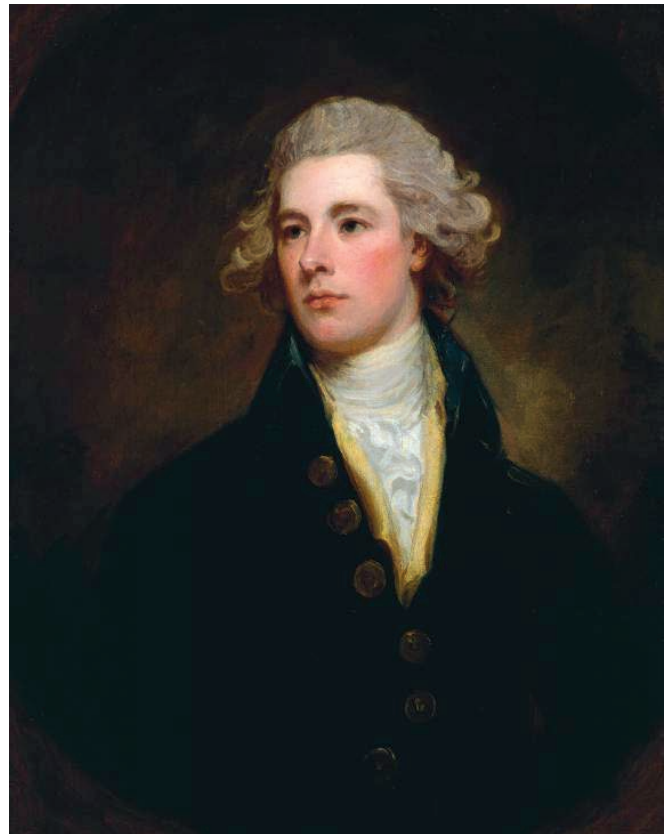
**T**HROUGHOUT THE SECOND HALF OF THE EIGHTEENTH-century, George Romney was one of the most sought-after portraitists in Britain. Though his portraits were not quite as expensive as those by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792) (see inventory) and Sir Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788) he was nevertheless recognised as their only rival. 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 communicates to the viewer an elegant and refined personality. By using such a dark, unadorned background, Romney focuses the viewer's attention wholly on 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. In many of the portraits of the time, therefore, portrait commissions were not restricted to only the most important public figures. *Portrait of a Gentleman, Half-Length, Wearing a Dark Coat and White Stock* reflects this trend, and similar commissions 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* (fig. 1). 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'.<sup>1</sup>

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 one 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



George Romney, William Pitt the Younger, c. 1783,  
Tate Britain, London (Figure 1)

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) (1761-1815), who exercised a morbid fascination over him. His 'divine Emma' appears in more than fifty 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.

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



