**Portrait of William Jackson (1730-1803), Thomas Gainsborough**

**Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter. 41/1950**

This work is one of the most significant visual documents in Exeter and, in the interest of the public, and posterity, should not be re-attributed. As the responsible curator, I was indeed aware that both the attribution and identification of the sitter had been questioned for some time. My predecessor had vigorously defended the painting but I remained neutral until 2009-10 when resources for research and conservation became available. My expectation was that the attribution to Gainsborough would be abandoned but I now believe that it should be upheld. In addition, there is little doubt that Jackson is the sitter. Contrary to a report in the national press (*The Guardian* 11/03/2017) and some comments made above, the museum retained the attribution to Gainsborough only after balanced consideration of documentary, visual and technical evidence.

For decades, the reputation of the portrait has been tainted by both misinformation on Jackson and the drastically altered state of the paint surface. I do not anticipate that Hugh Belsey will ever publicly revise his long held opinion and I can sympathise – to a degree. Serious damage and extensive overpainting have left us with only fragments of the original. Those few areas of original paint have also been flattened by aggressive cleaning. In this case, subjective quality assessments based on traditional connoisseurship are not adequate - especially where low resolution images are consulted. The question we should perhaps be asking is not ‘is this a Gainsborough’ but ‘*was* this by Gainsborough’. We should also allow that this work was swiftly executed for a close friend and probably not intended for public exhibition.

**20th century provenance:**

Firstly, the association of the portrait with William Jackson and Thomas Gainsborough was not invented by the museum. The painting was put up for sale at Sotheby’s on 14th December, 1949, acquired by Ernest Edward Cook and donated by him to the museum in the following year. It is worth noting that a major auction house with a reputation to protect had assessed the work and in their original sale catalogue the artist and sitter were identified *without qualification*. In addition, the catalogue entry included a short biography of Jackson.

Why then were Sotheby’s so certain? Probably because they had obtained information on provenance, now lost. The marked auctioneer’s catalogue indicates that the consignee was almost certainly Harold Samuel, later Baron Samuel of Wych Cross (1912-1987) or possibly his brother, Albert. Samuel, a prominent art collector, bequeathed his collection of Dutch paintings to the Mansion House, London. In earlier life his tastes were more eclectic and he is known to have acquired and sold on a number of paintings. However his activities as a successful property developer are also of crucial relevance here. In 1944 Samuel acquired Land Securities Investment Trust. His strategy was to enter into partnerships with local authorities with the aim of rebuilding towns and cities after World War II. Through his subsidiary company, Ravenseft Properties, he secured major contracts in Exeter, Plymouth, Bristol, Hull and Coventry. The centre of Exeter had been devastated by the air raids of spring 1942 and Samuel’s company was largely responsible for the redevelopment of the Georgian Bedford Circus area into the Princesshay shopping centre. Construction work began early in 1949, the same year in which the portrait was consigned for sale at Sotheby’s and Samuel’s business involvement with Exeter was at its height. Had Samuel acquired the portrait through his contacts in Exeter? This would explain why Sotheby’s confidently identified the sitter as William Jackson ‘of Exeter’. If so, the portrait may well have been located in or near Exeter for nearly two centuries before. Perhaps also, the extensive damage to the picture surface may have resulted from wartime bombing in the city.

This portrait was one of the few donations to a public collection made during Ernest E. Cook’s lifetime and was not part of the major Art Fund (then NACF) bequest of 1955. Cook’s collection is generally regarded as one of the most important ever bequeathed to public museums in England. British paintings of the 18th and early 19th century were a particular interest for Cook and he acquired important works by Gainsborough, Reynolds, Zoffany, Raeburn, Wilson, Stubbs and Turner. Whilst living in Bath for the last 27 years of his life he developed a special appreciation of Gainsborough. He did not form his picture collection in isolation and was advised by prominent London dealers such as Gooden and Fox. We can therefore assume that the RAMM portrait would have been thoroughly and professionally assessed before purchase and donation to a public collection. We may also reasonably question (again) how the sitter could have been identified other than through known provenance. Back in 1949 there were no portraits of William Jackson in public museum collections, access to images was extremely limited by modern standards and, as has been pointed out, Jackson was not known as a harpist. From all this, we can conclude that the identification of the artist and sitter had been in no sense speculative.

Reference has been made to Ellis Waterhouse. He included the painting in his check-list of Gainsborough portraits (Walpole Society Vol. 33, 1948-50) but omitted it from his later catalogue (1958) which contained only certainties. His check-list entry declared it ‘too damaged for judgement’. To be precise then, one of the most prominent historians of 18th century British art in the post-war era had examined the painting, noted the damage, and left open the possibility that Gainsborough was the artist. He went on to say that the sitter could not be Jackson because he was ‘not a harpist’. We now know that he was mistaken on that point (or simply unaware of the private context of the image) – which demonstrates how opinions on works of art *should* develop over time in response to new evidence.

**Jackson, Gainsborough and the harp:**

For many years, as now, the harp has wrongly been cited as evidence against the identification of the sitter as William Jackson. Paradoxically, it is the harp which links the sitter to Gainsborough and vice-versa.

Professional harpists, in the modern sense, were quite rare in the mid 1700s. With the notable exception of Handel, few composers had produced work specifically for the instrument and most players were amateur. And yet any number of 18th century portraits record the popularity of the harp for recreation and private performance. Many of these, including Gainsborough’s portrait of Lady Clarges (Victoria Art Gallery, Bath), depict ladies who could play to an accomplished standard at social gatherings. From the portrait evidence of the time it is therefore apparent that an individual could be represented playing a harp and not be a concert performer. Even so, in the case of the RAMM portrait (**Image 1**) this hardly matters because *the composition commemorates the private relationship between the sitter and artist.*

William Jackson has traditionally been titled as the ‘organist at Exeter Cathedral’. He was in fact a versatile composer and musician who took the post of cathedral organist in 1777 for social advancement and regular income (many years after the RAMM portrait was painted). His knowledge of musical instruments, including the harp, was extensive. However, he considered the harp unsuitable for public performance due to the risk of string breakages (see William Jackson, *A short sketch of my own Life*, 1802, Gainsborough’s House Review, 1996-97).

Crucially, the loan of a harp by Gainsborough may even provide the context for the portrait. The letter from Gainsborough to Jackson in the RA archive referred to by Timothy Roberts and Osmund Bullock is undated (presumed 1770 but probably earlier):

‘The harp is packed up to come to you, and you shall take it out with Miss ------, and I’ll not take anything for it, but give it to you to twang upon when when you can’t twang upon Mrs. Jackson….’

Though laden with sexual innuendo, we can be reasonably sure that an actual harp was despatched as its return is mentioned in a subsequent letter from Gainsborough (RA archive, also undated). In these *personal* circumstances, did Jackson, the composer and musician, need to have been a *renowned* harpist to have appeared in a Gainsborough portrait playing a harp? Clearly not.

During the early 1760s Gainsborough established his reputation in Bath. Jackson had composed songs, elegies, and sonatas for viola and harpsichord but was not yet famously linked to *any* specific musical instrument. Some of his early compositions were performed in Bath where he and Gainsborough met, probably in 1762-63. During the 1760s the two close friends shared a mutual and eclectic love of music and musical instruments. We have it from Jackson himself how Gainsborough obsessively acquired one instrument after another:

‘The next time I saw Gainsborough he had heard a harper at Bath. The performer was soon left harpless, and now Fischer, Abel, and Giardini were all forgotten – there was nothing like chords and arpeggios’ (William Jackson, *The Four Ages*, p.1798).

Jackson appears again playing a harp in a later portrait by John Downman (**Image 2**: reproduced in John Hayes, *William Jackson of Exeter*, The Connoisseur, January 1970 and exhibited at Gainsborough’s House, 1997). Whilst the identity of the harpist in the Downman portrait has been questioned, Jackson’s own recollections suggest that the instrument shown in the RAMM portrait belonged to Gainsborough:

‘He really stuck to the harp long enough to play several airs with variations, and, in a little time, would nearly have exhausted all the pieces usually performed on an instrument incapable of modulation, (this was not a peddle harp)…’. (William Jackson, *The Four Ages*, 1798).

Relations between the two men eventually cooled and Jackson has been accused of belittling the artist’s musical talents. Nevertheless, this one instrument, the harp, was evidently an enduring focus of their friendship since he does credit Gainsborough with a reasonable standard of play – and we know from the letters that, at one stage, Jackson even borrowed his harp. The instrument obviously made an impression since some thirty years later Jackson retains a specific memory of it. He tells us that Gainsborough’s instrument was ‘not a peddle harp’ but the more traditional triple harp. I agree with E. Jones, Joanne Julier and Mike Parker that in the Exeter portrait we see a triple harp similar in form to the high-status example by David Evans, 1736, and another by John Richards, c.1740 (**Images 3-4**: V&A). There is nothing in either the design or decoration of this harp which precludes a dating of the picture to the 1760s.

**The sitter:**

The same is true of the sitter’s clothing which can also be dated to the 1760s. I can certainly see why an attribution to Thomas Hickey would require a later date of 1780s since Hickey was in Italy on an extended Grand Tour for most of the 1760s. Whilst it is not unusual in 18th century portraiture to find older men dressed unfashionably, young men (as now) generally did not wear clothing some 15-20 years out of date. Changes to wigs and the cut of fashionable male dress could be quite subtle between the 1760s and 1780s. Yes, subtle but still detectable. With respect, neither can I see an association with Hickey on the grounds of style. As even Ellis Waterhouse discovered, this significantly damaged and altered painting cannot be accurately attributed without the aid of technical analysis.

Ellis Waterhouse’s comment on the harp (noted above) has ever since encouraged doubts as to the identification of the sitter. Even so, over the years, some visiting researchers, after viewing the original painting, have accepted the RAMM portrait as a representation of William Jackson (and some also, the attribution to Gainsborough). I note from Justin Reay’s blog that he sees a resemblance to the image reproduced in *Devonshire Characters and Strange Events* by Sabine Baring-Gould, 1908. This was taken from a mezzotint, engraved by James Walker, published 1818, probably after an oil portrait by Opie, c.1790 (**Image 5**: NPG D3145). The resemblance is not coincidental.

My predecessor at the museum would refer sceptics to a little-known oil portrait of Jackson painted by John Keenan in 1800 (**Images 6-7**: Devon and Exeter Institution; RAMM). She was right to have done so as clearly this is a representation of the same man in later life. As painted by Keenan, Jackson was aged 70 whereas in the museum’s portrait (1760s) he would have been in his early-mid 30s. If we extend the comparison to another image – John Downman’s profile drawing of 1781 (**Image 8**: BM 1967,1014.187) we can observe the same face throughout the entire group – allowing for variations in age, viewpoint, media and technique. Most striking are the distinctive eyebrows and the uncommonly angular nose tip but other key facial features can be matched beyond reasonable doubt. Gainsborough’s later portrait of Jackson, exhibited at the RA in 1770, provides a semi-profile likeness again consistent (**Image 9**: of which there are two versions, both private collection; both again variously attributed over the decades to Gainsborough, Jackson himself and an unidentified copyist).

**The artist:**

Jackson and Gainsborough first met during the early 1760s and became the closest of friends. Given that Gainsborough habitually painted portraits of his musical friends, it is almost inconceivable that he would have waited some eight years until 1770 before painting Jackson for the first time. Indeed, a letter written in that year, on the subject of his RA exhibition portrait, reveals that he did not:

‘I saw you at the Exhibition, and as I expected hung a mile high. I wish you had been created Lord before my sending the Picture, then that puppy Newton would have taken care you had been in sight… Let me know if I must send you your Head, or whether you can do with the half one you already are in possession of none but a half-hearted fool would pay you this compliment…’ (Gainsborough to Jackson, dated 9/6/1770; published in the Burlington Magazine, February, 1941. Letter owned by Mr. G Mackworth Young, a descendant of Jackson).

Here Gainsborough confirms that he had painted an earlier portrait of Jackson during the 1760s – ‘the half one’. His reference to picture dimensions is crucial since he describes the later 1770 portrait as a ‘head’. For him, this indicated a canvas area of 30 x 25 inches. He then refers to the earlier work, then in Jackson’s possession, as a ‘half’ – the term he used for half-length canvases of 50 x 40 inches – measurements which correspond precisely to the Exeter painting.

We therefore know for certain that Gainsborough had painted a half-length portrait of Jackson during the 1760s but curiously, Jackson does not mention this work in his autobiography…

‘It seems trifling to add that all the Jacksons in Devonshire have a family face and person. What was mine may be known by a picture by Rennell, painted at twenty years of age; one by Gainsborough at forty; another by Keenan at seventy. I recollect also sitting for a miniature to Humphrey, for a portrait in crayon by Morland, and for two in oil by Opie.’

(First published in the *Leisure Hour*, 1882)

The smaller 1770 RA exhibited portrait (‘at forty’) is duly recorded. Jackson’s list should, however, be regarded as selective since he omits, for example, known portraits by John Downman. We also know from a letter to his son, Thomas, that Jackson did own several other works by Gainsborough (dated 6/9/1788, Gainsborough’s House Review 1996-97). Could the earlier half-length portrait have been seriously damaged and/or given away in Jackson’s lifetime? Jackson would no doubt have preferred to have been immortalised in the more prestigious and formal RA portrait as an artist/composer, rather than simply as a musician or indeed, a ‘harpist’.

Of course, once we accept that the Exeter portrait is of William Jackson from the 1760s, we must also seriously consider Gainsborough as the artist. As described earlier, the painting has suffered from significant damage and alteration. There nevertheless remains enough of the original to justify the attribution to Gainsborough. My predecessor was again correct to argue that despite much over-painting, traces of Gainsborough’s handling may be found on the face, cravat and waistcoat notwithstanding that even here abrasive cleaning has flattened the paint surface and partially erased tonal transitions. This lack of form is especially apparent in the face but the quality and aspect of the right eye does match our expectation of Gainsborough (**Image 10** NB: the left eye has been damaged and retouched). In addition, both the thinness of the paint layers and openness of handling are indicative of Gainsborough’s technique, developed in Bath during the 1760s. A broadly contemporary (but better preserved) work is *Karl Friedrich Abel* (NPG 5947). Here we can make a direct comparison of the handling – of for example, the waistcoat areas (**Images 11-12**).

In 2009-10 funds became available to the museum for conservation. This work, carried out by a conservator with considerable experience of Gainsborough portraits, included complete removal of varnish and of overpainting where original work remained beneath. Losses were repaired and retouched and all stages of work photographed. X-ray images of the under-painting were compared with those of other works by Gainsborough – a procedure that was not influenced by the museum. We were advised that these comparisons left little doubt that the original work was by Gainsborough.

**Overview:**

* In 1949 the portrait was identified by Sotheby’s as of ‘William Jackson of Exeter’ and by Gainsborough. The consignee was probably Harold Samuel, the collector and property developer, who may well have acquired the painting through contacts in Exeter. Soon after, it was assessed and purchased by Ernest E. Cook, a major collector of 18th century British art.
* Despite the damaged condition of the painting, Ellis Waterhouse did **not** rule Gainsborough out.
* Though Jackson was not a ‘harpist’ by reputation, it is obvious from published recollections and correspondence, that it was *Gainsborough’s* harp which became a focus of the relationship between artist and composer.
* Jackson may be identified as the sitter from several other portraits, including those by Keenan, Downman and Gainsborough.
* A letter from Gainsborough himself confirms that he certainly painted a half-length (50 x 40 inches) portrait of Jackson during the 1760s.
* Both the age and dress of the sitter in the Exeter portrait indicate the same 1760s date as the half-length portrait referenced in Gainsborough’s letter.
* Though the Exeter painting has been damaged and heavily restored, traces of Gainsborough’s handling remain. This is, after all, the reason why Sotheby’s retained the attribution to Gainsborough to begin with, it was acquired and donated by Ernest E. Cook, and Ellis Waterhouse reserved judgement.
* X ray comparisons, carried out in 2009-10 confirmed the under-painting to be almost certainly by Gainsborough.

The Exeter portrait is a severely damaged and drastically altered picture that should be evaluated on its own terms – not through expectations of quality normally associated with Gainsborough, nor through fear of diminishing Gainsborough’s reputation or genius. It should have been a major work in the RAMM collection from an artistic standpoint but sadly it did not survive in original condition. It nevertheless should be preserved as one of the museum’s most important visual documents – that of a close friendship between a great artist and an Exeter composer, based on a mutual love of music and painting.

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