

Playing to the Gallery

Reynolds: Portraiture in Action by Mark Hallett

Over the last decade at least, ever since he was involved in the organisation of Tate Britain's exhibition 'Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity' in 2005, Mark Hallett, the recently appointed director of studies at the Paul Mellon Centre, has been working on a new study of Reynolds's paintings. It has now been handsomely published by Yale University Press and is a major and deeply serious work, informed by all the latest scholarship in the field of 18th-century studies.

In what ways does it advance our knowledge and understanding of Reynolds? Its first great strength is in paying attention to, and contributing to, the work that has been done on 18th-century Royal Academy exhibitions. From the moment that the Society of Artists (the body representing artists before the creation of the Royal Academy) began organising annual public exhibitions in 1760 – in its first year in the Society of Arts' Great Room in Denmark Court off the Strand and in subsequent years in Spring Gardens – artists were bound to pay attention to the response of the general public, rather than just those who had commissioned the paintings. Painting became a much more public and democratic medium.

As Hallett writes, Reynolds's decisions in the late 1750s and early 1760s to pursue innovative forms of celebrity portraiture and to become involved in this inaugural art exhibition and in its immediate successors were thoroughly complementary in character. They testified to the ways in which the artist was now beginning to supplement his address to aristocratic clients with an appeal to a new urban public. As a result, to put the argument at its crudest, paintings got bigger and more flashy and Reynolds experimented with new ways of treating his sitters, particularly female ones, in order to make an impact at the annual exhibitions, which, from April 1769, were held under the auspices of the newly established Royal Academy.

I find this aspect of the book completely convincing. It shows the impact of the exhibition 'Art on the Line: The Royal Academy Exhibitions at Somerset House, 1780–1836', which John Murdoch and David Solkin organised at the Courtauld Institute in 2001, in which they reconstructed the original hang of the Great Room at Somerset House. Pictures were hung symmetrically, jam-packed together either above or below the line, and had to fight to gain the attention of the audience. As a result, artists began to think about how to catch the attention of the viewer in new ways.

The second thing that Hallett does is to subject nearly every painting that Reynolds made throughout his long professional career to a close reading in terms of its attitude to its subject and its composition. From the moment Reynolds returned from Italy in 1752, he was working in a highly competitive, commercial marketplace in which he had to secure his place by constant innovation in the ways he portrayed his sitters. When Thomas Hudson saw the portrait of Reynolds's friend Giuseppe Marchi looking dark and Levantine, he declared, 'By God, Reynolds, you don't paint so well as when you left England!' The implication, which is correct, was that Reynolds was transgressing the established conventions of portraiture by painting in a way that was darker and more original, in some ways more psychological. Reynolds's portrait of Commodore Augustus Keppel as a young and dashing naval commander makes use of a backdrop of waves and the pose of an Apollo to provide a new image of naval heroism. One has the sense always of Reynolds as a thoughtful autodidact, making good use of his time in Rome, always experimenting with new genres, learning by looking, painting not naturally, like Gainsborough, but, following the precepts of his own Discourses, with a great deal of hard work and careful thought. One sees – and Hallett is able to trace – exactly how Reynolds established his reputation by a process of constant compositional innovation.

Hallett's close readings of individual canvases yields particular benefits in his analysis of the great series of paintings that Reynolds did of well-known beauties, beginning with his portrait of Elizabeth Gunning, Duchess of Hamilton and Argyll, full size and standing in parkland. It is easy to view these as efforts to secure the attention of a broad public by giving them the pleasure of viewing the great beauties of the day (some of them courtesans), whom Reynolds was able to paint with asexual, idealised pleasure. I also find it easy to see that Reynolds's portraits of Laurence Sterne and his friend David Garrick were ways of disseminating their likenesses and enhancing their public reputations in an era in which the sale of prints and criticism in newspapers had led to more widespread consumption and appreciation of art.

Hallett's technique of analysis is less convincing when he discusses Reynolds's portraits of his friends. Of course, portraiture was, to some extent, a way of commanding an audience in the exhibition room. But it was also a way of recording a personal, more private relationship. For example, Hallett reproduces but does not dwell on Reynolds's portrait of Bennet Langton from Gunby Hall. Langton was extremely tall ('like a stork'), an Oxford-educated classical scholar and a friend of Samuel Johnson. He was one of the founder members of the weekly supper club that Reynolds and Johnson established in an upstairs room in the Turk's Head Tavern. This is an example of Reynolds painting someone he liked and respected, not just another routine sitter in his daybook. When Reynolds painted Samuel Johnson, he was not only providing another portrait for the library of the Thrales, some friends in Streatham, but also responding to and recording the changing appearance of his closest friend as he was transforming from a public man of letters into an unhappy and sometimes angry seer.

Hallett's method can also sometimes feel ahistorical, like a Courtauld Institute examination in which picture after picture is subjected to close scrutiny with inadequate attention paid to the circumstances in which the paintings were commissioned, whom they represent and the nature of Reynolds's relationship to the sitter. This is most obvious in a long chapter devoted to a critical reading of Reynolds's great picture of the Marlborough family for Blenheim Palace, in which the fourth duke is painted sitting down with his hand on the shoulder of his oldest son and heir, while the duchess in the centre of the picture supervises the rest of their brood. Much is made of the duchess's limp hand gesture, touching the duke gently on his sleeve. Does the painting really show a new gender politics or attitude to family relations? It looks pretty ducal to me, compositionally clever as Reynolds's paintings so often were. At this point, one is forced to recognise that, however much Reynolds may have wanted to command the attention of a broad public, he remained a professional portrait painter who needed to keep his patrons happy and was necessarily subject to the tight constraints and expectations of those who were paying the bills. By concentrating to such an extent on Reynolds as a public painter, Hallett neglects Reynolds as a private man. But these minor criticisms do not diminish my admiration for the book as a whole. It is deeply thoughtful about the ways in which Reynolds conceived of his compositions and the most substantial contribution to the study of Reynolds for a generation.

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