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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK LAWRENCE ***



**MASTERPIECES
IN COLOUR**

**EDITED BY - -
T. LEMAN HARE**

"Masterpieces in Colour" Series

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BOUCHER.	C. HALDANE MACFALL.
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CHARDIN.	PAUL G. KONODY.
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WATTEAU.	C. LEWIS HIND.
WATTS.	W. LOFTUS HARK.
WHISTLER.	T. MARTIN WOOD.

Others in Preparation.



**PLATE I.—MASTER LAMBTON. Frontispiece
(In the collection of the Earl of Durham)**

In painting this portrait (for which he is said to have received £600) Lawrence was happy in his sitter. The child has good looks and a very intelligent face, but unfortunately he is over-posed. One misses the simplicity, the natural attitude, the spontaneous gesture, found in portraits of children by Sir Joshua, and feels that although Lawrence made an attractive picture, his sitter has been made too self-conscious for childhood.

LAWRENCE

BY S. L. BENSUSAN ❀ ❀ ❀
ILLUSTRATED WITH EIGHT
REPRODUCTIONS IN COLOUR



LONDON: T. C. & E. C. JACK
NEW YORK: FREDERICK A. STOKES CO.

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I

The prodigy is no unfamiliar figure in our midst to-day—indeed the world's wonder children tend ever to increase in numbers and attainments. For the most part they belong to the realm of music; poets and artists must be made as well as born. We are but mildly excited when the papers announce the arrival in town of a child who can play the piano like Rubinstein or the violin like Paganini; we know that though the statement be a gross and misleading exaggeration, we shall at least hear work that is little short of marvellous from hands that might well have known no heavier burden than toys. We know, too, that these precocious children tend to make their *début* and disappear, making way for others. If they are to develop their promise, a long spell of study is inevitable, and for the most part parents and guardians are more intent upon present profit than future prestige.

The precocious lad whose talent makes him a painter is rare. Natural aptitude for drawing and natural sense of colour are not uncommon, but the possessor of these gifts may remain quite undistinguished. He generally succeeds in doing so in these days when the old traditions of art are despised by the *cognoscenti*,

and the genuine faculty of interpretation is not understood or appreciated by the rank and file of those who pay their annual tribute of one shilling to the authorities of Burlington House, and are not always ashamed to frame the colour plates that illustrated papers inflict upon their long-suffering subscribers. Life is harder for the young painter of genius than his contemporary musician of like age. It was not always so, and turning back to the history of England's accepted artists, the name of Sir Thomas Lawrence, P.R.A., stands out as one of the most brilliant examples in the history of art, of untutored skill that came near to amounting to positive genius.

The history of the Italian painters provides us with many cases in which men, starting life with talents akin to those that Lawrence enjoyed, claimed and found a measure of immortality. Only a few will be found to declare that the English painter is destined to the very highest place in the annals of British art, but at his best he is a very notable painter indeed, in spite of the fact that everything in his life was working in opposition to the best interests of his art. He had no education, his gifts were exploited shamelessly from the days when he was a little boy. As he grew up, the imperious need for money gave to purely commercial work the precious years that should have been surrendered to study. Happily Fortune was not altogether unkind. She checked the proper development of rare talent, she kept the painter from all opportunity of becoming the most outstanding figure of his generation in the critical eyes of generations to come; but, on the other hand, she loaded him with all the material favours within her gift. His career was as brilliant as the passage of a meteor through the sky; he rose from surroundings of the most unsatisfactory kind to the highest place in the profession he adorned. He became the intimate of princes and people of high degree, and, with certain limitations imposed by an incomplete education, he was a great painter.



PLATE II.—MRS. SIDDONS
(In the National Gallery)

In this portrait Lawrence has dealt faithfully with the greatest actress of his time. The face suggests the latent power that could upon occasion hold an audience spell-bound, and there is a certain quality of intimacy about this remarkable study that shows the painter's effort to express the full depths of a complex character. As in the case of Miss Maria Siddons, the painting of this portrait was a labour of love.

From many of his canvases we can see man's splendid gifts struggling for full expression. At times he seems to be a reflection of a still greater man, Sir Joshua Reynolds; at other times he is the founder of a tradition that lesser men were to make vulgar and commonplace and bring ultimately into disrepute. But at every period of his life and in every aspect of his work with which we are acquainted, Thomas Lawrence is interesting—perhaps it is permissible to say he is even lovable. One gets the impression of a strong man who has equipped himself for life's race in despite of disadvantages that would have crushed and quelled the spirit of a weakling, a man who makes for the most difficult goal, and reaches it in triumph. He is an Englishman every inch of him, and the spirit that supported him is one he shared with the greatest of this island's citizens. Even the most severe of his critics cannot hide their admiration of the man, though they are most acutely conscious of the shortcomings of the artist.

It is fair to remember, too, that much of the painter's work was done under certain disadvantages inherent in the times of his activity. With the close of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, costume was stiff and ugly to an extreme that excites our laughter now. The age of artificiality was upon land, and Sir Thomas Lawrence was not so well equipped for making the best of it as were Reynolds and Gainsborough, who came immediately before him. That he succeeded so often in making the personality of a sitter overcome the absurdities of dress and decoration is an eloquent tribute to his art. His treatment of children is frankly delightful but frankly derivative; it is only necessary to refer to such portraits as the "Childhood's Innocence," "Master Lambton," "Nature," and the "Countess Gower and Daughter," to see how

great is his debt to one who was *facile princeps* among the painters of childhood—Sir Joshua himself—and how far he fell short of his teacher's greatness. But the gallery of children is a small one; the collection of representative men and women of his time is far larger, more representative, and painting many of these portraits the artist is speaking with his own voice, the voice that lured so many men of a later generation to assume it as their own, with results that are little short of lamentable. Students of the life of Sir Thomas Lawrence must surely have shared the writer's regret that the strong soul, the sure hand, and the far-seeing eye were not destined to have lived and thrived in the golden age of the Italian Renaissance. Then such natural gifts were stimulated to the highest possible pitch of development by the splendour of a more flamboyant life, the glory of a less restricted power, the rare beauty of pageant and of costume unknown to late eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century England, in a land where beauty was the very keynote of existence. There, poverty was a stimulus to countless artists whose very names thrill us as we mention them, men whose genius is enshrined in the galleries of Venice, Florence, and Rome. Under Italian skies such gifts as Lawrence possessed would have blossomed and budded and filled the face of the world with fruit. Eighteenth- and nineteenth-century skies in England were never bright enough to teach Lawrence the one secret that his canvases lack—the secret of exquisite colour that came to Sir Joshua in his prime, though, alas, it faded from so many canvases as surely as it passed from the laughing faces that thronged his studio.

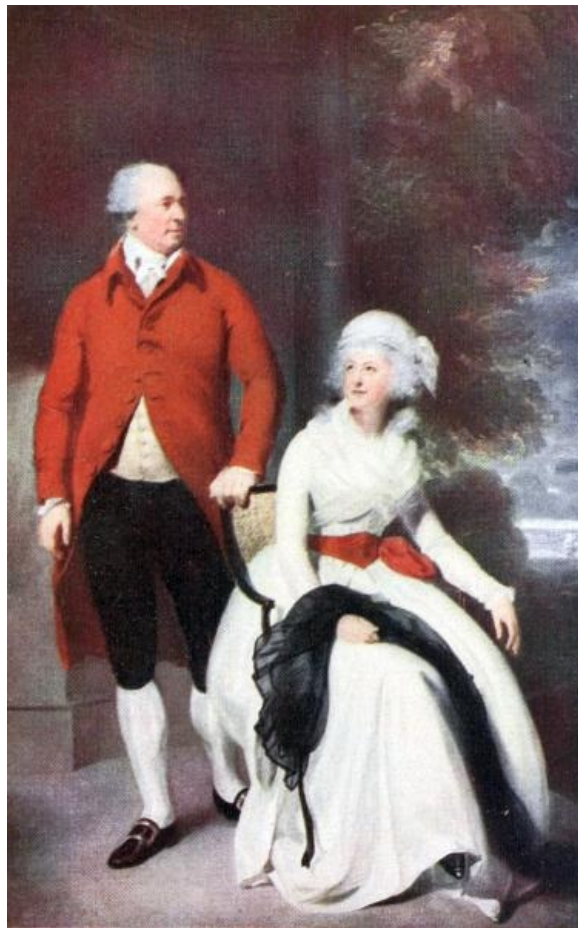
Taste, Lawrence had in a very marked measure; his draughtsmanship was facile and sure to an almost dangerous degree; but in point of colour, as in some of the more subtle qualities of portrait-painting, he lacked the equality of gifts that would have silenced our later-day criticism. Only when we turn to consider the conditions under which his early life was passed, and the labours that were enforced upon him at a tender age, do we cease to complain of his slight limitations in wonder of the great gifts that passed unscathed through his troubled childhood, his scanty days of training, his long years of devoted toil, his season of honours and great rewards. The record of Lawrence's life is full of interest that has been heightened in the past few years by the publication in 1904 of "An Artist's Love Story," edited by Mr. Oswald G. Knapp. With the issue of this work, made up of hitherto unpublished letters written by the painter, Mrs. Siddons and her daughters, Martha and Maria, a fresh and interesting light was thrown upon the artist's relations with the great actress and upon his devotion to her daughters; the countless stories and rumours that passed current in his day have been corrected. Through this correspondence we see more of the man than any biography had ever succeeded in showing us, and as the painter had been dead for more than seventy years when the book was published, and had left no descendants, there could be no suggestion of impropriety in the publication. Many of the letters are more than a century old.

In the light of the leading biographies, the brief one by Redgrave, the longer and more interesting biography by Allan Cunningham, and some others of less note, and with the aid of this volume of correspondence, it is possible to set down at all necessary length the story of the artist's life, and to speak with some authority of the conditions under which the bulk of his work was done.

II

THE PAINTER'S LIFE

Thomas Lawrence was born in the year 1769, when Sir Joshua Reynolds was in his forty-sixth year, and Gainsborough was two-and-forty years his senior. His father, after whom he was named, was a ne'er-do-well of decent birth and good education who had made a clandestine marriage with a lady of better social position than his own; for Lucy Read, who married Thomas Lawrence, senior, was related to the Powis family. Because she listened to his suit she was disowned and disinherited by her relations. Her influence upon her son would seem to have been wholly good; indeed he was devoted to both parents, though his father started to exploit the child's gifts in nursery days; and his grief when the old people died was very severe. Thomas Lawrence, senior, "stiff in opinion, always in the wrong," was "everything in turn and nothing long." Attorney, verse-writer, actor, exciseman, and farmer, he had become a tavern-keeper when his sorely tried wife presented him with the baby who was destined to paint the portrait of Benjamin West that hangs in the National Portrait Gallery, and to succeed him as President of the Royal Academy.



**PLATE III.—PORTRAIT OF MR. AND MRS. JOHN
JULIUS ANGERSTEIN
(In the Louvre)**

This work, despite one or two regrettable conventions from which the painter was never entirely free when he put more than one figure on his canvas, is of more than passing interest. Mr. Angerstein was a great collector of pictures, a wealthy man to whom the painter was often in debt. The head of Mrs. Angerstein is beautifully posed.

At a very early age little Thomas Lawrence developed a wonderful gift for making life-like sketches, and at the same time he inherited his father's gift of recitation. Such an effective combination seemed to be too good to waste, and the elder Lawrence employed the lad to improve custom in the Bristol tavern over which he presided in his own careless fashion. Visitors were invited to hear the infant prodigy recite, or if their ears were duller than their eyes, they were invited to sit for their portraits. Doubtless this was excellent for custom, but it did not avail altogether, for the Bristol house on the great Bath Road soon passed into the hands of unsatisfied creditors, and the family moved, not without considerable private aid, to the Black Bear Inn at Devizes, then a place of importance to the coaches passing on their way to and from the west. At Devizes the boy received a little education, nothing better than a smattering, and was called upon at short intervals to exhibit his precocity. He soon found an influential and appreciative audience.

A large proportion of those who patronised the Black Bear Inn were men of position and culture; they could not only appreciate the boy's gifts, but could reward them. Indeed we read that a few years later the elder Lawrence received an offer from one of his old-time visitors, Sir Henry Harpur, to send the boy to Italy and have his gifts developed in the best schools. Unhappily the father knew as much about art as he did about inn-keeping; he was indignant rather than pleased with the suggestion that foreign study could improve the child's gifts. "My son's talents," he replied, "require no cultivation," and this answer says more for his stupidity than all his repeated failures to adapt himself to any one of the many occupations he followed so unsuccessfully until the time came when he could live in comparative affluence upon the proceeds of his boy's talent. Doubtless in the latter days he ever prided himself upon the discernment that had kept the lad by his side.

The artist's earliest work would seem to have consisted of chalk drawings which were produced with great rapidity and sold to his father's customers for half a guinea or a guinea each. The likeness in each case must have been good, for it is on record that one of his earliest efforts, a sketch of Lady Kenyon, who stayed at his father's inn with her husband, was easily recognised five-and-twenty years later. But drawing was not the only accomplishment of his early days. He was, as has been remarked earlier, a clever reciter. Garrick heard him twice when he was a lad, and on the second occasion asked his father if "Tommy was to be an actor or a painter?" The father had no doubt at all about the profession that promised to be the more profitable, and, in later years, when the artist was very anxious to go upon the stage, was at great pains to persuade him not to do so. As his son was more intent upon helping the family than anything else, the advice was taken, and doubtless the results justified it. The theatre could have offered no equal reward for talent, however great. To the end of his days the painter was a fluent reciter, and possessed a mastery over his voice that could turn every tone into a caress. More than one woman was misled by it into thinking that the artist

was seriously in love with her.

As early as 1785 young Lawrence received his first public recognition; it came from the Society of Arts, which was then quite a serious rival of the Royal Academy. He sent a copy on glass of a Transfiguration, perhaps one he had seen at Corsham House, the seat of the Methuen family. It was made two years before, when the painter was fourteen years of age, and although the rules of the Society did not admit of a work being put in for competition more than a year after it was painted, the Council felt bound to make an exception in this case, and presented him with five guineas and a silver-gilt palette. For a boy, and he was nothing more, this was a considerable triumph, but it had been led up to by much startling work at Devizes and Oxford. When young Lawrence was ten years old, Daines Barrington (Gilbert White's correspondent) had referred to him as "a lad who can copy historical pictures amazingly, and is likewise an excellent reader of blank verse."

From Devizes the family had gone to Oxford, where they lived and thrived upon the proceeds of the boy's pencil. Among his sitters were the Bishops of Oxford and Llandaff, Earls Bathurst and Warwick, Countess Egremont, and many others. The visitors to the inn at Bristol and Devizes had spread his fame, and Oxford was such a liberal patron that Thomas Lawrence, senior, moved to Bath, where he took a house at one hundred pounds a year rental as a boarding-house. Sitters were expected, and did not fail. Here it was that young Lawrence painted Mrs. Siddons for the first time, that Sir Henry Harpur offered to adopt him, and that Hoare the painter, to whom the boy was indebted for many hints, wanted him to sit for a picture of the youthful Christ. Small wonder that if at the age of seventeen, after he had taken up oils instead of crayon, and had copied a certain number of old masters—Rembrandt, Reynolds, Titian—his thoughts turned to London, the Mecca of all British art pilgrims; and he wrote to his mother with the unblushing confidence of youth to say, he "would risk his reputation for the painting of a head"—the reputation of seventeen years—"with any save Sir Joshua." Gainsborough, Romney, and Hoppner were very much in evidence then, and the challenge would seem an odd one if it had been more than a lad's confidential boast to his mother.



**PLATE IV.—MISS GEORGINA LENNOX, AFTERWARDS
COUNTESS BATHURST
(In the collection of Earl Bathurst)**

Fine colouring and effective modelling are noticeable qualities in this, one of the painter's highly successful portraits. Here we have a painting that does not suffer from the costume of the sitter and a rather daring but completely fortunate effect in the contrast between the curtain background and the dress. The landscape is, as usual, quite conventional and uninspired.

So he came to London, entered himself as an Academy student, and took apartments in Leicester Fields, a district made popular by Sir Joshua. His father was behind him in all this; and as there was some money in hand, and a good send-off was necessary, an exhibition of the boy's work was arranged. To make it still more attractive, the worthy innkeeper included a collection of stuffed birds recently acquired. Between the amateurs of art and ornithology the exhibition fell to the ground; it was a failure unredeemed. Happily the funds were still sufficient to enable young Lawrence to take a house in Duke Street, St. James', and a studio in Jermyn Street near by. Hoare introduced him to Sir Joshua, for whom Lawrence's admiration was ever whole-hearted. The great painter looked at his work, and remarked, "Study nature—study nature." In years to come, looking at some of the famous early portraits, he remarked with the rare generosity that was one of his characteristics, "This young man has begun at a point of excellence where I left off."

Success did not come with Lawrence from the provinces; a few years were to pass before it visited him in London and elected to remain associated with his work as long as he lived. He found many friends, and was much at the house of Mrs. Siddons, whose portrait as Zara he had painted four years earlier. Her family

consisted then of two boys, Henry and George, and two daughters, Sarah Martha (Sally), then twelve years old, and Maria, aged eight. It was round the lives of these two girls that the strangest romance of Lawrence's life was to be woven. Both Sally and Maria were very attractive girls, with the fragile beauty that suggests early in life a tendency to consumption. John Kemble, another firm friend of Lawrence, was brother of Mrs. Siddons.

The first three years that the artist spent in London were not associated with any striking successes, but in 1790 a portrait of the Queen and Princess Amelia attracted considerable attention, and pleased King George III., who liked British artists best if they had not studied abroad. The royal patronage came at the right time. Already Lawrence was beginning to experience the financial difficulties that never left him as long as he lived, no matter what his income might be. He was making an allowance of £300 a year to his parents, and for the rest, his earnings "melted," says Allan Cunningham, "like snow on a thatch." King George was royal in his patronage, and expressed to the Royal Academy his wish that the young artist should be made an Associate forthwith. To this suggestion there was great opposition, and in the end the difficulty was solved by making the artist a Supplementary Associate, the only one in the Academy's history.

In 1792 great honours were achieved. The King appointed Lawrence to be his painter in ordinary, in succession to the late Sir Joshua Reynolds, passing over Romney, Hoppner, Opie, and others, whose claims to the honour were held to be greater. Nothing succeeds like success, and the Dilettanti Society, suspending their regulation that said nobody who had not crossed the Alps could join their brotherhood, elected Lawrence and made him one of their chosen painters. He painted full-length portraits of the King and Queen, to be sent as a present to the Emperor of China, moved from Duke Street to Bond Street, and raised his prices all round, charging one hundred guineas for full-length portraits, fifty for half-lengths, and twenty-five for heads. In 1794 he received the full honours of the Academy; a year later the poet Cowper sat to him, and was so pleased with the portrait that he invited the artist to Weston.



PLATE V.—MISS MARIA SIDDONS
(In the Wallace Collection)

The portrait of the lady with whom the artist was in love, and to whom he paid his vows, is a tribute to one side of the painter's art. He has contrived to put far more into it than the mere quality of attractiveness. The constitutional delicacy of the sitter, her refined and sensitive nature, are clearly expressed, and the colour harmony is attractive.

Soon after this Lawrence would seem to have had some grave doubt as to whether his gifts were completely expressed through the medium of portraiture. The dramatic sense was very strong in him—portrait-painting could not quite satisfy it. To be "master of the unlettered nameless faces" sufficed him no longer, and he started a series of big canvases that added more to his labours than his fame. Staying with his great friend Fuseli at a house in Pembrokeshire he saw the artist leaning over some rocks that stand above the Bay of Bristol. The pose gave him an idea for a big canvas known as "Satan," that was painted in 1797, found its way to the Duke of Norfolk's collection, and then to the Academy authorities. A year later he gave London its first view of "Coriolanus in the house of Aufidius," and followed this with other classical studies—Hamlet, Cato, and others, for which John Kemble sat.

In the opening days of 1798 Lawrence proposed to Maria Siddons, and the family's consent was given to the union. The engagement was brief. Within a few weeks he confessed to Mrs. Siddons that he had mistaken his feelings, and asked to be allowed to woo Sally Siddons instead. To this startling request Mrs. Siddons gave her consent, but kept the truth back from her husband and brothers. To Maria the shock was naturally a severe one, and for a consumptive girl, whose medical treatment consisted of confinement to the house and repeated bleedings, it may even have been a contributory cause of death. Be this as it may, and her

correspondence shows that she did recover from the first shock, the truth remains that she passed away in October of the same year, and on her death-bed implored her sister not to marry Lawrence. In "An Artist's Love Story," to which reference was made in an earlier chapter, the whole story of the engagement and its tragic *dénouement* is set out at length.

There seems no reason to doubt that Lawrence would have married Sally Siddons had he been able to do so, when Maria had passed from the scene, and that in years to come he was profoundly moved by her death. We know, too, that he died a bachelor, though the opportunities for marriage that came in his way were almost startling in their number; so it well may be that there were deeper springs of devotion and loyalty in his heart than were expressed by his pen. Sally Siddons died in 1803, when Lawrence was thirty-four years old, and had more than a quarter of a century to live. We may then give him the benefit of the doubts that have arisen in the minds of his contemporaries and biographers. Some still declare that Maria Siddons died of a broken heart, but the recently published correspondence throws a measure of doubt upon the statement; and fair-minded people will incline to the belief expressed by Allan Cunningham that "she died of a disease and a doctor."

While the social tragedy was affecting his private life, Lawrence was making great headway in his profession and out of it. In society he was an established favourite; he had a handsome face, a fluent and honeyed tongue, he wrote agreeable verses, and made facile sketches, which he would give freely to his friends and acquaintances. His most intimate associates were Smirke, the architect of the British Museum, Farrington and Fuseli the artists, John Kemble the actor, and Mrs. Siddons, whom he painted as Aspasia as well as Zara, though he never approached the beauty of the Gainsborough Siddons in our national collection. Some of his paintings went to engravers, who paid big prices for them; and though after moving from Bond Street to Greek Street he settled finally at 65 Russell Square, he never entertained on such a scale as his position would have justified. In fact he seldom or never gave a dinner party, excusing himself on the ground that he had neither wife nor mistress to superintend one. His prices rose steadily; he took half his fee in advance, but was always in debt and difficulty, and frequently forced to borrow at a high rate of interest. A devoted and conscientious worker, he always stood to his canvas, and seldom spoke to his sitter. At a first sitting he would draw the sitter's head, at the second he would start painting. He told friends that on one occasion he worked for thirty-seven hours consecutively, a marvellous feat for a man who never sat down to paint.

In the year 1801 Lawrence passed through a very critical time. The Princess of Wales sat to him at Montague House, Blackheath; he stayed in the house while at work on the portrait, spoke and wrote in rather indiscreet fashion, guiltless of everything save enthusiasm, and provoked a scandal of the first magnitude that alienated royal favour. The scandal grew and spread and was partly the subject of the commission of inquiry that sat several years later, and whose labours were known as "The Delicate Investigation." Lawrence was not even referred to in the report issued by the commissioners, but he made a difficult position worse by going out of the way publicly to declare his own and the Princess's innocence. For some time after the scandal was broached, the lady visitors to the studio in Russell Square were few and far between, and Lawrence was never as happy with men as with women. The genius of his brush was essentially feminine.

In the years wherein the sun of court favour was withheld, and fashionable women were less constant in their attention, he was nevertheless extremely busy, and was able to raise his prices in 1802, 1806, 1808, and 1810, the last date being the year of Hoppner's death. His other rivals included Beecher and Owen. For one who had comparatively few expenses, a large income, and neither parents, wife, nor children to support, the general position should have been very satisfactory, but nothing seemed able to keep Lawrence in easy financial circumstances. Financial difficulties followed him as they had followed his father before him; neither his great industry nor his raised prices availed to keep him from all manner of small troubles.



PLATE VI.—PORTRAIT OF A LADY
(In the Wallace Collection)

This portrait of an unknown sitter is as happily posed as it is unhappily dressed. One notices two points of interest—the fine painting of the head and the atmosphere of self-consciousness that is common to so many of the Lawrence portraits.

The early years of the nineteenth century passed without any very stirring events apart from the appointment of the Commission for the “Delicate Investigation.” Lawrence kept his place, earned a great deal of money, spent a great part before he received it, met some of the greatest men of the day—statesmen, soldiers, *literati*, ecclesiastics, and the rest—and was a frequent visitor to country houses where he took part in private theatricals. Indeed he may be said to have survived the loss of royal favour very creditably. As the years passed, subduing all recollection of the scandal associated with Montague House, Blackheath, his name was brought forward again in Court circles, where he was greatly missed by the women, if not by the men. There was no other painter who could combine the portrait with truth and flattery in such exquisite proportions that they conveyed an impression of youth and beauty while stating all essential truths. The truth was well summed up by one of Sir Thomas’s biographers who wrote: “Lawrence lavished summer colours upon autumn and on winter, and gave to declining years the vigour of the life of youth.”

It had long been an ambition of the painter to visit Paris, and when in 1814 the entrance of the allied armies into the French capital opened it to travellers, Lawrence was prompt to take advantage of the situation. Now after many years he hoped to see the famous collection in the Louvre, enriched as it had been of late years by the thefts of Marshal Soult and others of Napoleon’s generals with a *flair* for works of art. But before he could complete his work the painter was summoned back to London. On the intervention of the first Marquis of Londonderry, the Prince Regent had taken the proper and charitable view of the Montague House affair.

Lawrence was commissioned to paint for Windsor Castle a commemoration gallery of those who had restored the Bourbons. The sitters chosen were the Emperor of Russia, the King of Prussia, Blücher, and Hetman Platoff. The portraits were painted, and at about the same time, Wellington and Metternich sat to the painter. Lawrence recovered all the ground he had lost, and gained fresh honours in rapid succession. In the year of Waterloo he painted the portrait of the Prince Regent, who knighted him; in 1817 he painted at Claremont the portrait of the Princess Charlotte. To these years his biographers trace the beginning of his relations with Mrs. Wolfe, wife of a diplomat accredited to this country. Cunningham refers to her as the wife of a Danish Consul, Mr. Knapp says she was the wife of the German Ambassador, but the point is not worth investigating. Suffice it she was a clever, attractive woman, separated from her husband, and the artist seems to have established with her intimate but platonic relations. He was devoted to her, but, then, he had a very susceptible heart. The friendship continued until the death of the lady, whom the artist survived only a few months.

In 1818 a further and greater honour than any that had come his way hitherto was conferred upon Sir Thomas. He was sent to Aix-la-Chapelle to paint members of the Congress then sitting there, with instructions to proceed to Vienna and Rome. An allowance of one thousand a year for travelling expenses made the commission still more attractive, and the artist, free at last to travel and to work in the most stimulating surroundings Europe could provide, remained away from England for a year and a half. In his work he distinguished himself. His sitters included Emperor Francis of Austria, Louis XVIII., Charles X., Archduke Charles, Metternich, Techernicheff, Ouvaroff, Hardenberg, Nesselrode, Baron Gentz, Earl Bathurst, Lord Liverpool, the Marquis of Londonderry, the Duke of Cambridge, and Mr. Canning. In Rome the aged Pontiff Pius VII. gave him nine sittings, and he painted the portrait of the great Cardinal Gonsalvi, “the Pitt of Rome.” But it was not only to paint that he went to the Eternal City; he had much to learn, and some of the letters he wrote to London during his stay are remarkable for their sound judgment and insight. The supreme master of art for him was Michael Angelo, following him Raphael, Correggio, Titian, Sir Joshua, and perhaps J. M. W. Turner came in the order named. To the end Lawrence was faithful in his devotion to the art of the first President of the R.A. “I don’t see why British artists wish to travel abroad when we have Sir Joshua in England,” he said in his untravelled days. He was not heard to express this opinion again in the years when he had crossed “the narrow seas.” Eighteen months of foreign travel did much for him; he brought a wider mind and a bigger intelligence home with him; to say nothing of a collection of gifts from European rulers and honours from many academies of art. From the social standpoint it is hard to believe that life could have given more than it gave in 1818-19.

Lawrence was able to visit several Italian cities, and returned to London at the end of his eighteen months’ sojourn in the country, to find that Benjamin West had just died, and that he had been elected to succeed him as President of the Royal Academy. His attitude was dignified. “There are,” he said, “others better qualified to be President; I shall, however, discharge the duties as well and wisely as I can. I shall be true to the Academy and, in my intentions, just and impartial.” In giving his consent to Lawrence’s election, King George IV. presented the new P.R.A. with a gold chain and medal. King George also sat to him,^[1] and was heard to say that Lawrence was “a well-bred gentleman.”

[1] The portrait in the Wallace Collection reproduced here.

In many respects the Academy chose wisely. Sir Thomas was a man who had moved and still moved in the highest social circles, whose pleasant manners made friends and conciliated foes; he was very popular with all save the most critical of contemporary artists. But, on the other hand, he was never a great teacher, and his addresses to the students were of little worth. He would seem to have entertained the idea of running a studio after the old Italian fashion; perhaps he had learned about it in Rome. There would have been a certain number of student apprentices to prepare the work, and he would have trained the cleverest among them to do still more. Unfortunately there was not enough money to start the required establishment; not all the foreign travel, the handsome presents, and the considerable fees had availed to stem the chronic leakage in the exchequer, and the scheme came to nothing. Sir Thomas resumed his place in London life, bringing an enhanced reputation; and all the old scandals being quite forgotten, the house in Russell Square was thronged with fair women who trusted to the artist, and not in vain, to make them fairer still. His portrait of Lady Blessington, reproduced here, called for recognition from Lord Byron in the stanzas beginning—

“Were I now as I was, I had sung
What Lawrence has painted so well.”

Both Byron and Sir Walter Scott spoke of the social graces of Sir Thomas. His manners would seem to have been distinguished, though his taste, generally correct, was not always above suspicion.



**PLATE VII.—PORTRAIT OF COUNTESS BLESSINGTON
(In the Wallace Collection)**

This portrait is one by which the painter is best known, and is the singularly felicitous expression of a very beautiful woman. It reveals the strength, and perhaps a little of the weakness, of the artist, and made a great sensation when first exhibited in London, moving Lord Byron to an expression of praise, to which brief reference is made in the text.

In 1825 he was called to Paris, where he painted Charles X., the Dauphin, and others, and received the title of Chevalier of the Legion of Honour. The Academies of St. Luke in Rome, and those of Florence, Venice, Bologna, Turin, Vienna, and Copenhagen, had given him honorary memberships; the Fine Arts Academy of America had done the same, and there were other bodies that had expressed their sentiments in similar form.

As he approached his sixtieth year, Sir Thomas would seem to have become conscious of failing health and the double burden of old age and loneliness. He had acquired every honour within his grasp, but he had lost his best friends through death, and monetary worries still troubled him. This last fact is the more surprising, because his prices were now very high indeed. They ranged from two hundred guineas for a head to seven hundred for an “extra length portrait,” and even at these high prices there was no lack of patronage. He had no extravagances of a discreditable kind, but he could not resist the chance of buying a fine drawing, whether old or new, and as, when his collection was sold after his death for twenty thousand pounds, it was said to have fetched far less than it cost, one large source of expenditure is accounted for. Then again the President was a singularly generous man, who could not refuse an appeal, and some of those who were round him were quick to take advantage of his weakness. Making every allowance for his expenditure as collector and philanthropist, it is hard to understand why he could earn so much and have so little. Even when he painted the portrait of Sir Robert Peel he wrote letters asking for the money before the work was finished.

Happily the statesman was a good and understanding friend; not only did he entertain the artist very frequently, but he commissioned him to paint a gallery of distinguished Englishmen for his country house—a commission the painter did not live to execute.

In the late twenties of the nineteenth century, Sir Thomas discovered a serious state of mind and became a churchman. The death of Mrs. Wolfe, to whom reference has been made, in the year 1829, grieved him so deeply that he laid aside his brush for a month. The Irish Academy gave him its honorary membership, and the city of Bristol, in which he was born, gave its freedom, and these were the last of his honours. Those about him noted an ever-increasing feebleness, a failing interest in life, though he stuck manfully to his duty, and early in January 1830 the end came. He was buried in St. Paul's Cathedral by the side of Reynolds and Benjamin West. All the Academicians attended, scores of the aristocracy sent mourning coaches, and Sir Robert Peel was among the pall-bearers.

III THE PAINTER'S WORK

If in our estimate of a man's work we could pause to consider the difficulties under which the work was accomplished, there would be much to say for many of those who are lightly esteemed. But in criticism there are no extenuating circumstances; the artist, whether he work with words or pigment, notes or marble, is judged on his merits with as much justice as is ours to command. No judgment is final. John Ruskin described a Whistler nocturne as "a pot of paint flung in the public's face," but we value these nocturnes even more highly than Ruskin's own faultless prose. We know that the critic was better equipped to write than to judge, and we have reversed his verdict. The history of all art, from the work of the early Tuscan and Umbrian painters, with their backgrounds of gold, down to the time of the French impressionists, who bring the wide spaces of air, sky, and sea on to their canvas, is the history of a constantly changing verdict. The men most heartily acclaimed by their contemporaries have often failed in their appeal to succeeding generations, while in other cases "the stone that the builder rejected has become the corner head-stone."

As far as Sir Thomas Lawrence is concerned, it is well to remember that his first reputation was not made by artists, but by people whose acquaintance with the essentials of a great and enduring art is ever of the slightest. His gifts were many and attractive, but they could never have deceived the men who were his contemporaries, although Reynolds' generous criticism might justify the idea that they did. Fuseli after declaring that he painted eyes as well as Titian, could find no other praise. Opie said, "Lawrence made coxcombs of his sitters, and his sitters made a coxcomb of Lawrence," but then Opie, together with Romney, Hoppner, and others, had been passed over by King George III. when in 1792 he appointed Lawrence to be his Painter in Ordinary, in place of Sir Joshua deceased. Compared with his great contemporaries, we see at once that Sir Thomas Lawrence was by no means a great colourist, he had no marked skill in composition, the effect of more than one figure on his canvas is seldom pleasing, his backgrounds were never interesting or even distinctive. That he was handicapped by the absurd and artificial dress convention of his day is undeniable, but he was hardly as happy in dealing with it as were some of his contemporaries. Why then, we may ask ourselves, was Lawrence a favourite artist from the days when as a little boy he made crayon drawings of visitors to his father's inn, down to the time when he was sent on a tour of the chief European capitals to paint Kings, Kaiser, and Pope? Why, while artists remained critical and were even grudging in the measure of justice they meted out to him did all the wealthy patrons of art prefer his studio to that of his contemporaries, face the heavy and constantly increasing charges without protest, and rejoice in the possession of the canvas that his brush had covered? The reason is not far to seek.



PLATE VIII.—KING GEORGE IV.
(In the Wallace Collection)

This portrait, painted in the last years of the artist's life, when he was President of the Royal Academy, is a notable study, despite its rather absurd proportions and artificial

background. The figure is rather stiffly posed if carefully observed, the brushwork highly skilled. It was painted when Sir Thomas had returned from the Continent, after a careful and discriminating study of the Italian Masters.

Lawrence looked upon his sitters with an eye that magnified all points of beauty or attraction and passed over the failings, the blemishes, the points that in more conscientious eyes might have made a portrait true rather than merely attractive. It was but necessary to have the beginnings of beauty, to have some attractive features, and Lawrence would go to them instinctively, they would be the foundation of his study, other points of less attraction would fade from the representation on canvas. It was his singular gift, not only to see beauty, but to pick out the aspects of the sitter that would give the most attractive result possible without absolutely rank flattery or deception.

Naturally enough when this gift became recognised the artist's studio was thronged by the prettiest women in London. Whatever their beauty, Lawrence would interpret it in terms of the utmost generosity. The charms transferred to canvas to defy the ravages of time were safe to be at least a little in excess of those that existed in the sitter. Praise and patronage are notoriously more difficult to fight against than neglect, and as time went on Sir Thomas turned more and more to the task of perfecting prettiness. The female heads do not suffer from this—perhaps they are the better for it—but the male ones do; in place of strength we find effeminacy, and many of his men sitters narrowly escaped the charge of being pretty. Allan Cunningham does not hesitate to express his conviction that Lawrence became weaker and more effeminate of set purpose because he found that by doing so he kept his dangerous rival Hoppner at bay. This marks the difference between Reynolds and Lawrence, for the first named was strengthened by the rivalry of Romney; at least Lawrence himself thought that some of Sir Joshua's finest efforts were produced by Romney's rivalry.

After 1810, when the danger of this competition had passed with Hoppner's death, Lawrence's style was set. France and Italy came too late to strengthen a man who in so many ways was the spoilt child of fortune. Another reason for his weakness may be found in the desire to please. When he painted women he flattered them; when he talked to them he did the same. His children have a certain self-consciousness that does not belong to the children of Sir Joshua and Gainsborough; they can't help posing and looking at their best, for their parents and relatives may have been expected to appreciate a little pose. Where men are concerned the strength of Lawrence lay in the masterful character of the sitters themselves, rather than in any force of hand or brain. Had he been called upon to paint common-place types, his reputation would hardly have been what it is to-day, but his sitters were the pick of the generation, men who played no small part in deciding the fate of Europe at one of the most critical periods of history. Reference has been made already to some of the greatest; of the others, he was extremely successful with John Kemble, John Wilson Croker, Curran, Sir James Mackintosh, and Lord Thurlow, this last portrait being the one at which, according to his own account, he laboured for thirty-seven hours without stopping or sitting down. Among his most successful portraits of fair women may be mentioned those of the Duchesses of Sutherland and Gloucester, Mrs. Arbuthnot, the Countess of Charlemont and children, the Countess Grey, Lady Ellenborough, Lady Leinster, Lady Emily Cowper, Lady Elizabeth Leveson-Gower, Miss Croker, and Lady Blessington. This is no more than a random selection; his portraits and drawings of fair women are numbered by the hundred.

Lawrence was a man who was prompt to take advantage of the opportunities that were showered upon him. One of his critics said of him, "His manners please everybody, save the two or three who look to the grain rather than the varnish." This is very harsh and severe, for it need have occasioned no surprise had Lawrence been self-conscious and awkward, overbearing, or even pompous. His success might well have turned his head, and there are indeed occasions when his taste might certainly have been impeached; but, all things considered, he preserved a wonderfully level head, and in the latter days, when he was in as much social demand as anybody in London, he remained faithful to his brush—so faithful, that the work coming from his studio was always his own. He employed no assistants, though we have seen that he had the idea at one time of keeping something like a school in his own house. In private life he was fairly abstemious, he had no vices, nor did any young painter appeal in vain to him for advice or encouragement. Unfortunately those who sat at his feet learned the secret of his weakness rather than his strength, and a study of a man or a woman after Lawrence is something that defies criticism within the limits of courtesy, while showing that there was more in Lawrence himself than the keenest of his critics would always care to admit.

His colour was never equal to that of Reynolds, but his pictures have faced the time test better; the secret of the iridescent glaze that the first President of the R.A. could lend to a canvas was apparently unknown to Lawrence. On his death nearly one hundred canvases were exhibited at the British Institute, and his popularity may be gauged from the result of the exhibition, which yielded three thousand pounds, the money being given to his nieces. His tastes in art were catholic, and his love of attractive drawings has been referred to. It was said by some that the £20,000 the collection yielded was less by far than it had cost, but this, as far as the writer can ascertain, is conjecture. He had drawings of unequal merit, the best being by Michael Angelo and Raphael, and these went to Oxford University. His Italian journey quickened the best side of Lawrence, and justifies the regret that he was not able to visit Italy as a lad. His instinct for good work was quick and true; he never hesitated for long between the best and the second best, giving the preference to Michael Angelo as soon as he had compared his work in Rome with that of Raphael. In the last years of his life he gave up the creamy white of his earlier canvases for a pure white, taking the hint from the old Venetian masters, by whom he was deeply impressed. He exhibited over three hundred portraits, and painted many that were not for exhibition. To-day he may be seen at his best in Windsor Castle, but London claims some of his successful canvases.

Study and the life of Sir Thomas Lawrence begins and ends on the note of wonder. It is easy to point out his shortcomings, but it is far more difficult to account for his merits when we remember that he started to earn his family's living before he was seven years old, and received a public recognition at the age of sixteen for work completed two years before. He had no student life in the true sense of the term, no painstaking teacher, only one or two friends to give him hints more or less valuable. His strength lay in accurate draughtsmanship and a wonderfully quick eye for effect, his weakness in the effeminacy of his handling, the indifference to minor details of composition, and the general inferiority of his colour sense to that of his great

contemporaries. But from a lad who was self-taught and never ventured to handle colours until he was seventeen, nothing better could be expected, and something not as good might well have been pardoned. Finally, it may be suggested that while Sir Thomas Lawrence will never take equal rank with the greatest of his contemporaries, while Reynolds, Gainsborough, Hoppner, and others will take precedence of him, his best work will always command a large measure of genuine admiration. It will not fail to attract the attention of the student and the connoisseur, while his life must be full of interest to those who realise how talents that were not of the highest rank did almost as much for Lawrence as greater gifts did for Velazquez, Rubens, Hans Holbein the younger, and others whose brushes were a powerful aid to diplomacy in days past.

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