

Artwork of the Month May 2020

Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball, William Etty (1787 -1850)



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*The City of York has produced a surprising number of significant artists, including John Flaxman, Albert Moore and his brother the marine and landscape painter Henry Moore, and Henry Scott Tuke. However the painter most closely associated with the City is William Etty, whose statue stands outside the Art Gallery, and who is buried in St Olave's Churchyard. Here **Margaret May**, who has an MA in the History of Art from the University of York, and a special interest in Gainsborough, shares with us a taster of the talk she will give, once the Gallery re-opens, on one of Etty's finest and most popular paintings.*

Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball (a portrait of Mary and Charlotte Williams-Wynn), 1833; acquired 2009 with Art Fund support and a grant from the Friends of £44,000, the largest made by the Friends up to that time.

William Etty (1787 -1850)

I am writing this in the hope that it will not be too long before we will be able to meet in the Burton gallery and together focus our attention on this painting!

The reason I chose it is perhaps a little eccentric. I was present when Louise Wheatley talked about *British American Scarecrow* by Mohammed Sami, which the Friends had purchased for the Gallery and which I had admired when it was exhibited as part of the exhibition [*The Sea is the Limit*](#).

In the discussion which followed her presentation, someone mentioned that Sami, an Iraqi refugee, had to retrain as an artist in the Western tradition. This led me to glance at the other pictures nearby, and my eye was caught by a painting that in terms of its composition struck me as a mirror image of Sami's work. That painting turned out to be: *Preparing for the Fancy Dress Ball*.

When I looked further into the notion of the composition of a painting, I came across the idea that goes back to the ancient Greeks of 'the Golden Section' or 'Golden Ratio', new to me, but well known to art historians (the ratio of approximately 1 to 1.618, the use of which in artworks has been found aesthetically pleasing). As I plan to illustrate in my talk, the application of this idea to the two paintings does suggest that these two near neighbours in the Burton gallery are mirror images of one another. Another element of Etty's composition which particularly interested me is the way that the portrait of Mary is framed by the body and arm of Charlotte who invites the viewer to look at Mary, and this encouraged me – wrongly! – to assume that Mary was the unmarried sister and Charlotte already married.

Reading further on William Etty, I came upon the description of him as 'a child of the Royal Academy', and this has led me to focus attention on his training and development as an artist as well as on the influence of the Royal Academy on the art world in Britain at that time. *Preparing for the Fancy Dress Ball* was selected for exhibition at the Royal Academy

in 1835, one of the eight (the maximum number permitted) submitted by Etty, who had been elected a Royal Academician in 1828, beating Constable. Traditional art theory at the time promoted a particular view of the hierarchy of artistic merit, a view which was shared by Etty and which valued 'history painting' (paintings with a significant subject involving the human figure, including religious, mythological and allegorical scenes) above all others.

Etty had entered the Royal Academy Schools in 1807, while also spending a year in the studios of the successful portraitist Thomas Lawrence, who was elected President of the Royal Academy in 1820, a position he held until his death in 1830. During Etty's first year, John Opie RA ("The Cornish Wonder" and from 1805 elected Professor of Painting at the Royal Academy) delivered lectures to the students on colouring, and these lectures were subsequently published. They make interesting reading not least because Etty came to be greatly admired by his contemporaries for his use of colour. As he listened, he would no doubt have taken to heart that he should associate colour with our ideas of character; arrange colours such that each should have a principal and a few subordinate masses of unequal sizes and irregular shapes; and balance and harmonise colours by judiciously contrasting their opposites. It is stimulating to look at Etty's use of colour in *Preparing for the Fancy Dress Ball*, and to judge how far Opie's precepts influenced him some twenty-five years later.

In passing it may be noted that in his works Opie himself does not seem to have followed his own guidance very closely. His painting [*The Surprise*](#) is notable for its very restricted use of colour, and even [*The Assassination of Rizzio*](#), which made him famous, has a somewhat limited palette. Opie, however, greatly admired the colouring of Titian and Rubens, a judgement which Etty later enthusiastically endorsed while undertaking his Grand Tour from 1822 to 1824.

Finally, I plan to compare what is in effect a double portrait of Charlotte and Mary with other such portraits: with Thomas Gainsborough's [*The Linley Sisters \(1772\)*](#) and Thomas Lawrence's [*The Fullerton Sisters*](#) both of which depict two sisters but in strikingly different ways, and also with George Hayter's [*Princess Victoria*](#) exhibited at the RA in 1833, the same year in which Etty painted Charlotte and Mary

I will suggest that George Hayter's approach to portraiture is very different from Etty's, particularly in the application of colour to the cheeks and lips.

I look forward to meeting some of you who have read this far, in the Burton Gallery and in person – I hope later this year.

Margaret May
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