

High Society: British Female Portraiture of the Eighteenth Century

Report

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Portraiture has been used throughout history, not least during the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, not only as a physical record of a person's likeness, but also as an attempt in some way to convey the personality, individuality, and emotional state of the subject. This report will focus on a topic that has become important to me while writing my dissertation: eighteenth-century female portraiture, and what it can reveal about gender stereotypes and the female experience.

My dissertation will focus on the reinterpretation of the French Rococo by contemporary artists; one such artist I study ([Ewa Juskiewicz](#)) centres her oeuvre around the reimagining of European female portraiture of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Her key motivation is to remodel these works in order to challenge the gender conventions and ideals of beauty that often removed women's autonomy from such portraits.

Portraits, whilst seemingly depicting a singular person and frame of mind, can however have a conscious, or unconscious, multi-layered agenda which dictates how a person is portrayed. This is a fascinating matter to consider, especially within the context of the Enlightenment. In a period where new thoughts on religion, science, and even the inner self challenged the status quo, portraits can uncover far more about societal changes and stereotypes than we might realise.

This is never truer than with the female experience of portraiture, which imposed far more traditional, constraining and aesthetically driven conventions. With this idea in mind, I have chosen to assess two female portraits from the York Art Gallery collection: [*Elizabeth Betts \(Mrs Benjamin Hoadly\)*](#), (1741: fig. 1 below p. 11) by William Hogarth, and [*Jean Abercromby, Mrs Morison of Haddo*](#) (1767: fig. 2) by Allan Ramsay. I chose these two case studies as they were painted by two prominent artist contemporaries who yet displayed extremely different styles in their depiction of middle-class women. Within these two portraits, we can observe some important similarities in how women were portrayed in society portraiture during this period, but also key differences that demonstrate contradictory conventions of beauty and ideas of British femininity.

Elizabeth Betts was one of only a few portraits that Hogarth painted in the mid 1700s. He turned to portraiture largely as a response to the arrival of fashionable French and Italian portrait painters in Britain, such as the likes of Charles-André van Loo and Andrea Soldi.¹ Some art historians have commented that we can observe the development of an arguably more bravura style within Hogarth's work during this decade, a style reminiscent of the Baroque and possibly in response to the arrival of these European portraitists.² Beginning full scale with his portrait of [*Captain Thomas Coram*](#) in 1740, Hogarth moved on to head and shoulder portraits, as we see here with *Elizabeth Betts*.

We can see the vibrant, bravura quality of the *Elizabeth Betts* portrait, which, in comparison to *Jean Abercromby*, displays much less delicacy, both in the use of brushwork and within the composition itself. In

¹ Roy Strong, *The British Portraits, 1660-1960* (ACC Art Books: Woodbridge, 1991): 174.

² Tate Gallery, *The Tate Gallery: An Illustrated Companion to the National Collections of British & Modern Foreign Art* (London: Tate Gallery, 1979): 15.

comparison to the more enclosed, restrained pose of Jean, where her arms are crossed and leaning on a surface, Elizabeth's arms are down at her side, her chest is broad and open, and her face is up turned to the right-hand side. This more confident, comfortable pose may be a result of Hogarth's own intimate relationship with Elizabeth and her family. In comparison to other contemporary portrait painters, such as Gainsborough, Reynolds and Ramsay himself, Hogarth did not tend to paint aristocracy. His portraits tended to be of the professional middle class, usually those within his own inner circle.³ Hogarth was friends with both the Betts and also the Hoadly family into which Elizabeth married, with this portrait being a pendant pair with a [painting of her husband](#), Dr Benjamin Hoadly, also painted in the early 1740s.

Interestingly, at first glance *Elizabeth Betts* may appear to be a marital portrait. Elizabeth is shown to be in the bloom of youth; her hair is free flowing, and she wears an open-necked dress that draws attention to her smooth, unlined skin, highlighting her youth and fairness. She wears pearls in her hair, a typical sign of virtue, and a vase of what appear to be carnations sits behind her right shoulder. While Hogarth's motivation behind the placement of this vase has never been determined, it is fascinating to note that a vase of carnations often symbolised divine love within North Italian Renaissance painting. Additionally, depicting a woman with a 'pink' (a pink carnation or other pink flower) was a common trait of marital or betrothal portraiture in the Low Countries during the early modern period (as seen in these portraits by [Hans Memling](#) and [Rembrandt](#)).⁴ However, despite these suggestions of love

³ Strong, *The British Portraits*, 180.

⁴ Jennifer Meagher, "Botanical Imagery in European Painting." The Met, August 2007, accessed May 18, 2021, https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/bota/hd_bota.htm#:~:text=A%20vase%20of%20carnations%2C%20indicating,relative%2C%20on%20her%20wedding%20day.

and marriage, this image was actually painted sometime after Elizabeth's death. This makes it a posthumous depiction that seemingly pays a touching tribute to both the patron's wife and a woman with whom Hogarth himself was acquainted.

Another reason that might surprise us at the posthumous status of this image is the fact that Elizabeth is depicted with such vitality and health. She is solid and hearty with rosy cheeks, a typical example of the Hogarthian woman who usually appeared more physically imposing than the pale delicate sitters that contemporaries such as Reynolds tended to portray. Sadly, this more unconventional way of painting his subjects meant Hogarth's portraits were initially criticised as unfashionable. William Somerville, a contemporary poet taunted him as a 'burlesque painter,'⁵ and in his own 1753 book, *Analysis of Beauty*, Hogarth bitterly bemoaned that a 'whole nest of Phizmongers [face painters]' criticised his portraits of women as 'harlots.'⁶

This criticism of Hogarth for painting his women as 'harlots' brings us to a more extensive examination of eighteenth-century conventions of beauty. The art historian Caroline Palmer has explored the controversy of the 'cosmetik.' She has explored the prejudice against women who painted their faces with cosmetics, and the artists who painted their subjects in a cosmetic manner, with both parties often using the same pigments and colours. Within English society, cosmetics were traditionally viewed as representing artificiality and deception, with whiteness and purity of skin viewed as a demonstration of both physical

⁵ Strong, *The British Portraits*, 178.

⁶ William Hogarth, *The Analysis of Beauty: Written with a View of Fixing the Fluctuating Ideas of Test* (J. Reeves: London, 1753): 218.

and moral wellbeing.⁷ Whilst some colour was favoured to exhibit health, too much red was seen as coarse, reminiscent of prostitutes or even worse, the French aristocracy. While in England, excessive red could be seen as inappropriate and low-class, in eighteenth-century France heavy rouge was fashionable amongst the aristocracy or 'beau monde'.⁸

Tensions between the French and British (already at their height during this period with the onset of the Seven Years War) were exemplified through both tastes in art and opinions on the 'proper' appearance of women. However, criticism could be contradictory. While French women's uses of rouge were seen by the British as 'whorish and brotherlous painting',⁹ the French also criticised the growing use of 'terrible vermilion'¹⁰ on portraits of English ladies from the mid 1700s. It seems that in both cultures, portraits that were seen as 'cosmeticised,' and any depictions of women which were not seen to fit the appropriate aesthetic mould were condemned.

Interestingly, Allan Ramsay was known to underlay his sitter's faces in vermilion, a method he picked up from his training in Italy, which was used to help preserve flesh tones.¹¹ However, this appears not to have been excessive, and, in contrast to Hogarth's, Ramsay's women were usually seen as fashionable and socially acceptable, largely because they were seen to embody more elegance and delicacy.¹² The renowned eighteenth-century writer and art historian, Horace Walpole, said of

⁷ Caroline Palmer, "Brazen Cheek: Face-Painters in Late Eighteenth-Century England," *Oxford Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (2008): 196-204, accessed May 18 2021, <http://www.jstor.org.libproxy.york.ac.uk/stable/20108020>.

⁸ Palmer, "Brazen Cheek," 204-205.

⁹ Philip Stubbes, *The Anatomie of Abuses*, (1583), quoted in Neville Williams, *Powder and Paint: A History of the Englishwoman's Toilet* (Longmans and Green: London, 1957): 3.

¹⁰ Jean-André Rouquet, *The Present State of the Arts in England* (London, 1755): 48-49, quoted in Palmer, "Brazen Cheek," 205.

¹¹ Jane Turner, "Allan Ramsay," in *The Dictionary of Art*, vol. 25 (New York: Grove, 1996): 882.

¹² James L. Caw, "Allan Ramsay, Portrait Painter (1713-1784)," in *The Twenty Fifth Volume of the Walpole Society, 1936-7* (Oxford, 1937): 78-79.

Ramsay that he excelled even the great Reynolds as a painter of women, for while '[Reynolds] is bold, and has a kind of tempestuous colouring, yet with dignity and grace; [Ramsay] is all delicacy.'¹³

This 'delicacy,' which Ramsay was commended for bringing to the society portrait, was itself influenced by contemporary French artists such as Georges de La Tour and François-Hubert Drouais. Ramsay also incorporated some Italian techniques which he learnt from his training in both Rome and Naples, where he studied under the Baroque history painter, Francesco Solimena.¹⁴ However, Ramsay became most successful for his portrayal of the Scottish nobility and was even appointed as Principal Painter to George III before injury forced him into retirement in 1773.¹⁵ While he was influenced by the French style, what he was most praised for was his naturalism and intimate connection with the sitter, something which supposedly separated him from the 'artificial' nature of the French beau monde.¹⁶

This psychological and emotional engagement with the sitter might well be a direct result of the Enlightenment, especially the Enlightenment within Scotland. The Scottish Enlightenment afforded women a more elevated role within society, not just for their social role in maintaining the family structure, but also a certain feminine mentality, a 'frame of mind.' Stana Nenadic has argued that the late Enlightenment emphasised a certain 'frame of mind' and 'common sense' that was particularly applied to women, as it was seen to complement 'male rationality,' and natural feminine passivity. She describes how a rising trend for portraits of the professional and upper classes coincided with a

¹³ Horace Walpole, letter to Sir David Dalrymple, February 25, 1759, quoted in James L. Caw, "Allan Ramsay," 61.

¹⁴ Strong, *The British Portraits*, 165.

¹⁵ Turner, "Allan Ramsay," 881.

¹⁶ Caw, "Allan Ramsay," 78.

trend for the 'portrait of sensibility.' This kind of portrait was normally put on display in family rooms associated with the female sphere (such as the drawing room, parlour, or bedroom) with its aim to create an intimate engagement with whoever viewed it, a kind of visual aid to creating a calm, spiritual presence within the home.¹⁷

We might then see *Jean Abercromby* as such a 'portrait of sensibility.' Jean looks straight out at the viewer, the light falling predominantly on her face, highlighting the whites of her eyes which draw the viewer's focus. This is perhaps what Nenadic calls the 'liquid eyes' of the women of the portrait of sensibility.¹⁸ Jean's background is entirely in shadow, and whilst her dress is an ostentatious display of blue silk and highly elaborately woven lace, her pose appears quite natural and gentle, if a little restrained.

In comparison to *Elizabeth Betts*, we do believe this portrait to have been painted on the occasion of Jean's marriage to Captain George Morison of Haddo that same year. Jean was herself from upper-class Scottish society: the daughter of General James Abercromby of Glassaugh, Banffshire, she would later go on to marry Admiral Robert Duff of Loggie after her first husband's death. This portrait would be passed down through her daughter's family until it came into the collection of James Duff, second Earl of Fife, who amassed an impressive collection of artworks at Duff House.

The fact that this is a marital portrait can tell us a great deal about how Jean was purposefully portrayed, and what was intentionally revealed (and not revealed) about her character. While portraits were certainly on

¹⁷ Stana Nenadic, "The Enlightenment in Scotland and the popular passion for portraits," *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 21, no. 2 (1998): 178-188.

¹⁸ Nenadic, "The Enlightenment," 190.

the rise in the eighteenth century amongst the middling and upper classes, they were still traditionally commissioned at a pivotal moment in a person's lifetime. Such portraits also developed a specific purpose during the eighteenth-century, as they became important instruments of modern individualism and for embracing this new Enlightened 'frame of mind.' Within such portrayals, the individual could express autonomy by engaging in an act of 'self-fashioning.' This involved a construction of their appearance by including various locations, manners, poses, or costumes into their portrait which would associate them with or disassociate them from a recognised stereotype. Such appearances could be discussed with the artist, or were obvious choices depending on the social context.¹⁹

For instance, Allan Ramsay painted three particular half-length portraits of British society women during the 1760s, of which *Jean Abercromby* is one. The other two are *Maria Gunning, Countess of Coventry* and *Mary Maxwell, Duchess of Sutherland*, both painted around 1760. All three images follow the same compositional pattern as Ramsay's famous 1759 portrait of his wife, [*Margaret Lindsay of Evelick*](#). In all three images, the sitter holds the same pose of the right arm resting on a surface with a hand concealed. In *Jean* we even see the same shadowed window shutter on the left behind the sitter as in *Margaret Lindsay*. There are several similarities between *Margaret* and *Jean*. As well as having an identical background and very similar composition, with the sitter's face turned to the right to stare out at the viewer, both women wear their hair up in a blue ribbon, a strand of which falls just over the hairline. Both women also wear intricately woven lace shawls and sleeves. While of

¹⁹ Kate Ketford, "Gender and the Marital Portrait in Eighteenth-Century England: 'A Sort of Sex in Souls,'" *British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies* 27, no. 1 (2004): 100.

course this is reflective of contemporary fashions, it does also tell us something about how Ramsay chose to depict his women. While individualism may have been influential in the choice to depict the subjects with piercing, outward gazes (hence conveying more intimate engagement) there is little deviation in the composition and dress. Such poses, dress, and manner clearly place them within a specific role which society has fashioned for them. As Kate Kefford has keenly argued, while such portraits aimed to convey individualism, they also expressed ideals of gender relations and stereotypes, aiming also to uphold societal norms and win acceptance and approval from the audience.²⁰

In comparison with the treatment of men, where individual career, education, and rank were often conveyed to make their portraits more diverse, depictions of female subjects enjoyed far less divergence. Visual expression of the same kind of autonomy as enjoyed by men was not usually employed. Women were generally forbidden careers, could not legally own property, and any attempt to associate them in a field away from the role of mother, wife, or hostess, would usually be seen as offensive. Kefford stresses that all this leads to female portraits of this time taking on a distinct 'private' nature, whereas we are given little insight into the sitter's personality or life aside from those duties imposed on her by society.²¹

To conclude, both these works present dual ideas about female identity in the eighteenth-century. They can enlighten us about such things as contradictory conventions concerning female beauty (as influenced by French-British relations) and ideas of Enlightenment individualism and

²⁰ Kefford, "Gender and the Marital Portrait," 100.

²¹ Kefford, "Gender and the Marital Portrait," 101-103.

female sensibility. However, they also construct an image of the female sitter which is intentionally private, restrained, and somewhat depersonalised. In both images there is little to educate us about these individual women's lives, interests, or formal rank, beyond their clothing which indicates a fairly wealthy status. The emphasis is placed on their physical appearance, expression and adornment. While the Enlightenment claimed to promulgate ideas of autonomy and individualism, within these portraits the Enlightenment arguably only went so far as to grant these subjects a degree of emotional engagement and intimacy. These women were generally expected to communicate 'common sense,' 'sensibility,' and emotional depth, but are still held to those stalwart stereotypes which gave them little to no role outside the domestic realm. To this day there is still much we do not know about the two women depicted here. The vase of flowers behind *Elizabeth* (a notably unusual addition to Hogarth pendant images) has never been fully explained. While *Jean* is displayed in elaborate embroidery which may demonstrate her aptitude at needlework, we are given no other indications of her abilities. It is interesting to think that while these works were painted during a period where society underwent great changes in ideas of liberalism and free thought, women were still generally prevented from revealing their true selves within portraiture. In the last resort, these are portraits of the eighteenth-century woman, not portraits of the eighteenth-century individual.

Illustrations



Fig. 1 – William Hogarth, *Elizabeth Betts (Mrs Benjamin Hoadly)*, 1741.



Fig. 2 – Allan Ramsay, *Jean Abercromby, Mrs Morison of Haddo*, 1767.

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