

# A Portrait Sitting

## Visiting the Artist's Studio

### The Artist at Home



Once you had chosen which artist would paint your portrait, you would probably visit them at home where their studio would be located. Portraitists had to invest a large proportion of their income in suitable premises. A well-appointed house in a fashionable street would reassure clients of their status and respectability. This portrait of Francis Hayman, with his client Grosvenor Bedford, suggests the lengths to which artists went to furnish their rooms with items that helped to assert their intellectual and social credentials – here it's classical busts and old master paintings. All the physical labour, mess and smell of grinding and mixing colours or priming canvases would be relegated to a back room and kept away from sitters.

#### Francis Hayman and Grosvenor Bedford

by Francis Hayman, c.1748–50

NPG 217

### Selecting a Composition



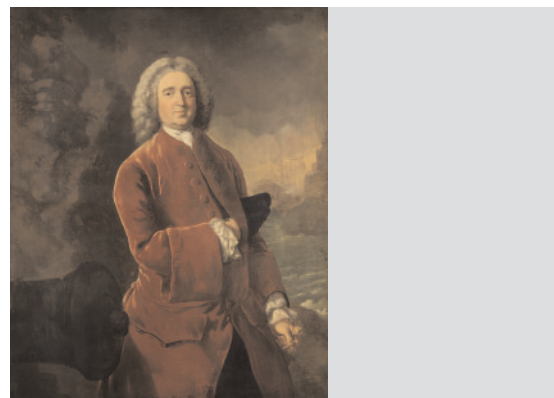
Although Hayman has a pencil in his hand, he seems to be discussing a composition that has already taken shape on the canvas. Before things could get to that point, however, sitter and artist would need to agree pose, composition and costume. Many artists provided a portfolio containing all the prints after their other paintings. Clients could leaf through these to see if there was an existing pose or composition that they liked. This portrait of Nathaniel Hone, invitingly opening his portfolio of drawings or prints, may refer to this practice. Given Hone's welcoming expression the portrait may also have been designed to hang in a parlour where sitters came to discuss new commissions. This form of self-promotion was common among eighteenth-century portrait painters.

#### Nathaniel Hone (1718–84)

by Nathaniel Hone, c.1760

NPG 177

### Stock Poses



Many of Britain's lesser (or younger) portrait painters relied on stock poses. Even brilliant and often highly inventive artists, like Gainsborough, fell back on this option – probably to help him speed through a portrait and thus increase his profit. Early in his career, when he painted Admiral 'Grog' Vernon, Gainsborough adopted the familiar and formulaic 'hand-in-waistcoat' pose. This repetition of stock poses was something foreign commentators criticised. One Frenchman wrote scathingly, in 1747; 'The portrait painters are at this day more numerous and worse in London than ever they have been ... I have been to see the most noted of them; at some distance one might easily mistake a dozen of their portraits [as] the same original.'

#### Admiral Edward 'Grog' Vernon

(1684–1757)

by Thomas Gainsborough, c.1753

NPG 881

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### A Complex Commission



Not all portraits were formulaic. Many were inventive or deeply personal and filled with symbolism. Joseph Highmore's portrait of the novelist and publisher Samuel Richardson was painted for the author's admirer, Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh. She proposed this detailed composition: 'I would choose to have you drawn in your study, a table or desk by you, with pen, ink and paper; one letter just sealed, which I shall fancy is to me.' She left artist and sitter to decide the size of the portrait and Richardson added his own tribute to Lady Bradshaigh and her husband by asking Highmore to include a copy of a portrait of them over the fireplace, seen here in the background.

**Samuel Richardson** (1689–1761)  
by Joseph Highmore, 1750  
NPG 1036

### A Family Piece



After agreeing composition, size and price, most portrait painters required half payment in advance. Sir Godfrey Kneller is credited with introducing this system to avoid loss when paintings were left on an artist's hands. At the same time, sittings would be entered in the artist's diary – or 'sitter book'. In 1777, Reynolds explained: 'It requires in general three sittings about an hour and a half each time but if the sitter chooses the face could be begun and finished in one day.' From Reynolds's sitter book we know that three sittings were rarely enough.

To relieve the boredom of sitting – something that Henry William Bunbury caricatured in *A Family Piece* – artists encouraged people to invite their friends to join them. Often the most successful artists were also noted for being entertaining hosts and witty conversationalists.

**A Family Piece**  
by William Dickinson  
after Henry William Bunbury, 1781  
Stipple engraving  
NPG D21380

### Taking Delivery



We know relatively little about what people thought of their portraits, once finished. Sir Richard Steele was painted by several artists and commented that his portrait by Kneller was 'resolute', by Thornhill 'thoughtful' and by Richardson – shown here – 'indolent'. The Earl of Bath sent his portrait back to Reynolds 'to mend my sickly looks'. He also commented that 'he has made an old man look as if he was in pain, which an old man generally is, and so far he is right'.

**Sir Richard Steele** (1672–1729)  
by Jonathan Richardson, 1712  
NPG 160

**William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath**  
(1684–1764)  
by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1761  
NPG 337