

Shopping Around

The Business of Portraiture

The Rage for 'Face Painting'



William Hogarth (1697–1764)
by Jean André Rouquet, 1740–5
NPG 5717

In 1712, *The Spectator* declared that 'England is confessed to abound in Face-Painters'. Jean André Rouquet (1701–58) – a miniature painter in London – was amazed at 'how fond the English are of having their pictures drawn (i.e. painted)'. Rouquet's friend, William Hogarth resented the dominance of portraiture. He complained: 'Portrait painting is the chief branch of art by which ... a money lover can get a fortune.'

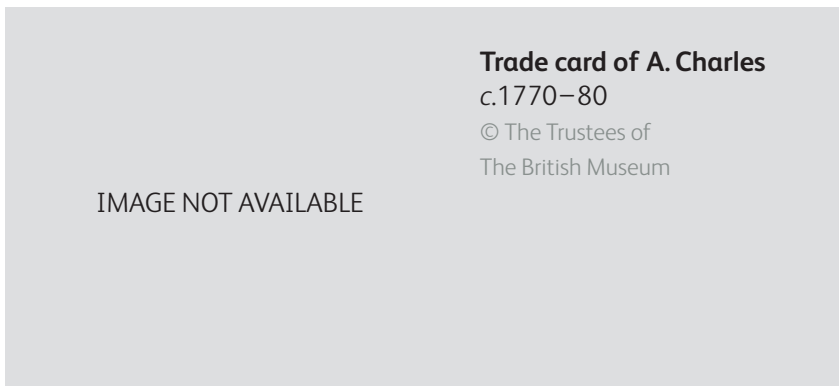
Commercial Competition



Sir Joshua Reynolds
(1723–92)
by Sir Joshua Reynolds,
c.1747–9
NPG 41

Portrait painting was an intensely competitive industry in the eighteenth century. At a time when London had about 800 artists, Reynolds thought the market could provide a living 'for eight painters only'. Reynolds was the age's most successful artist. He painted over 2000 portraits, earning great wealth and influence. But success depended on more than the ability to paint a likeness. As portraits were negotiations between artist and sitters, the successful artist had to combine hard-work, skill and creativity with business sense, social confidence and the ability to flatter their clients.

Portraits for All



Trade card of A. Charles
c.1770–80
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Although artists complained of the vanity of patrons and the drudgery of portraiture, there was a demand at all levels of the market. Many lesser artists produced portraits that were cheaper – in watercolour, miniature, pastel, silhouette or even wax. The otherwise unknown 'A. Charles' used this trade card to advertise 'Miniatures Painted in a masterly manner for 1.1.0 and finished in one Day'. With likenesses available for about one pound, even people on middling incomes could aspire to a portrait, when other luxury goods – like diamond suit buttons or state beds – cost far more.

Cost and Reputation



John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute (1713–92)
by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1773
NPG 3938

While prices rose throughout the century, the cost of an oil portrait always related directly to its size. Eighteenth-century artists had three standard sizes: bust, three quarter- and full-length. Prices also varied according to the reputation, location and overall quality of the artist and their work. Reynolds understood the importance of always being the most expensive and well-connected artist.

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Choosing a Portrait Painter



With so many portrait painters, choosing one was surely confusing. People were influenced by an artist's training, their abilities, even their place of birth. The artists who dominated the market, in the 1740s and 1750s, were Thomas Hudson and Allan Ramsay. Having studied in Italy, Ramsay was celebrated for his use of colour and ability to capture likeness and character. One critic described his men as 'strong likenesses ... his Ladies delicate and genteel'. Hudson, in contrast, never made a Grand Tour and played up his Englishness. He promised reliable portraits in standard formats which – like Susannah Cibber – were praised for their likeness. In 1751, it was said that Hudson – the most employed painter in London – had 'much merit'.

Susannah Maria Cibber (1714–1766)

by Thomas Hudson, c.1749

NPG 4526

Robert Wood (1716–71)

by Allan Ramsay, 1755

NPG 4868

Portraits in Print



A brilliant artist and showman, Reynolds understood the importance of publicity: he knew that painting celebrities would help win him attention.

Laurence Sterne, a Yorkshire vicar, became an overnight celebrity with the publication of his witty novel *Tristram Shandy* (1759–67). Within weeks, Reynolds had invited him to sit for this portrait. This was clearly a commercial enterprise. Once the painting was finished, Reynolds had it engraved as a mezzotint print. Such reproductions, which were sold relatively cheaply and in large numbers, promoted an artist's reputation and thus increased his business. Of another favourite mezzotint engraver, Reynolds proclaimed 'by this man I will be immortalised'.

Laurence Sterne (1713–68)

by Edward Fisher

after Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1760

Mezzotint

NPG D2980

Exhibition Critics



Reynolds sent his portrait of Sterne to England's first public art exhibition in 1761. After the Royal Academy was established in 1768, exhibitions of contemporary art were held every year. Portraits dominated these events and artists began to exert themselves to produce flamboyant compositions that stood out on the exhibition's crammed walls. But the reviews were not always positive. In 1814, the critics attacked Sir Thomas Lawrence's flattering portrait of the famously overweight Prince of Wales. William Hazlitt observed that 'Lawrence has with the magic of his pencil [paintbrush] recreated the Prince Regent as an ... Adonis of thirty-three.' Another critic could only splutter 'it is a lie upon canvas'!

King George IV (when Prince Regent)

(1762–1830)

after Sir Thomas Lawrence, after 1815

NPG 2503