

## Teachers' Notes

# THE GEORGIANS

(Rooms 9 – 14)

## Portraits as Historical Evidence

These guided discussion notes reflect the way in which the National Portrait Gallery Learning Department works when using portraits as historical sources, with pupils of all ages. As far as possible, pupils are encouraged through questioning to observe in detail and to form their own hypotheses; a small amount of information is fed into the discussion at appropriate points to deepen their observations.

These notes therefore consist of a series of questions, with suggested answers; where there is information to add this is shown in a box. The questions, perhaps slightly rephrased, would be suitable for pupils at both primary and secondary level; what will differ is the sophistication of the answers. The information will need rephrasing for younger pupils and it may be necessary to probe by adding extra questions to get the full interpretation of the picture. **Please note we cannot guarantee that all of the portraits in these notes will be on display at the time of your visit.**

Please see [www.npg.org.uk/learning/digital](http://www.npg.org.uk/learning/digital) for these and other online resources. Other guided discussions in this series of online Teachers' Notes include:

- Tudors
- Stuarts
- Regency
- Victorians
- Twentieth Century and Contemporary

These guided discussions can be used either when visiting the Gallery on a self-directed visit or in the classroom using images from the Gallery's website, [www.npg.org.uk/collections](http://www.npg.org.uk/collections).

**All self directed visits to the Gallery must be booked in advance** by telephone on 020 7312 2483. If you wish to support your visit with the use of Teachers' Notes please book in advance, stating which notes you wish to use in order for us to check that the appropriate Gallery rooms are available at the time of your visit.

---

## SIR WILLIAM CHAMBERS, JOSEPH WILTON AND SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

---

by John Francis Rigaud  
oil on canvas, 1782  
46 1/2 in. x 56 1/2 in. (1181 mm x 1435 mm)  
Purchased, 1895  
Primary Collection  
NPG 987



Portrait sitters send out 'messages' that they hope the viewer will interpret and understand. These are visual messages or clues to the sitter's identity, character and status. Interpreting these 'visual messages' is usually achieved by the viewer asking him or herself a number of questions and formulating answers from what the artists and sitters have created.

**Look at the sitter on the far right. This is Sir Joshua Reynolds. How can you tell he was an artist?**

Under his left elbow is a folio of drawings. He was one of the foremost portrait painters of his day.

**How can you tell that Reynolds was a successful painter?**

He is well dressed, in fashionable rich red velvet, a fur lined coat and gold buttons. Also, this portrait has been commissioned which indicates his status and importance.

**Describe Reynolds' expression and pose.**

He is in the process of speaking to the figure opposite. The hand gesture indicates he is 'instructing', making a point.

**Now look at the figure opposite. This is Sir William Chambers. Focus carefully on what he is holding in his right hand, what is under his left forearm and where he is pointing.**

The 90° set square, pair of dividers and a detailed building plan tell us he was an architect. Sir William was one of the finest architects of his day, with a reputation in England and abroad, and he was close to George III.

**Can you see something pinned on his chest that might suggest his importance?**

This star decoration is an Order of Knighthood bestowed on him by the King of Sweden.

**Look at Sir William's expression. Where is he directing his gaze?**

Onto the building plan and not at Sir Joshua – do you think the two men might be discussing the building? This is the plan of Somerset House, the first purpose built office block which was to house the Navy Board, the Stamp Office and the new Royal Academy of Art.

**Now let us focus on the third figure in the centre of the canvas. This is Joseph Wilton. Look at what he is holding in his right hand – can you guess his skill?**

Joseph Wilton was a sculptor and ornamental plaster maker.

**Look carefully at Joseph Wilton's pose. What is he doing?**

He is looking at Sir William Chambers, and indicating towards the garden with his left hand.

**What is in the garden?**

This statue is a copy of one of the most famous of all classical statues – the Apollo Belvedere in Rome. All Grand Tourists, the sons of English aristocrats would have seen and admired the one in Rome.

**Sir William Chambers and Sir Joshua Reynolds disliked each other. Can you think of a reason?**

They were immensely proud and jealous of each other's fame. Sir William thought architecture was greater than painting – Sir Joshua disagreed! They squabbled all the time they were working on the Royal Academy quarters in Somerset House (where the present Courtauld Collection is housed).

**Now look at Joseph Wilton. Can you decide who he has the most sympathy for?**

He is standing closer to Sir Joshua Reynolds but note who he is looking at with a sympathetic look. Sir William was his employer!

---

# LORD BUTE

---

by Sir Joshua Reynolds  
oil on canvas, 1773  
93 1/4 in. x 57 in. (2369 mm x 1448 mm)  
Purchased with help from The Art Fund,  
1958  
Primary Collection  
NPG 3938



This is a full length portrait of an important nobleman and Prime Minister to George III. Full length portraits were the most expensive format. This one is by Sir Joshua Reynolds, who could command top fees and who would be worthy to paint such a man.

**Look at Lord Bute. Find three clues as to how important he was.**

Costume, gold jewellery, location – grand setting.

**Look at what he has chosen to wear in this portrait. Have you seen an outfit like this in other portraits?**

There are the Garter robes – the Order of the Garter was an exclusive ‘club’ its members were chosen by the monarch.

**Can you see the hat that went with the robes? What expensive feathers were used to decorate it?**

Ostrich – from Africa – indicating trade and luxuries and also, alas, the infamous slave trade.

**The garter robes are red white and blue but one national emblem is foremost. What is it?**

St George’s cross on his should – England’s flag.

**Look at how the artist has painted cloth and fabric. What do you think these robes were made of?**

Silk.

**Look at the wonderful golden chain and pendent around his chest and shoulders – this is called a collar. Can you see another clue to an English emblem?**

The pendent with St George and the dragon on it.

**Can you see any other gold?**

His shoe buckles! And the embroidered garter (how the Order got its name!) around his right knee.

**Is Lord Bute inside or outside?**

He is in a very lavish interior with classical columns and an urn – Lord Bute was a contemporary of one of the most famous neo-classical architects and designers, Robert Adam. His portrait hangs very near to Lord Bute.

**Look hard at where he is standing. Can you work out where he is in this building?**

He is on the landing at the top of a magnificent flight of stairs. See how Reynolds has painted the carpet design on the flat surface as somewhat indistinct but on the vertical face of the top stairs the carpet design is quite clear. Notice too, how wide the stairs are!

**Now look at Lord Bute's pose. Is it a good pose for 'a man of action'? If so, why?**

Bute appears to be walking towards us and his pose was often chosen by soldiers and admirals in their portraits. Have you seen this pose before? It is based on the statue in the first portrait you looked at- it is copied from the Apollo Belvedere!

**One last thing... Look at Lord Bute's face and the angle of his head. He is looking down on the viewer. Can you guess why?**

He wants you to be in no doubt how very important and elevated he is!

---

# CATHERINE MARIA (‘KITTY’) FISHER

---

by Nathaniel Hone  
oil on canvas, 1765  
29 1/2 in. x 24 1/2 in. (749 mm x 622 mm)  
Bequeathed by Lord Revelstoke, 1929  
Primary Collection  
NPG 2354



This is a much more informal portrait than others we have looked at so far. The Irish born artist was one who could capture the charm of the sitter.

**Look at the sitter’s clothing. Do you think she might be in her bed chamber undressing?**

She is wearing her shift, or bodice undergarment rather like a nightdress. She has yet to remove her jewellery and her hair is loose, undressed and unpowdered.

**Is she alone?**

Her cat is there and a large bowl of goldfish.

**Where is she looking, and what is her expression?**

At us, the viewer, and she is smiling slightly.

**What is she holding?**

A shawl or scarf. The gesture suggests she wants to cover her bosom / chest.

**What is the cat doing?**

It is trying to catch and eat a gold fish.

**Is the woman cruel to let the cat eat the gold fish or do you think there might be another explanation?**

This portrait has a rebus or a punning Clue. The sitter’s name is Kitty Fisher – the Georgian viewer would have enjoyed this humour.

**Look very closely at the goldfish bowl. Can you see a reflection of her bedchamber window?**

**What can you see in this reflected window?**

There are the heads of a crowd of people looking in through her window. She was a celebrity and had intrusive fans and followers. Does that explain her grabbing her shawl to cover herself?

**Do you think the goldfish might have a further meaning?**

Goldfish, imported by sea in large bowls like this one, were really expensive. Kitty was very rich. Could her carelessness about her kitten’s behaviour tell us she was so rich that she could buy some more?

**Do you like this idea of a rebus – a clue to someone’s name?**

See if you can work out a rebus clue to give someone an idea of what your name could be e.g. Rose White, or Robin Archer.

---

# SARAH SIDDONS

---

by Sir William Beechey  
oil on canvas, 1793  
96 1/2 in. x 60 1/2 in. (2456 mm x 1537 mm)  
Given by Dr D.M. McDonald, 1977  
Primary Collection  
NPG 5159



This very dramatic portrait always attracts viewers because at first glance the sitter appears to be someone evil and dangerous. But the more one looks, the visual messages give a very different view. What is the woman doing? She is lurking in a dusky wood; she holds a dagger and a mask.

## How has the artist created 'atmosphere'?

The trees, dimming light and shadow, 'spooky' monuments. Her gown appears to dissolve into the ground.

## Is there an inscription on the 'spooky' monument that might lead you to another train of thought?

Shakespeare and the weeping cherub (baby angel!) – a monument to the greatest playwright.

## Does the new information change the nature of the woman? How?

Actress. The mask is theatrical.

## If this is an actress playing a role of an evil woman, can you guess which Shakespeare play it can be?

Macbeth.

## The actress was called Sarah Siddons and had a starring role as Lady Macbeth. Now look a little closer at her face. What do you notice?

Her gown and the background is dark, black, gloomy but her face appears lit with light and that is emphasised by her white turban and scarf around her neck. She isn't wearing much makeup – you see the actress' real face, not one with theatrical paint.

## Now look at the mask. Would it have made a good murder disguise?

No. It is the mask of tragedy; you have probably seen the two mask badge in a theatre – mask of comedy with an upturned mouth. This is the mask of tragedy with the downturned mouth.

## There are a large number of theatrical portraits and scenes from plays in the 18th century. What does this tell you about people's tastes in Georgian England?

The theatre has always been popular in England, especially in the 18th century. Actors and actresses, like today were celebrities.

## Looking at Mrs Siddons, is she beautiful?

No, in fact. She has a very long nose which the artist has flatteringly shortened but a brilliant actress can convince her audience she is as beautiful as Aphrodite or as evil as Lady Macbeth!

---

# THE SHARP FAMILY

---

by Johan Joseph Zoffany

oil on canvas, 1779-1781

45 1/2 in. x 49 1/2 in. (1156 mm x 1257 mm)

Lent by Trustees of the Lloyd-Baker Settled Estates, 1978

Primary Collection

NPG L169



This kind of portrait is called a 'conversation piece' and it shows a remarkable family on the deck of their sailing barge, on the River Thames at Fulham, London. Zoffany, a German artist, has managed to include all the family members in this wonderful cone shaped composition.

## How many men can you see on the barge?

There are 4 brothers - the other two male figures - the barge master and his son / cabin boy are actually shown on the outside - in the water!

## Which brother do you think was the most important?

In the 18th century the brother at the top of the apex of the cone – Doctor William Sharp, the King's surgeon, wearing the distinctive blue coat and red collar of the King's Windsor household.

**The brother on the far right hand corner is dressed very plainly. Can you guess why?**

He is John Sharp, a clergyman or vicar. In the 18th century clergy wore black clerical dress and a strange white wig with puffy side pieces. The brother on the far left is James Sharp- an engineer and ironmaster.

**Look at the remaining brother who is holding something for his sister to see. Does he look rather kindly?**

In today's terms, this brother, Granville Sharp, is the most important. He dedicated his life to ending the infamous slave trade. The women are sisters, wives and daughters.

**What are the family doing aboard the barge?**

They appear to be playing music – this remarkable family were all excellent amateur musicians and gave summer concerts on the Thames to the delight of their fellow Londoners.

**Can you identify any instruments? Do some look a little unusual?**

We can see the cello and violin belong to John; James is playing an old fashioned serpent; Granville could play the recorder like flageolet, French horn and oboe. Elizabeth is playing a newly invented piano; Judith has a guitar called an angelica.

**There are two animals on the barge; what are they?**

Little Mary is holding her kitten while at Frances Sharp's feet rests Zoffany's own pet dog, Poma, a German Spitz, who was so good natured that sitters loved him and he appears in several of Zoffany's works.

**Have you been wondering how Zoffany could have painted such a complicated group? Do you think the artist would have arranged them on a barge, in their best clothes and wigs on a windy river Thames?**

No. Each sitter would have been sketched either in Zoffany's studio or at home. Once he had all their likenesses and had discussed their poses and positions he would have gone to work in his studio and completed the painting.

**Have you also been wondering why the poor barge master and the boy are outside the barge?**

Zoffany had to show his audience how they were not members of the family and also to show their lower status!

---

# WILLIAM HOGARTH

---

by William Hogarth  
oil on canvas, circa 1757  
17 3/4 in. x 16 3/4 in. (451 mm x 425 mm)  
Purchased, 1869  
Primary Collection  
NPG 289



**Who has painted this portrait, do you think?**

He has – it is a self-portrait.

**What equipment can you see him using?**

Brushes, palette, palette knife, easel, canvas.

**What colours does he have on his palette?**

White, red, blue, black, yellow, shades of brown.

**What is his paint mainly made of?**

Pigments – ground-up rocks, mixed with oil.

**How does he create his outlines?**

Sketching with white paint.

**Do you think he is showing you his real painting clothes or is he dressed rather better than that?**

Possibly wearing better clothes than he usually wears for his actual work.

**Look at his head – what has he done to it do you think?**

Shaved off his hair.

**How is he keeping his head warm?**

Wearing a hat or turban.

**What else do gentlemen from Hogarth's time often wear on their heads?**

Wigs.



**Hogarth made several changes to this painting before he completed it. He originally painted a little dog in the corner lifting his leg and urinating over a pile of drawings by foreign artists. Hogarth resented British artists being considered less good than foreigners. Why do you think he decided to paint this out?**

Too rude perhaps.

**Modern X-Ray technology can reveal what is underneath the paint surface. What do you think Hogarth would feel about us finding his little dog lifting his leg?**

---

## DUCHESS OF QUEENSBERRY

---

attributed to Charles Jervas  
oil on canvas, circa 1725-1730  
50 in. x 39 3/4 in. (1270 mm x 1010 mm)  
Purchased, 1867  
Primary Collection  
NPG 238



**What does this woman appear to do as a job?**

Something to do with farming – being a dairy maid.

**What clues in the portrait tell you this?**

Simple plain-coloured clothes, bucket, field behind her.

**What animals can you see in the field?**

Cows and sheep.

**What is the bucket for?**

Milking cows.

**Was it a well paid job in the past?**

No.

**How is it done today?**

With machines.

**The National Portrait Gallery collects portraits of famous people – did dairy maids usually get to be famous? Or, if you are in the Gallery, are there any other portraits nearby of people doing such poorly-paid jobs?**

No.

**Was she really a dairy maid, do you think - what are your reasons?**

No – a dairy maid wouldn't have afforded having her portrait painted; also her hands don't look as though she uses them for real work.

**Is there anything else about her appearance that makes you suspicious – what must she be wearing underneath her dress to make her look that shape?**

A corset.

**If she is not a dairy maid what is she doing in her portrait?**

Dressing-up – she was actually a duchess and was very rich.

**Why do you think she chose to be a dairy maid?**

For people who have never done farming work it might seem like fun, rather than being a really hard life. There was a French queen who used to play at being a dairy maid but in the end the French people rebelled against her and she was executed.

---

## ANGELICA KAUFFMAN

---

by Angelica Kauffmann  
oil on canvas, circa 1770-1775  
29 in. x 24 in. (737 mm x 610 mm)  
Purchased, 1876  
Primary Collection  
NPG 430



Look at these two portraits and think about how they are the same or similar and how they are different.

**What is the first thing you notice that is the same?**

Both women.

**Are they both holding something?**

Yes.

**Look very carefully. Are they holding exactly the same things?**

No. MM is holding a palette and brush, AK a crayon holder and board.

**What would they use these things for?**

Drawing and painting.

---

## MARY MOSER

---

by George Romney  
oil on canvas, circa 1770-71  
30 in. x 25 1/4 in. (763 mm x 642 mm)  
Purchased with help from the Heritage Lottery Fund and The Art Fund (with a contribution from the Wolfson Foundation), 2003  
Primary Collection  
NPG 6641



**Does this tell us what job they did? Was it the same?**

Both artists. They were both very famous artists more than 200 years ago when not many women did that job.

**Now look at how they are posing. How are they different?**

AK looking to the front. MM looking over her shoulder.

**Perhaps invite two students to copy the poses.**

**One of them is a self portrait and the other is by a famous portrait painter of the time called George Romney. Which one do you think is the self portrait?**

AK – she is looking out and at herself in a mirror. MM is looking over her shoulder, not easy to do a self-portrait in that position.

**What is Angelica doing with her free hand?**

Pointing to herself.

**Do you think that Angelica really wore that dress while she was painting or using pastels?**

Probably not – much too likely to get messy, and her silk dress is not washable.

**Actually this self-portrait is painted using oil paint, but Angelica Kauffman has shown herself holding pastels in a crayon holder. Can you suggest any reason why she might have done this?**

We don't know why, but perhaps because pastels were considered more 'feminine' than oil paint, creating a less strong statement about herself in her self-portrait.

**Now look at the backgrounds of the two women. Are they the same or different?**

AK has a plain background. MM has some fruit.

**Do you think MM is hungry and wanting to eat the fruit?**

No.

**What is she going to do with it?**

Paint it.

MM was very famous for painting pictures of fruit and flowers – still life. AK was famous for painting big pictures of old stories, for decorating houses and for painting portraits. Both women were founder members of the Royal Academy (no further women were elected as full members of the Royal Academy until Dame Laura Knight in 1936.) Both Mary and Angelica appear in a group portrait by Zoffany entitled 'The Academicians of the Royal Academy'. However, they are not actually present in the picture. The members are shown gathered around a nude male model at a time when women were excluded to protect their modesty. So that Angelica and Mary could be included in the picture, Zoffany added them as portraits hanging on the wall.