

Finishing Off

Joseph van Aken

Britain's Leading Drapery Painter



In *The London Tradesman* (1747), a handbook of professions, the drapery painter is listed as a 'mere mechanic hand' who is 'employed in dressing the figures, after the painter has finished the face, given the figure its proper attitude, and drawn the out-lines of the dress or drapery.' This may have been true for many anonymous hacks, but the Flemish-born artist Joseph van Aken (c.1699–1749) earned great wealth as Britain's leading drapery painter. He worked for Thomas Hudson, Allan Ramsay, Joseph Highmore and so many other successful portrait painters of the 1740s that one critic remarked, acidly: 'As in England almost everybody's picture is painted, so almost every painter's works were painted by van Aken.'

Joseph van Aken (c.1699–1749)

by J. Faber after Thomas Hudson, c.1745–9
Mezzotint

Private collection

Joseph van Aken

IMAGES NOT AVAILABLE

Van Aken's drapery may be one reason why many portraits from the 1740s, look so similar. Surviving drawings suggest that Ramsay provided detailed instructions about how van Aken should pose and dress his figures. Others merely supplied the face – sometimes cut out and tacked to a larger canvas. Such was the consistent quality of van Aken's 'draperies, silks, satins, velvets' that artists found it a 'great addition to their works and ... so much on a level that its very difficult to know one hand from another.'

Studies for the Blackwood and Mansel Children

possibly by Joseph van Aken, c.1742

Black and white chalk

Derby Museum and Art Gallery

Thomas, 2nd Baron Mansel of Margam with his Blackwood Half-Brothers and Sister

by Allan Ramsay, 1742

© Tate, London 2005

Going it Alone



On van Aken's death in 1749 his brother Alexander, a lesser artist, tried to continue this family business, but the smooth running of several portrait painters' studios was disrupted for months. No single drapery painter ever again achieved van Aken's hold over the market, and the practice of outsourcing drapery slowly dwindled. By the 1760s and '70s, artists such as Thomas Gainsborough or Joseph Wright of Derby were painting all parts of their canvases themselves.

Thomas Day (1748–89)

by Joseph Wright of Derby, 1770

NPG 2490

Finishing Off

William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath

Pulteney and Politics



Throughout the reign of Queen Anne (1702–14), Pulteney played a major part in the Whig struggle to regain power from the Tories. He held a number of government posts before falling out with Sir Robert Walpole, the Whig ‘Prime Minister’. From his opposition faction, Pulteney was in a position to take over the government on three occasions. This biting satire – *The Treacherous Patriot Unmask'd* (1742) – attacked Pulteney for refusing to accept command for a third time. With his public face slipped to reveal a devil behind the civic mask, this print says much about the way polite oil portraiture was often judged to be little more than flattering and misleading propaganda.

The Treacherous Patriot Unmask'd

(William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath)

by an unknown artist, 1742

Mezzotint

NPG D 9351

Sitting to Reynolds



Pulteney had a reputation as a wit and socialite well into his final years. This portrait was commissioned for his devoted friend, Elizabeth Montagu, when he was seventy-seven. He is dressed in his earl’s parliamentary robes of red wool and white miniver fur, with a white horsehair (or perhaps human hair) wig. Much of the composition and background is formulaic, and meant to focus our attention on the sitter’s face. The artist was clearly asked to include the largest volume on the table. It is Lord Lyttleton’s *Life of Henry the Second*, a book that reflects Pulteney’s and Montagu’s mutual friendship with its author.

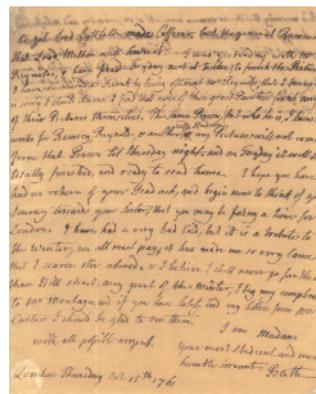
William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath

(1684–1764)

by Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1761

NPG 337

The Painters’ Secret



From appointments in Reynolds’s sitter book we know that Pulteney sat at least four times between late August and mid-October 1761. Shortly before his portrait was finished, Pulteney wrote this letter to Mrs Montagu: ‘I have discovered a secret by being often at Mr Reynolds, that I fancy, he is sorry I should know. I find that none of these great Painters finish any of their Pictures themselves. The same Person, (but who he is, I know not) works for Ramsay, Reynolds, & another, called Hudson, my Picture will not come from that Person till Thursday night, and on Friday it will be totally finished, and ready to send home.’ Pulteney’s great ‘discovery’ was that Reynolds used a drapery painter to paint the costume and background of many of his paintings. It is ironic that, on delivery, Pulteney was not pleased with the likeness and sent the painting back to ‘mend my sickly looks’.

Letter from William Pulteney, 1st Earl of Bath to Elizabeth Montagu

15 October 1761

NPG 337