

Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), *Mr and Mrs Andrews*

Key facts:

- **Date:** c. 1750
- **Size:** 69.8 x 119.4cm
- **Materials:** oil on canvas
- **Location:** National Gallery
- **Patron:** Mr Robert Andrews (1725-1806)
- **Nationality:** British
- **Scope of work for Pearson Edexcel A Level:** Identities in Art and Architecture



Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, circa. 1750, oil on canvas, 69.8 × 119.4 cm. Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery, London (NG6301)

1. ART HISTORICAL TERMS AND CONCEPTS

Subject Matter

This is a highly significant painting within both the history of portraiture, and the history of landscape painting in Britain. It is a privately commissioned full-length formal double portrait on a small scale to commemorate the recently married couple, set within an accurate rendering - with topographical details still visible today - of some of the 3000 acres of land they owned in the valley of the River Stour, Essex. As a portrait it acts as propaganda for their wealth, status and power as landowners. It also highlights their interests in radical developments in agriculture, as well as their hope for a future family. The image is clearly stereotypically gendered with Mr Andrews shown vertically as a dominant male, at ease in a casual pose, with crossed legs and a certain swagger, looking out directly at the viewer from a commanding position. He wears appropriate clothes for a day's shooting with his fashionably bound neckerchief, tricorn hat and shotgun – a combination of

leisure and activity, and subtle illustration of his power. His expression has been described as either blasé or one of vague stupor. In contrast Mrs Andrews is seated, demure, hands and knees together, her legs crossed at the ankles, her eyes swivelled to her right - perhaps back to the house and her domestic space; she is rigid, proper, dainty, disdainful, and feminine. Her expensive, fashionable Parisian silk blue pannier dress over pale-yellow petticoats is too fine for outside, and her tiny satin slippers are inappropriate for damp grass, yet she is wearing her garden hat. She is pale and has a cool, distant gaze, and tight lips – recognisably English features to Europeans at the time. She is seated on a French Rococo-style bench - which must be wooden but would be impossible to carve - to create an elegant and decorative effect. The unfinished section of painting on her knee “may have been reserved for a child for Mrs Andrews to hold” (NG)¹. Others have suggested a dead bird due to the hunting dog, loyal to his master, which enters from left to right to take our eye to the landscape.

The landscape background shows their estate; it does not show a park - unlike French Rococo art, or the Claudian ideal landscape - but farmland, they are new, modern landowners. It is a portrait of the estate, a naturalistic rendering of a particular place at a particular time. It is the view across the Stour valley from their farm at Bulmer towards Sudbury in East Anglia. This type of landscape is unique in Gainsborough's *oeuvre*, as is the bi-partite division of space, so it is likely to have been explicitly requested by Mr Andrews. In 1769 his house, Auberries, was described as “*a modern regular and uniform building of bricks... situated on an eminence... commanding a most delightful prospect... with gardens... and several ponds*” – it is likely the latter were added later. This working landscape represents major changes in the English countryside during this period, as well as employing traditional symbolism. Rather than following the new landscaping ideas of Capability Brown, Mr Andrews chose to show off the productivity of his land with the enclosed fields in the distance and the five-bar gate keeping in the sheep, while the cattle are similarly confined to the wood on the left. To the right the wheat has been cut and bound in sheaves to indicate it is harvest time, with neat, ordered, straight rows of stubble – the result of the latest agricultural equipment, Jethro Tull's seed drill. The ripe wheat, and the three trees – a smaller one between two taller ones – suggest fertility, and perhaps the hope of an heir. The couple pose under the old oak tree, Mr Andrews standing on its roots to suggest stability, and continuity for his family and his land. The oak tree is a symbol of endurance, strength and survival and is England's symbolic tree. In the background under a typically East Anglian cloudy sky are the enclosed fields and the church in which the Andrews had married. Gainsborough later said, “*I paint portraits to live, landscapes because I love them*”.

Formal Qualities

Gainsborough trained with the French Rococo engraver and illustrator Gravelot from c.1740, from dressed up dolls and landscapes set up on the table. He painted ‘*portraits in little with landscape settings*’ i.e. *conversation pieces* but with fewer participants (traditionally painted by Dutch and Flemish artists as well as English contemporaries such as Hogarth, Devis and Hayman, e.g. Jonathan Tyers and his Family). In the 1740s Dutch landscapes from the C17th began to enter the London art market and Gainsborough may have earned money repairing them or even adding figures to them. He was influenced by the work of Jan Wijnants (e.g. Landscape with Figures, Kenwood House) and Jacob van Ruisdael (e.g. A Pool Surrounded by Trees, NG); especially the pictorial composition, the prominence of the sky, the clouds following the silhouette of landscape, the organisation of distant planes, the treatment of light and atmosphere, pattern of light and shade, the sensitivity to detail, as

¹ https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/media/31350/notes_gainsborough-mr-and-mrs-andrews.pdf

well as the fresh handling of the paint. East Anglia is close to the Netherlands geographically. Gainsborough was also influenced by the French Rococo style with the winding paths, the curved horizons, the cascade of clouds.



Hayman 'Jonathan Tyers and his Family' 1740 NPG and Daughter c. 1748



Gainsborough 'Portrait of the Artist, with his Wife and Daughter' c. 1748

Francis Hayman, *Jonathan Tyers and his family*, 1740, oil on canvas, 77.8 x 106.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 5588)

Thomas Gainsborough, *Portrait of the Artist with his Wife and Daughter*, circa. 1748, oil on canvas, 92.1 x 70.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery, London (NG6547)

The figures are small scale, slightly insubstantial and angular, with what were considered distinctive English physical features emerging. In 1997 Sister Wendy described Mr Andrews as having a 'thick, unintelligent face' and Mrs Andrews as a 'thin, tense, scraggy little figure'!² The composition is carefully organised, not just with the vertical division creating half-portrait, half-landscape, but the horizon line midway too. The right edge of the oak tree is on the golden section locking the figures into the painting with their heads arranged on a diagonal from top left to bottom right. To counter this are the curves of the bench, Mrs Andrews' skirt and the trees and hills with rolling darkening clouds above. The crossed legs, feet and roots create a pattern. The scale of the landscape is convincingly depicted through a series of planes. The light from the right highlights the wheat, Mrs Andrews' dress and the bark of the tree trunk with very subtle shadows. The range of greens and earth colours suggests the English landscape and is now seen as iconic, due in part to Gainsborough's influence on Constable.

CULTURAL, SOCIAL, TECHNOLOGICAL AND POLITICAL FACTORS

Gainsborough is one of the founders of the English School of Landscape Painting. He was born and grew up in Sudbury in Suffolk and went to the same school as Mr Andrews. He had an innate affinity with the countryside and made studies from nature, but his work was not topographical, he selected and synthesised elements. This is an example of Gainsborough's early work, his Sudbury period 1748-51, when his patrons were the local gentry. He had returned from London in 1748.

Robert Andrews (c. 1726-1806) of the Auberries, near Bulmer, Suffolk married Frances Mary Carter (c. 1732-80) of Ballingdon House, near Sudbury on 10th November 1748 at All Saints Church, Sudbury. The church tower can be seen in the background of this painting to the right of Mrs Andrews. The landscape is part of the Auberries estate to which land was added through the marriage dowry. The painting was probably commissioned by Mr Andrews after the wedding, but it is not a traditional marriage portrait. It is small scale and intended for their new house. At the time

² <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hsolMavZwZc> Sister Wendy's Story of Painting

of this arranged marriage of neighbours with adjoining land, he was 22 and she was 16, and they had inherited their wealth. Gainsborough himself had just married the pregnant Mary Burr, illegitimate daughter of Duke of Beaufort in London and gained an annuity of 200 pounds a year. The Andrews were both upper middle-class, their money had been made through trade, but they had aspirations to be gentry as can be seen in various allusions in the painting which present them as part of the 'squirearchy' – the landed class. Mr Andrews' father was a *silversmith* and later a banker and made his fortune lending money (in 1743 he had lent Frederick, Prince of Wales 30,000 pounds), buying ships, and trading with the colonies. Robert was given an Oxford education by his father, who bought this estate and wife, hence ensuring his entry in the landed gentry. However, Robert did not live the life of a squire, instead on the death of his father in 1762 he took over the family bank and made his own fortune in business. Mrs Andrews' family money was made in the textile industry (hence her dress), her grandfather had made a fortune as a draper and had invested his money in land so by this time they were important landowners. (Gainsborough's own father was a draper, but not a successful one, and had gone bankrupt in 1733, five years after Gainsborough was born.)

Mr Andrews carries a gun to establish his social status - he had a gun licence, which was expensive and only the gentry could shoot game - and stands proudly surveying his land. By commissioning this portrait, they were emulating the landed gentry, with the tradition of commemorative family portraits for stately homes. However, they were also using the image as propaganda and prestige to show off their wealth, power, fashionable taste, and modern approach to agriculture, their 'model farm'. Portraits cost more than landscapes, though Gainsborough was a young (21) local artist and probably knew the couple personally. Landscapes were considered as decorative space fillers to go over doors and fireplaces, while Gainsborough himself considered portraits as mere 'face painting'. Gainsborough would later say of his patrons: *"There is not such a set of enemies to the real artist" as the "damn Gentlemen... They have but one part worth looking at and that is their purse."*

In 1724 the author of *Robinson Crusoe*, Daniel Defoe, had described Sudbury as poor and highly populated. The decline of the textile industry had been brought about by political instability at the end of the C17th and wars at the beginning of C18th which in turn led to increased taxation, destruction of the home market and fall in foreign trade - hence Gainsborough's father's bankruptcy. Only those with land survived the decline. The landed gentry, the freeholding class of squires and recent peerages owned most of the country and had all the power in parliament. Without their consent King George II could neither impose taxes nor raise an army. There were between 8,000 and 20,000 landed families with estates large enough to bring them an annual income of 1,000-3,000 pounds, allowing them to lead a life of leisure or enter politics. The largest estates were owned by a much smaller elite class of peers and lords of aristocratic lineage (e.g. Duke of Bedford). The franchise/vote was based on landownership at this time. However, unlike in France, non-landowners enjoyed some equality before the law.

The Agrarian Revolution at this time changed England by doubling agricultural production 50 years before the Industrial Revolution. Enclosures, or the fencing of previously open land, had been a precondition for more intensive cultivation and was the most profitable investment of the C18th. The old patriarchal feudal system had allowed access to open fields and common land for subsistence, or to graze after harvest, but impeded rationalisation and intensification. Progressive landowners combined strips of land to create larger fields, ploughed land which had previously been infertile or forest, fenced them in to prevent villagers and peasants putting their own cattle there. Of course, this led to ruin for the rural poor:

"the sentence for poaching at that time was deportation. If a man [sic] stole a potato he risked a public whipping ordered by the magistrate who would be a landowner. There were very strict

property limits to what was considered 'natural'."³ Gainsborough's painting represents this key moment of change in terms of class, money and power in English life.

DEVELOPMENTS IN MATERIALS, TECHNIQUES AND PROCESSES

Gainsborough was a child prodigy and was to become one of the most technically proficient and experimental artists of his time. Despite having been taught by the French Rococo painter, Gravelot, from dressed up dolls and landscapes set up on the table, his painted *'portraits in little with landscape settings'* were observed from nature. His oil technique was extremely sound and based on that of the Dutch artist Francis Wynantz, who was adept at the use of *glazes* and *scumbling*. He was known to be constantly observing his surroundings, both landscapes and faces. Unlike his contemporaries Devis and Hayman, who might have based their figures on mannequins (hence the doll-like appearance), Gainsborough knew Robert Andrews well and was later praised for his likenesses. It is likely he would have made sketches of their faces from life, if not their poses. Gainsborough did not employ a drapery painter.

The landscape was studied separately. It almost seems like two paintings in one, not only because of the composition but because he used different coloured grounds – white for the light areas, and dark for dark areas. Light penetrates through the layers of oil glazes as well. Translucent paint is used for details, and there is a very smooth transition between colours of the details. The unfinished patch of canvas of a lighter colour on Mrs Andrews' lap may be the result of a certain nonchalance towards finishing a painting. Gainsborough wrote *"Painting and punctuality mix like oil and vinegar" and "genius and regularity are utter enemies"*.

WAYS IT HAS BEEN USED AND INTERPRETED IN PAST AND PRESENT SOCIETIES

Gainsborough has painted the couple as landowners, proud of their property and wealth and their rights after the Enclosure Acts; the contemporary viewer was expected to admire Mr Andrews' possessions, his land, his wife, his dog, and his progressive farming techniques. Gainsborough has painted an archetypal image of the new English gentry who had made their money through trade and were taking over from the old aristocracy in terms of power and taste.

Reynolds, the founder of the Royal Academy, praised Gainsborough in 1788: *'If ever this nation should produce genius sufficient to acquire to us the honourable distinction of an English School, the name of Gainsborough will be transmitted to posterity, in the history of Art, among the first of that rising name'*⁴. Later writers linked this notion of Englishness to the class system and property. Most famously John Berger wrote: *"They are landowners and their proprietary attitude towards what surrounds them is visible in their stance and expressions... the possession of private land was the precondition for... philosophical enjoyment – which was not uncommon among the landed gentry."*⁵ More recently Oliva Laing summarised Berger: *'he points out the wicked ideologies locked into paint, the grotesque display of capitalism, profit, property in Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews'*.⁶

It has also been interpreted as a pre-Romantic image based on the ideas of Jean-Jacques Rousseau. Lawrence Gowing wrote: *"there is evidence to confirm that Gainsborough's Mr and Mrs Andrews were doing something more with their stretch of country than merely owning it. The explicit theme of a contemporary and precisely analogous design by Gainsborough's mentor Francis Hayman suggests*

³ Berger, John *Ways of Seeing* 1972 p. 108

⁴ Reynolds, Joshua *Discourse 10th December 1788*

⁵ Berger, John *Ways of Seeing* 1972 BBC p. 106-8

⁶ Laing, Olivia 'Do adjust your set' in [The Guardian](#) 15.01.2022

that the people in such pictures were engaged in the philosophical enjoyment of 'the great Principle... the genuine Light of uncorrupted and unperverted Nature.'⁷

It can also be read as a traditional marriage portrait with sheaves of wheat as symbols of fertility: "ripe ears of corn are a fitting fertility symbol for a wedding portrait... a little tree grows between two larger ones on the right; the man's casually lowered shotgun and the bird lying in his wife's lap may also be seen as discreet erotic allusions." (Hagen, R M & R *What Great Paintings Say* Taschen 1999 p. 297). The Andrews were to have 9 children so did indeed strengthen the family tree.



Thomas Gainsborough, *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (detail), circa. 1750, oil on canvas, 69.8 × 119.4 cm. Digital image courtesy of The National Gallery, London (NG6301)

Gainsborough's biographer James Hamilton goes further, focusing on the two donkeys bound together far left, shot bags like swollen genitalia and underdrawing on Mrs Andrews' lap to suggest this is an image of a matrimonial trap, and that 'sexual innuendo and graffiti were not foreign to Gainsborough – a painting with such a clear dynastic message would not have been left in this state unless there had been a death or a disaster.'

The painting remained in the family for over 200 years. It first came to public attention in 1927 when shown in Ipswich and was bought for the National Gallery in 1960. It has since become an iconic image of Englishness, a 'quintessential view of the English countryside as imagined by foreigners' (Waldemar Januszczak).



Yinka Shonibare, *Mr. and Mrs. Andrews without their Heads*, 1998, two life-size fibreglass mannequins, bench, gun, dog, Dutch wax printed cotton costumes on armatures, 165 x 570 x 254 cm. Collection National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa (39849.1-5). Digital image © Yinka Shonibare CBE. All Rights Reserved, DACS

Cover of *The Economist Magazine*, May 12th-18th 2012, Europe's Achilles heel. Digital image courtesy of The Economist Newspaper Limited

⁷ Quoted in Berger p. 107

FURTHER READING AND LINKS

- <https://smarthistory.org/thomas-gainsborough-mr-and-mrs-andrews/>
- <https://www.everypicture.org/blank-v5f50>
- <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/aug/17/gainsborough-james-hamilton-review>
- <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jP8PTUvHfkw> – Art History Girl (12 minutes)
- https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_w--aEYmH8 Waldemar Januszczak 'One Painting, Many Voices