

Rosalba Carriera: a Journey through a Pastel Portrait



Portrait of Gustavus Hamilton, 2nd Viscount Boyne (1710-1746),
Rosalba Carriera (1673-1757), January 1730/31, pastel heightened with
white body colour on blue paper, 59.7 x 47.6 cm.

© The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts,
University of Birmingham (No. 2009.3).

Transcript

Welcome back to the Barber Institute's online Tuesday Talks, now in its third series. Over the coming months, staff, students and invited external speakers will talk about a range of paintings, sculptures, decorative arts and coins from the gallery's collection; for this series these short talks will be released every fortnight. My name is Helen Cobby, I'm the Assistant Curator at the Barber, and for this first episode I would like to introduce to you an evocative pastel portrait made in 1730/31 in Venice by one of the most successful and accomplished female artists of the 18th century, Rosalba Carriera (often just known as Rosalba). I would like to talk about both the artist and the sitter, Gustavus Hamilton the 2nd Viscount Boyne, his outfit and his trip to Venice, as well as the pastel medium and the place of pastel portraits in 18th-century European art and culture.

The young Viscount was the grandson of a soldier promoted to Viscount Boyne for his services. This is an unusual title because it does not refer to land owned, but rather to one of the battles he fought in. He would have been about 20 years old when this portrait was made. He gazes steadily out at us, his chin tilted to his right and his torso twisted at an angle to the picture plane to show off his elaborate outfit. This is called a *contrapposto* pose, with his head facing one way and body the other, and is a standard pose in portraiture to convey the illusion of some movement rather than stiffness. He sports many different fabrics, textures and accessories, which must have both challenged and delighted the artist. His dark coat contains flecks of orange highlights, perhaps suggestive of embroidered details in golden thread. A large section of this coat is on show down his right shoulder, yet the artist has not depicted it with nearly as much detail as she does with the fur trimming or the white shirt or waistcoat. The artist appears to have been most interested in capturing the lace patterns and various textures of his white clothing. The white ermine fur trim of the coat is flecked with black tufts; the ermine fur being a sign of luxury and his elite social standing. Underneath this he seems to be wearing a silk waistcoat with round buttons and salmon-pink embroidery. The buttons are undone, revealing a high-necked shirt with a lace frill down the centre. The lace work has not been captured in great, and even, detail, rather Rosalba has skilfully conveyed the impression of the lace, in parts by using the flat side of the pastel stick dragged over a

pastel layer below. The whiteness and brightness of these clothes are offset by the man's black tricorne hat and the long dark lace veil - called a *bautta* - which is tucked under it and falls around his shoulders. This is a playful and performative outfit, a form of dressing up. This is confirmed by the inclusion of a small white mask, seen in profile and partly tucked into his hat. The angle of the Viscount's head and the positioning of the mask suggest that he has just slipped the mask to one side to reveal his identity for this portrait.

The mask is, for modern-day viewers, the clearest indication that the Viscount is in Venetian Carnival dress. We know he was in Venice for the annual carnival of January 1730 and again in 1731 - although it is not known for certain in which of these two years the portrait was made. He used his inheritance to fund this trip, part of his Grand Tour of Europe, which he made with his friend Edward Walpole, the second son of the Prime Minister Sir Robert Walpole. The portrait was originally mistaken for Edward's brother Horace. In addition to Venice, they visited Rome, Florence, Naples, islands of the Mediterranean, and Spain. The term 'Grand Tour' refers to a familiar, standard itinerary to Continental Europe - primarily France and Italy - taken by young European men from the upper classes of 18th-century society to enhance their social and cultural education, and to make useful contacts. The journeys could be difficult to schedule because they could only take place during periods of peace, for example between France and Great Britain. However, the ritual of the Grand Tour left behind a vast legacy of art and architecture, and this portrait of Viscount Boyne is arguably one of the most successful and evocative Grand Tour images.

During his travels, the Viscount met the Irish art dealer Owen Swiney, who was Rosalba's agent and he may have introduced them, as Rosalba was also in Venice in January 1730 and 1731. Born in Venice, probably in 1673, to an artistic family, Rosalba's mother was an embroiderer, and one of her two sisters, Angela, married the painter Giovanni Pellegrini (one of his paintings is also in the Barber's collection). Although her early training is uncertain, she went from designing lace patterns and painting portrait miniatures to being admitted to the prestigious art academies of Rome, Florence, and Paris as an artist with international reputation. She was admitted on merit to the academies, rather than via an honorary title

normally given to women artists. Opportunities for female artists were very limited at this time, but working in pastels was encouraged as it was thought to be a neater, tidier and more contained medium than oil. Rosalba's clientele included princes from the courts of Europe (while in Paris she portrayed Louis XV as a child) and prominent German, French and English connoisseurs, including many Grand Tourists.

She was one of the most famous pastellists working before 1800, and the most successful female artist of her generation. The range and number of other artists who copied her work is unprecedented. Rosalba's career helped to raise the status of pastels, no longer considered as suitable only for sketchy preparatory drawings but a highly prized and well-respected form of art in its own right. Her portrait of the Viscountess is Rosalba at her best - and we have the added bonus of knowing who the sitter is, and a good idea of when it was made. Many of her other sitters can no longer be identified, and she rarely dated her work, or signed it. She was so successful because she was extremely exacting; she was interested in the technical aspect of her medium and ordered pastels from different countries, concluding that French pastels were the best.

As pastels consist mainly of pure pigment, they are opaque and known for their intensity and richness of colour. These qualities were used to produce the equivalent of a highly finished painting, covering the entire sheet of paper on which it was drawn. Particularly dense areas (such as the sitter's face), and the effect of white highlights, could also be achieved by introducing white body colour (an opaque water-based paint like gouache) and applying colour more thickly to one part of the paper than the rest, as Rosalba has done in her portrait of the Viscountess. Thick, coloured paper (often blue) was commonly used, although the hue was rarely seen in final compositions because the pastels were expected to cover the whole surface. However, Rosalba, an experimental pastellist, left small parts of the blue paper showing through the Viscountess's dark lace veil, creating the illusion of great depth and intricacy. Some 20 years after the portrait of the Viscountess was made, in 1756, wove paper was introduced. This had a smoother, more uniform surface compared to the 'laid' paper used previously which was formed on moulds containing grid lines. These lines could cause shadows and interfere with the look and texture of the pastel, so artists usually modified the paper's surface. They

either levelled knots in the paper with a penknife, sanded the surface, or poured boiling water over the paper to smooth the fibres. Rosalba obscured the paper's lines in the Viscount's face, possibly by sanding the paper, but left them in the background. This creates an impression of depth and an interesting interplay of textures, which emphasises the flawless luminosity of the man's youthful skin and eyes. What is particularly extraordinary is the use of an opaque medium to convey the soft translucency of flesh and the wateriness of an eye ball. This capacity to produce a three-dimensional and translucent (or luminous) rendering of facial features was highly prized by both pastellists and their patrons. Rosalba was the most accomplished in this in the first half of the 18th century and certainly set the bar high.

Rosalba's technically accomplished pastel portraits are enhanced by her sensitive approach to her sitters. Her subjects often lack the formal expressions seen in many traditional portraits and in those by her peers, and instead she conveys a sense of an unguarded individual character and psychological state. In her portrait of the Viscount, the jutting angle of his chin conveys a degree of pride, which - with his arched eyebrows and slight upturn at the very corner of his mouth - is mixed with playfulness. Equally, I think, there is a sense of naive vulnerability; his features are soft, rounded and youthful (to the point that his face appears fleshy like puppy fat), and his eyes are large and expressive. It is almost as though we have open access to his mind. After all, he has just pushed aside his mask and bared his face for us to look directly at him.

With their potential to capture such a vivid likeness, pastels were often chosen for 18th-century souvenir portraits such as this. Like oils, they were considered to be paintings (not drawings), but were more suitable as a souvenir because they cost less than oils, and did not command such large sizes or require tools or assistants (for example to mix pigments). The portrait of the Viscount is quite a typical size, measuring 59.7 x 47.6 cm, about the size of a bathroom cabinet mirror. Pastel paintings were quicker to execute, with no drying time necessary, and so could be done in one sitting. This would have been extremely convenient for travellers, who may have only stayed in a city for a few weeks before eagerly moving on to their next destination - with their newly acquired works of art in tow.

On one hand, pastel portraits immortalised a sitter by providing a compelling likeness, yet, ironically, these paintings are extremely fragile objects, with the pigments and image easily brushed away if touched. In the 18th century, they were protected with plate glass, glues and varnish. These fixatives were detrimental to the artworks, as liquid compresses the powder, making the painting appear darker, less glossy and less luminous. Fortunately, most of the pastels that survive from the 18th century, including Rosalba's work, were not fixed. Her pastels are now in collections worldwide, including the Louvre in Paris, the Gemaldegaleries Alte Meister in Dresden, the Uffizi in Florence, the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C., and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. In UK collections, there are only a few other pastel portraits in addition to the Barber's work - there is a drawing of an unknown man from the 1720s in the National Gallery in London, three portrait miniatures and a pastel portrait at the V&A in London, and five works acquired by George III for the Royal Collection, including what is thought to be the artist's final self portrait.

There are three known versions of the Barber portrait, the second is at the Metropolitan Museum in New York and the third is in a private collection. The colour scheme is different in each one, with a Prussian blue coat dominating in the Metropolitan version. It was not unusual for Rosalba to make multiple versions of the same portrait, but it is not certain why three versions of the Viscount's portrait were made or who the original recipients were apart from the sitter himself. The Barber's version is thought to have been in the Walpole family until about 1820, when it was given to the actress Kitty Clive by Horace Walpole. Within twenty years it entered back into the Walpole family when it was purchased by Thomas Walpole the Younger (who died in 1840), and it stayed with the family until they consigned it to auction at Christie's on the 8th July 2008. From there it passed to the dealer Danny Katz Ltd, from whom it was purchased by Henry Barber Trust with assistance from the Estate of the late Elnora Ferguson, The Art Fund, the Friends of the Barber Institute and the R. D. Turner Trust, in 2009. Due to the fragility of the portrait, we normally display the work every January for a few months of the year, to coincide with the annual Venetian Carnival. This year is obviously very different, and the Barber remains closed in line with

the current government lockdown restrictions. However, I hope this talk has been a gesture towards giving Rosalba's portrait the annual recognition, if not the airing, it deserves.

Thank you very much for joining me here, and thanks to Jack Davies for playing his guitar compositions to accompany these talks. We have another talk in two week's time and look forward to welcoming you back then.

Select reading list

Adams, C. Kingsley and W. S. Lewis. "The Portraits of Horace Walpole" in *Walpole Society*, 42, London, 1970, pp. 27–28.

Baetjer, Katharine, and Marjorie Shelley. "Pastel Portraits: Images of the 18th Century" in *Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 68, no. 4. Yale University: New Haven and London, 2011.

Bernardina, Sani. "Carriera, Rosalba" in *Online Dictionary of Art*, 2003. [<https://www.oxfordartonline.com/groveart/view/10.1093/gao/9781884446054.article.T014414>].

Jeffares, Neil. "Rosalba Carriera, 'Gustavus, Viscount Boyne'" in *Pastels & Pastellists*. London, June, 2011. [Online edition, [http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Carriera_Boyne.pdf?zoom_highlight=boyne#search="boyne"](http://www.pastellists.com/Essays/Carriera_Boyne.pdf?zoom_highlight=boyne#search=)].

—. "Rosalba Carriera" in *Dictionary of Pastellists Before 1800*. London, 2006, no. J.21.0326. [Online edition, <http://www.pastellists.com/articles/carriera.pdf>]

Sell, Stacey. *The Touch of Colour: Pastels at the National Gallery of Art*. National Gallery, Washington D. C., 2019. [Exhibition and online resources, <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2019/touch-of-color-pastels.html>]

Speaker info

Helen Cobby joined the Barber Institute of Fine Arts as the Assistant Curator in the summer of 2017. She works on a variety of projects including the care, interpretation and display of the Prints and Drawings collection, the digitisation of the collections, and research into new acquisitions. She has also curated an exhibition about the Scottish Colourists with the Director Nicola Kalinsky, and assisted with the curation of the Spring 2020 exhibition, 'Cornwall as Crucible: Modernity and Internationalism in Mid-Century Britain', as well as contributing essays to the accompanying exhibition booklets. Her research interests also include Rodin's sculpture and photography (the subject of her MA dissertation at the University of London), JMW Turner's early prints and drawings, feminist art history and criticism, and 20th-century American women printmakers. For the latter, she was awarded a Jonathan Ruffer Curatorial Grant from the Art Fund to undertake research in New York City. Prior to the Barber, Helen worked in a variety of museums, including Leamington Spa Art Gallery and Museum - as the research curator, Cheltenham's Art Gallery and Museum, and most recently the Ashmolean Museum, where she curated a touring exhibition of JMW Turner's early architectural work.

Music composed and performed by Jack Davies.