

BARBER



HOME

JON SLEIGH

The Queer Gaze - Emotion and Erasure

Live Zoom Talk and Q&A

Our collection, your place

THE QUEER GAZE - EMOTION AND ERASURE

The Barber Institute of Fine Arts invites cultural facilitator Jon Sleigh to select works in our collection that speak to LGBTQ+ identities, relationships and histories. Whether implicit, inferred or the conjecture of history, each portrait is full of hidden meaning and stories. Powerful, moving and often challenging, explore the themes found within the artwork to reflect on our attitudes today and contemporary society. This accompanying Barber Home resource provides historical background about the chosen artworks, a transcript of his talk and prompts for reflection.

CONTENT WARNINGS

LGBTQ+ histories can contain unpleasant and offensive treatment of those who do not conform to gender or sexuality norms of the time.

This pack contains information on genital castration and the difficulties of searching for LGBTQ+ histories in the face of cultural erasure.



RESOURCE 1 - ELIZABETH VIGEE LEBRUN

The artist Elisabeth Louise Vigée-Lebrun is recognised as the most important female painter of the 18th century. *Portrait of Countess Golovina* (1797/1800) is an example of one of the few paintings by a female artist held in the Barber's collection. This painting is situated in our Beige Gallery, hanging alongside *A Portrait Of Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci* (1773) by Thomas Gainsborough.

Born in Paris in 1755, Lebrun was the daughter of a portraitist Louis Vigée.



Elizabeth Vigee Le Brun, *Portrait Of Countess Golovina*,
Moscow, About 1797/1800, Oil On Canvas

© The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

Lebrun received her first artistic teaching from him and then joined the Academy of Saint Luke in Paris aged 19. Her talent and fame spread, transforming her into a highly fashionable portrait painter of European nobility and royalty. Two years later, she married Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, also a painter and art dealer who helped her gain valuable access to the art world.

Lebrun became patronised by Queen Marie Antoinette in the late 18th century. She painted at least thirty portraits of the Queen. She went on to become one of only four female members of the French Academy, Académie Royale, after being admitted by royal intervention in 1783.

Slanderous scandal and displacement soon followed this success as rumours circulated about the young painter and her relationship with Marie Antoinette. From 1789 Lebrun lived a life of exile—at the onset of the French Revolution she left her unsuccessful marriage and was forced to flee France with her nine-year-old daughter.

It was in Moscow that she met the lady in this portrait, Varvara Nikolayevna Golovina, who had been appointed maid of honour at the court of Catherine II, Empress of Russia. She described Golovina as a ‘charming woman’ who was a talented musician and artist and a lover of literature.

In *Portrait of Countess Golovina* (1797/1800) we see a spontaneous and informal pose that conveys Golovina’s lively intelligence and a sympathetic engagement between the two women. The compact octagonal format and the simple setting — a diagonal shaft of light — reinforce the portrait’s intimacy. This artwork is a window into the relationship between sitter and artist that displays mutual friendship and admiration.

Looking into this portrait and the intimacy of the gaze, scholars have speculated on the nature and reported intensity of their friendship. There is no direct evidence however to support the idea that it was ever more than a friendship. However, both women kept detailed diaries which talk about the time they spent together. Later generations since edited both diaries. Speculation arises if this editing was due to political content, indiscreet detail about their contemporaries or something about the women which was considered worth hiding.

RESOURCE 2 - THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

Thomas Gainsborough, the fifth son of a cloth merchant, was born at Sudbury, Suffolk. He was first introduced to the arts by his teacher and illustrator, Hubert Gravelot. By 1745 Gainsborough had established his own studio in London going on to exhibit at the Society of Artists and becoming a foundation member of the Royal Academy in 1768. He received Royal commissions from 1777 and is considered one of Britain's most prominent portrait painters. Gainsborough was a keen musician and painted many portraits of musical friends as gifts or as showpieces.

A *Portrait Of Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci* (1773) hangs in the Barber's Beige gallery next to *Portrait of Countess Golovina*. The painting is unfinished. The existence of another completed version in a private collection suggests that



Thomas Gainsborough, *A Portrait Of Giusto Ferdinando Tenducci*,
Probably Bath, About 1773, Oil On Canvas

© The Henry Barber Trust, The Barber Institute of Fine Arts, University of Birmingham.

the artist perhaps abandoned this canvas and began again.

It shows Giusto Tenducci (1734-1790), a celebrated Italian singer who moved to England in 1758 at the age of 22. Here he is shown performing, perhaps in a domestic setting. A raised eyebrow suggests that he has hit the sort of high note associated with a castrato singer. His hair is coiffed and lightly powdered. The contemporary fashions in men for heavy make up and large wigs were beginning to disappear at the time of this portrait. These fashions were often criticised during the 18th century for effeminacy.

Tenducci was one of the most famous celebrities of the 18th century. Women flocked to his concerts and found him 'irresistible'. Mozart and Bach composed for him. Despite his success, Tenducci's career was dogged by scandal. He was frequently in debt, often borrowed money from friends and was notorious for both his extravagance and his vanity.

In 1766 he married Dora Maunsell, the 15-year-old daughter of a Dublin lawyer. The marriage was annulled nine years later on grounds of non-consummation, despite reports - including one in Giacomo Casanova's *Story of My life* - of Dora bearing two children.

THE PRACTICE OF CASTRATION

A castrato was a man who possessed a singing voice that never reaches sexual maturity due to physical castration. The practice of castration was often performed on young boys who had particularly strong singing voices before puberty. The procedure involved a cut of blood supply to, or amputation of, the testicles.

The procedure was almost exclusively practiced in Italy in the Catholic Church, beginning in the mid-16th century and continuing through the 1800's. It was a common practice with more than 4000 boys being castrated annually at the height of the popularity of the practice. Many of the boys enduring castration came from poorer income homes and they were often sold to the Church or a singing master in the hope that they would bring in money for their families.

Castration prevents normal levels of production of testosterone in the body, having several lifelong effects on physical development. Some of these effects included prevention of the growth of facial hair, narrow shoulders, fat deposits on the hips, buttocks and breast areas, bones that did not harden effectively and limbs and ribs that often grew long.

The boys' larynxes did not develop and as a result the voice remained high with a broad vocal range. This combined with intensive training gave the castrati unrivalled lung power and breath capacity.

Castrati were rarely referred to as such. More common was the term *musico* or *musici*. The term *castrato* carries a negative connotation- it's therefore used most frequently today as a reflection of contemporary society's disapproval of the practice. Castration before puberty was made illegal in Italy in 1870.

TALK TRANSCRIPT

INTRODUCTION

Jon Sleigh is an arts educator who explores emotive artwork to challenge how they are viewed and used by us.

Warm up wellbeing action – participants are invited to use the chat facility to send a message of support to others in the session. We recognise that social distancing impacts on our wellbeing and invite those attending to send a message of support to others in an environment of shared interest.

GIUSTO FERDINANDO TENDUCCI TALK – 15 MINS

Who was Tenducci? Singer and socialite

The castrato and male genital mutilation

The 18th century dandy and the fop

Marriage and Addiction in his life

The absence of evidence IS evidence – what isn't said out loud here?

Unfinished artworks and how they move us

COUNTESS GOLOVINA TALK – 15 MINS

Who was Elisabeth Vigee-Lebrun and Countess Golovina?

The French queen, politics and contemporary queering

The French revolution and meeting Golovina in Russia

Historical erasure – why did the families of both women destroy key parts of their diaries referring to each other?

The powerful gaze – who is Golovina looking at? Our ego as viewers tells us she is looking at us and we feel special in her gaze. Instead, we consider that the sitter looks directly at the artist and what this means.

Wellbeing break number two – we encourage participants to send a message in the chat function expressing support and what they are looking forward to

when returning. In addition, we show on how art directly enhances empathy and ways to be conscious of this.

SUMMARY

The problem of projected identity – do we have the right to label these sitters as queer?

Hurt caused by a lack of queer history, who do we reach for and how does it affect us?

Embracing the feeling art gives and your instincts – “if it feels queer to you it is.”

Wellbeing check in – final thoughts or questions? Thanks, goodbye / time to address any accessibility requests.

PROMPTS FOR REFLECTION

If you didn't know the history of the sitters, would you identify them as queer? If so why or why not?

What is the impact of the two works together for you?

When looking at these works, do we reflect more on the sitters, or ourselves /current society?

What happens when we change the term “lost histories” to ‘erased histories’ while exploring artwork?

Do I have the right to use a label when the individual in art history either has not or would not use the term themselves?

What word or feeling do you think of when looking at each portrait? Why is that?

Consider the influence of the tour guide – how does the energy, enthusiasm or emotion of your guide effect how you feel about the piece? Do they offer neutrality, or do they acknowledge bias?

FURTHER RESOURCES

[The Story of Catherine The Great](#)

[MET Woman in Revolutionary France](#)

[Memoirs of Madame Vigée Lebrun by Elisabeth Vigée Le Brun \(1755-1842\)](#)

[The Castration Effect; The Wellcome Collection](#)

[Queering the Norm During a Pandemic.](#)

[LGBTQ+ Histories Tour at The British Museum](#)

SUPPORT

<https://mermaidsuk.org.uk/>

<https://blgbt.org/>

<https://www.mind.org.uk/about-us/our-policy-work/equality-and-human-rights/mental-health-and-being-lgbtiqplus/>