

Thomas Gainsborough (1727 – 1788) “Blue Boy”

FAME III (March 2007)

Costume suggestion: Dress all in blue. Props: Selection of hats.

Begin modeling hats

Clothes can tell us a lot about people. What can you tell me about the people who might wear these hats? What kind of clothes might you wear if you were going to play outside? If you were going to a wedding or fancy party?

Clothing has also been different at different times in history. Today we are going to talk about an artist who lived back in the 1700's, also known as the Eighteenth century. In the 18th century, clothing was usually very elaborate and complicated, at least for people of the upper classes. People would often wear wigs, and their clothing would have lots of lace and be made of many yards of rich fabric. (*Show picture of “The Honorable Mrs. Graham”*)

The picture for today is a portrait painted by a famous English artist named Thomas Gainsborough. (*For younger children: What is a portrait? How is it different than a landscape?*) This is probably his most famous portrait, and it is called “Blue Boy.” Why do you think that is the title? (*He is wearing blue.*) Back in Gainsborough's time, there was an unspoken rule with portrait artists that blue was a cold color, and so it shouldn't be used. But Gainsborough loved the color blue, and he felt it suited the subject and coloring of this painting, so he used it in this painting, but he tried to give it a warmer tone. It is painted with oil paints on a canvas and is quite large; 48 inches wide and 70 inches tall. He painted it over another painting that he had already started to paint.

We were just talking about how clothes can tell you something about people. What do this boy's clothes tell us about him? (*He is wealthy; he can't play outside in the clothes, etc.*) If this were today, even adults would only wear such fancy clothes for a special occasion, but back in the 18th century, this boy would have dressed this way every day. The boy also has very pale skin. What kinds of things do you think he might do every day? What kinds of games would he play? (*Quiet games; probably inside most of the time.*)

How old do you think he is? (*Teenager.*) This boy's name was Jonathan Buttall, and he was the son of a rich merchant. Even though he was a teenager, he probably didn't spend much time with, or even eat dinner with, his parents. Children back then would have spent time in a nursery or with their governess (*private teacher*) instead of with parents.

It's interesting to know that the painting was in Jonathan Buttall's possession until he filed for bankruptcy in 1796. It then changed hands many times until it was sold in 1921 to the American railway pioneer Henry Edwards Huntington for \$182,200 (then a record price for any painting). Before its departure to California in 1922, “The Blue Boy” was briefly put on display at the National Gallery where it was seen by 90,000 people. The Gallery's director was moved to scrawl “Au revoir” on the back of the painting.

Remember the elements that make up painting? (*Show graphic*) This painting uses all of these elements, but one of the most striking is the use of light. Gainsborough loved to use soft, dim light to paint. In fact, his wife used to keep a large supply of candles for him to paint by. Where can you see light as an element in the portrait? (*The shimmer of the satin, the sparkle of the buttons.*) The light also helps show the textures. What textures can you see in this painting? (*Soft feather, smooth skin, soft fabric, rough lace.*)

Artist Background

Thomas Gainsborough was born in England, the youngest of nine children. He loved to roam around in the English countryside. In fact, he much preferred sketching the trees, roads, and other sights around his home to going to school.

Thomas's father was a manufacturer of fine cloth, and he tended to spoil Thomas. On sunny days he would write a note to the headmaster of Thomas's school and ask for Thomas to be excused. The note would always say, "Give Tom a holiday." Even when Thomas was in school, he spent most of his time drawing pictures for classmates. They would pay him by doing his homework for him.

Gainsborough's parents encouraged his artistic talent. In fact, his mother loved to paint pictures of flowers. They were afraid that he wouldn't be able to support himself as a painter, but they were proved wrong.

Thomas loved to play games with his brothers and sisters. One of his brothers, Jack, was nicknamed "Scheming Jack" by their father, because he was always trying to invent new things. Two of his inventions were metal wings that he used to try and fly off the roof, and a self-rocking cradle. "Scheming Jack" once made Thomas a whistle that gave Thomas his start at playing music. Thomas also had another brother, Humphrey, who was an inventor, but he invented more sensible things, like a drill plough.

By the time Thomas was thirteen, he gave up on school, because both he and his parents were convinced he could make it as an artist. He moved to London when he was fourteen, and began to work for an engraver and then for an artist. He was soon good enough to be hired by art dealers to repair old paintings, and this helped him study the techniques of famous painters.

After Thomas became a successful painter, he went back home to Sudbury to visit his family. One day, he walked into the countryside to paint. As he was painting, he soon became aware that someone was watching him. When he discovered that the watcher was a beautiful young woman, he tripped over his stool and almost spilled his paints. He learned that her name was Margaret. Thomas asked if he could paint her portrait, and then took a very long time doing it. As he worked on the portrait, they fell in love and were married soon after.

Gainsborough and his wife had two daughters, Mary and Margaret, and he taught them to paint the backgrounds for some of the portraits he did, but they did not have his talent. Thomas painted several family portraits (*show copies*). Both of his daughters were rather unstable and unhappy, although Margaret played the harpsichord quite well.

Demonstration of Gainsborough's technique

Get student volunteer. Have him/her sit in a chair, profile to the audience and at right angles to a "blank canvas" on the easel. (Use the back of the Blue Boy print.)

Gainsborough always began his portraits by assessing the basic shape of the subject, free from distracting detail. He would do this by darkening the room and looking at the overall shape of the person. *(Darken the room if possible and let them see the shape of the person in the chair).*

Then the artist would stand so that he was at an equal distance both from the subject and from the canvas, close enough to touch both. That way he would touch the canvas at exactly the same distance from which he viewed the sitter.

He would start by marking the position of the sitter's head in chalk. He often used a pair of tongs to extend his reach and to allow him to stand back from the canvas a bit.

He would then quickly block in the painting in general tones using very thin oil paint. This served as under-painting for the later layers that would show the skin and clothing.

(Turn lights up again.) After getting the rough shape, Gainsborough would use brighter light, and then apply layers of thicker paint. He always painted the head and the area around it first. He often applied several layers of translucent paint to show the texture and light, while allowing the pale color of the first rough paint to show through.

Gainsborough became famous during his lifetime, and he painted many wealthy, noble, and even royal people. He never lost his love for painting the common folk; he also always loved to paint landscapes, although his landscapes were never as well known as his portraits.

He also kept his love for music, and he spent large amounts of money collecting different types of instruments, and then learning to play them. He died of cancer in 1788. His merry wit and music were gone, but his paintings live on.