

Diana and Actaeon

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This picture is a one-off, an intoxicating mixture of figure painting and landscape. Diana and Actaeon is Gainsborough's only mythological painting, but it's not really a mythological subject – it's a study of man in nature. Although based on the story of Diana, goddess of the hunt, surprised by Actaeon bathing with her nymphs in a woodland glade, it is really a wonderfully rhythmical composition of nudes and encompassing trees. Poor Actaeon, who was turned into a stag and torn to death by his own hounds, scarcely registers. He is painted merging into the bank at mid-left, half-human and half-beast, just sprouting antlers. The goddess and her nymphs are the heart and focus of the image, but they too are somewhat indefinite, their limbs sinuously deployed in an intricate pattern of sensual creamy flesh. Looking at this beautiful and unexpected painting you can see the beginnings of Modern Art – think of Cezanne's great series of Bathers, or Matisse and his odalisques. Yet it was painted

a hundred years before such revolutionary statements.

Diana and Actaeon is a very late and intensely personal work, a private painting done for Gainsborough himself at the end of his life, not for a prospective buyer or patron.

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age encourages them to throw caution to the winds. In the spirit of anything goes, pictorial solutions become increasingly summary and more risks than ever are taken. Look at the wonderfully sketchy quality here. (In some senses the painting was never



finished.) Note the virtuoso freedom of brushwork, even for an artist already celebrated for the fluidity of his paint-handling. The broken paint surface and tonal blending combine to reinforce the imaginative realisation of the scene, and particularly the

potent sense of movement. The flickering quality of the image reminds us that Gainsborough liked to paint at twilight or by candlelight to simplify what he saw. The flame-like figures are even reminiscent of the ignis fatuus or will-o'-the-wisp to be seen in marshy places (perhaps

around Sudbury?). But the overall effect is rhythmic and musical, recalling the fact that Gainsborough himself played practically every instrument of the period. It is also curiously serene for a depiction of the prelude to violent death, and may be read as indicative of the

longed-for harmony between man and his environment to which all Gainsborough's art was tending.

Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), DIANA AND ACTAEON, (c. 1784–6), oil on canvas Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016