

The Painter's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly

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There is a special place in the galaxy of British portrait greats for artists portrayals of their own children. The polite masks drop. The brush need not finish. Attachment elbows out decorum. In Gainsborough's portrait of his two young daughters Mary and Margaret chasing a butterfly, this is achieved more enduringly than any other painting I know: the paint flows across the canvas as liquid love from their father's heart.

This portrait exemplifies everything that is great about Gainsborough. It is both a portrait and a story of childish wonderment and delight. The unfinished passages in the skirt and shoes are indivisible from the mood, adding poetry and swiftness. Beams of light – as if captured in the glade that they are running – cause the sisters' features to glow. Mary's

sideways glance directs you to little Margaret, who in turn urges you to the wings of their quarry. Your eye joins the momentum of the moment, sweeping back through Margaret's little hand, held with protective firmness by her elder sister, and then back again to the chase.

Like every great work of art, it is a painting that satisfies on multiple levels. The physiognomies are subtle and affecting; the childrens' midflight movement is astonishingly convincing, anticipating photography; the lemon, silver and blue hues and reflections masterful – even more so when the discoloured surface varnish has been removed (which it is in need of). Perhaps most profound is the fusion of humanity and nature. His girls belong in their setting, as much as the butterfly they chase, and

the foliage and flowers that surround them. Gainsborough rarely portrayed flora and fauna with taxonomic exactitude but here, despite its unpainted passages, he has taken the trouble to fully resolve both insect and flower. It is as if the degree of detail is attempting to impart a message.

The butterfly alights upon a marsh thistle, one of the most abundant nectar sources in the summer meadow. Its clarity in contrast to the generalised foliage of the trees is pronounced. The butterfly itself, ribbed winged with apical black spots is instantly recognisable as the Great White, specified by Linnaeus in the decade this was painted (*Pieris Brassicae*). The lives of both, at least in the form we see them now, pass all too soon. Such attention to the uplifting but short-lived joys of spring and summer are not



without purpose.

It is thought that this painting is one of the earliest portraits of Gainsborough's two daughters Mary and Margaret and was probably painted in Ipswich in the mid-1750s.

The Painter's Daughters chasing a Butterfly is on display at the Princeton University Art Museum, USA, until 9 June 2019

Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88),
THE PAINTER'S DAUGHTERS
CHASING A BUTTERFLY,
c. 1756
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