

Reynolds

Plymouth

by KATE RETFORD

THE SUBTITLE TO the exhibition *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Acquisition of Genius at Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery* (closed 20th February) was well chosen. As Sam Smiles points out in his introduction to the substantial catalogue,¹ Reynolds's idea of genius was very far from any notions of inherent talent or divine spark. For him, it was something to be nurtured, to be developed through a process of diligent industry and training. This exhibition traced the fruits of his own assiduous labour, which took him from a perhaps unlikely start as the son of a Devon schoolmaster to the glories of being 'Sir Joshua', President of the Royal Academy of Arts and foremost society portraitist in late eighteenth-century London.

At the entrance to the show was Reynolds's self-portrait of c.1747–49 (cat. no.32: Fig.55). In this Rembrandtesque image, we see the artist in his mid-twenties, shading his eyes as he gazes out of the canvas, not quite meeting the viewer's gaze but looking somewhere over one's right shoulder. The muted hues that dominate the painting are offset by the blue silk waistcoat; the softness of the general painterly effect is accentuated by the contrastingly hard, diagonal line of the painter's maulstick. This is the only known self-portrait to show Reynolds with the tools of his trade. The exhibition took us from this striking image to the 1773 *Self-portrait in doctoral robes* (no.33), in which brushes and palette are typically omitted in favour of an emphasis on one of the many honours and titles that were to be heaped upon the artist.

The exhibition explored Reynolds's early years and his training under Thomas Hudson, leading portraitist of the day. The precocious young man was insistent that, if he could not be apprenticed to a painter of note, he would sooner not bother; 'he would rather be an apothecary than an ordinary painter; but if he could be bound to an eminent master, he should choose the latter'.² The show then moved onto Reynolds's West Country patrons and the importance of local wealthy landowning families such as the Edgcumbes in his early years and through the rest of his career. This section of the exhibition was nicely handled, with the various groups of family portraits clustered together in enclosed, intimate spaces to good effect. The paintings from Saltram, west of Plymouth, provided some of the highlights of the show, including the double-portrait of John and Therese Parker (1779; no.20; Fig.56). Reynolds himself may have been most gratified with the head of the boy, but it is the pert face, large eyes and tightly clasped hands of his sister which most fully exemplify the style of child portraiture for which the artist was renowned, both in his own lifetime and the subsequent century. What became particularly apparent

in this section was how Reynolds was so much more than a portraitist to such families. He was a supreme social networker (and climber), not only producing a number of portraits for the Parkers, but also becoming a close family friend. He seems to have acquired paintings for them in Rome; he toured artists' studios with them in London; he advised on the display of their art collection at Saltram; and he even, on one occasion, lent Sir Thomas Parker money.

The prompt for this exhibition was the Plymouth Museum's acquisition in 2007 of a number of portraits by Reynolds of members of the Eliot family. Of particular interest is the conversation piece *The Eliot family*, dated to c.1746 but likely to be somewhat earlier (no.7). This was a singular foray into a sub-genre of portraiture highly popular at the time, and one conducted here with a notable lack of success. Drawing heavily on Anthony van Dyck's *The Pembroke family* of c.1635 at Wilton, it fails to translate the style and composition into the small group-portrait idiom. The poorly rendered faces and drapery, the mistakes in scale and the mishandled setting indicate, perhaps, why Reynolds went on to become so successful with the broad facture and drama of the grand manner. When he returned to the model of Van Dyck's seminal family-group many years later in *The Marlborough family* of 1777–78, he was not only a much more accomplished artist, but he also revisited the prototype on a grander scale which echoed the original.

From the West Country, the exhibition took the visitor through Reynolds's Grand Tour to Italy between 1749 and 1752, where, according to one manuscript on display, he spent a memorable day in the Sistine Chapel, 'walking up and down with great self importance'. The story continued with Reynolds's established career in London and the era that featured in the Tate's exhibition *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity* in 2005.³ In these sections the coherence of the Plymouth show faltered a little, although the theme of Reynolds's

'hard-headed understanding of the business side of portraiture' continued with his portrait of (no.31) and two mezzotints by James McArdell (nos.29 and 30). Reynolds not only dominated the Royal Academy exhibitions with his portraits of celebrities, he was also highly alert to the potential of the rapidly expanding print market. McArdell was the first engraver to work for Reynolds, and the artist's astute, reputed assessment of his mezzotints indicates the importance of such prints for both his national and international reputation: 'by this man I shall be immortalized'.⁴

An abrupt break occurred between the latter section, dealing with Reynolds's inexorable rise, and the next focused on his activities as a collector of prints and drawings. This gallery included an impressive selection from the three thousand or so sheets which were sold at auction following the artist's death, and amply demonstrated the sheer range of his collection in schools and styles. Guido Reni's *Head of St Crispin* (c.1620–21; no.61) retains an original 'Reynolds' mount with its simple frame, and the mechanisms of collecting were here very much under scrutiny. The catalogue notes the way in which these works passed between portraitists and frequently from master to student. The provenance of Van Dyck's *A sheet of studies for a male figure* (no.64) begins with the collection of Jonathan Richardson, moves onto that of his protégé, Thomas Hudson, and thence to Reynolds himself.

Although, to some extent, this move into collecting created a sense of there being two shows, the theme of 'the acquisition of genius' persisted. James Northcote's description of Reynolds, at home in the evenings, 'looking over, and studying from, the prints of the Old Masters' enhances the sense of constant study, the persistent search for inspiration and, of course, the hunt for sources for the artist's infamous 'borrowings' – the direct transposition of selected poses and compositions into his own work.⁵ As Reynolds opined: 'Invention, strictly speaking, is little more than a new combination of those images which have been



55. *Self-portrait shading the eyes*, by Joshua Reynolds. c.1747–49. Canvas, 63 by 40 cm. (National Portrait Gallery, London; exh. Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery).



56. *John and Therese Parker*, by Joshua Reynolds. c.1779. Canvas, 142.2 by 111.8 cm. (National Trust, Morley Collection, Saltram; exh. Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery).

previously gathered and deposited in the memory'.⁶

The final section dealt with 'Legacy', ranging from a bust of Reynolds, commissioned for Plymouth public library in the 1860s, through a mid-nineteenth-century earthenware tile adorned with Reynolds's *Strawberry girl* (no.86), to George Richmond's 1840 *Self-portrait* (no.89), revealing a clear debt to the image with which the exhibition opened. This was perhaps the logical ending to a show commemorating a 'local boy made good', but it was an unfortunately fragmented and patchy one. What the exhibition sometimes lacked in coherence, however, was more than made up for in scale and ambition. It contributed considerably to both our understanding of Reynolds's West Country roots and his activities as a collector of graphic works. And the decision to conclude the show with an evocation of Reynolds's long shadow was, in part, justified as an extension of the story that led from the aspirational young artist of the first exhibit to the crimson-robed President of the Royal Academy. As the artist himself confessed in an engagingly candid moment: 'Distinction is what we all seek after [. . .] and I go with the great stream of life'.⁷

¹ Catalogue: *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Acquisition of Genius*. Edited by Sam Smiles. 208 pp. incl. 122 col. + b. & w. ills. (Sansom & Company Ltd., with University of Plymouth and Plymouth City Museum and Art Gallery, 2009), £24.99 (PB). ISBN 978-1-9065-934-07.

² *Ibid.*, p.17.

³ M. Postle, ed.: exh. cat. *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity*. London (Tate Britain) 2005; reviewed by David Mannings in this Magazine, 147 (2005), pp.428-29.

⁴ See Smiles, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.94.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.106.

⁶ J. Reynolds: *Discourses on Art*, ed. R.R. Wark, New Haven and London 1997, p.27.

⁷ Smiles, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.97.

Madeleine Vionnet

Paris

by LYNNE COOKE

SEVERAL DECADES AFTER her retirement in 1939, Madeleine Vionnet drew a distinction between a 'true couturier' and 'those working today': a couturier was involved with 'dressing a body with fabric', she claimed, whereas the latter, whom she dismissed as 'painters' and 'decorators', were dedicated to 'constructing an outfit'. Pragmatism had long been a hallmark of her aesthetic: the belief that 'a couturier dresses human beings not dreams' was another of her foundational tenets. Vionnet's distinction still holds, as may be seen in a comparison of the work of, say, Issey Miyake or Isabel Toledo, with the extravaganzas that typify current impresarios of the spectacular, Christian Lacroix and John Galiano.

One of the few supremely intelligent couturiers, Vionnet honed her philosophy over a period of two decades between the two World Wars. Although in that era her vision reigned alongside that of Coco Chanel and Elsa Schiaparelli, 'what I did wasn't fashion', she later claimed with considerable credibility, 'it was designed to last a life time', something made amply clear by the recent exhibition *Madeleine Vionnet, puriste de la mode* at **Les Arts Décoratifs – Mode et textile, Paris** (closed 31st January).¹ Vionnet's enduring influence stems above all from her technical innovations, which involved forms of cutting and draping that allowed the fabric to fall in line with the moving body and thereby freed the female figure from the constrictions of not only corsets and stays, but also linings and other infrastructural supports. Favouring crepes of different weights which were at once fluid and elastic, she devised the most elegant of dresses from astonishingly simple patterns based on geometric shapes folded, twisted, torqued and pleated so that the cloth wrapped securely around the upper body then fell to the floor in graceful folds.

Much else in Vionnet's practice was also pioneering, not least her social vision. The services she provided her staff of some twelve hundred seamstresses and specialist artisans who worked in what she termed her 'factory', went far beyond the legal requirements. On site medical and dental care (not just for the employees but for their parents and their children as well) were on offer together with maternity leave, a cafeteria serving healthy food, and extra-curricular options, ranging from classes in French to mathematics and other disciplines, for those who wanted to improve their education. And a purpose-built atelier offered model working conditions: plenty of natural light and clean air along with hygienic surroundings. Vionnet's concern with the well-being of her staff extended into the realm of the creator as she became a pioneer in establishing rights for the couturier, leading efforts to

install legislation that would recognise the designers' works as their intellectual and artistic property. Thus, in addition to prosecuting breaches of copyright, she devised an ingenious label on which both her signature and her fingerprint were inscribed in order to ensure her garments' authenticity. Vionnet's foresight in protecting her legacy was part of a vaulting ambition she once characterised in terms of the desire to make Rolls Royces rather than Fords. (Her arch-rival, Chanel, prided herself on her ability to create Fords, by which she meant designs that achieved an unchallenged ubiquity and popularity at all social levels; to the highly narcissistic Chanel, imitation and plagiarism were confirmation of her originality.)

Vionnet's conviction that a successful Maison depended equally on a well-run business, on creativity and on exquisitely refined technical expertise contributed to her legendary status. When faced in 1939 with the loss of her lease and the uncertainty of approaching war, she recognised that she had already done all she wanted as a designer and retired. In 1952 in a highly unusual but prescient gesture, she donated over one hundred of her original fashions plus her archive to the French State, a bequest that now forms part of the unrivalled holdings of her work in the collection of the Musée de la Mode et du Textile and was the source for this exceptional retrospective. Based on its detailed inventory, the labels for every exhibit in this show took the form of a small LED screen on which looped verbal documentation, together with a professional illustrator's sketches of the design from front and back, and a registration photograph of the garment on a model who is posed in front of mirrors that reveal it from a trio of



57. *Robe du soir*, by Madeleine Vionnet. Winter 1935. Silk. (Musée de la Mode et du Textile, Paris).