

NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

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**PRESS PREVIEW

Thursday, September 28, 1983
10 a.m. - 3 p.m.

GAINSBOROUGH DRAWINGS
AT NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART

WASHINGTON, D. C. June 30, 1983. The first U.S. exhibition of drawings by Thomas Gainsborough, the eighteenth-century British painter and master draftsman, goes on view October 2 through December 4, 1983 in the National Gallery of Art's West Building ground floor galleries. The exhibition includes 91 drawings--pastoral landscapes as well as figure studies and costumes sketches--that illustrate Gainsborough's development as an artist from the beginning to the end of his career.

The drawings have been selected by the Director of the National Portrait Gallery, London, Dr. John Hayes, who is a leading authority on Gainsborough and by Lindsay Stainton, Assistant Keeper of Prints and Drawings at the British Museum, London. The International Exhibitions Foundation has organized the exhibition, which has been drawn primarily from British collections with additional works from American and European lenders.

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A compulsive draftsman, Gainsborough drew primarily for his own pleasure rather than in preparation for paintings. He produced thousands of drawings; however, only 800 to 900 are known today. Because the artist never intended to sell his works, he discarded many of them and gave others to friends and family. Gainsborough rarely signed his drawings although many are stamped with his gold monogram.

While he was most renowned during his lifetime as a portrait painter, his greatest joy was landscape. He did not endeavor, though, to make topographical representations of specific sites. Instead, he created melodic, rhythmical compositions that would evoke a pastoral mood of serenity and repose.

Gainsborough was born in 1727 in the rural market town of Sudbury, Suffolk, and at the age of thirteen he began to carefully observe and sketch trees, rocks, and other features of the local countryside. He went to London where he worked for several years in the studio of Hubert François Gravelot, a draftsman, designer, and book illustrator, who introduced Gainsborough to a group of British rococo artists that included William Hogarth. Gravelot did more than anyone to disseminate the French rococo in England, an influence prevalent in Gainsborough's drawings. Several of Gainsborough's earliest works, produced during his London period are included in this exhibition: Portrait of an Unknown Man (1743-1744) and Portrait of an Unknown Woman (1743-1744).

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In London, Gainsborough also studied seventeenth-century Dutch painting. His ability to create depth by juxtaposing light and dark planes, his handling of light, his awareness of the importance of sky, and the emotional overtones of his work are among the elements typical of Dutch naturalism which he learned by studying and copying paintings by such masters as Ruisdael, Waterloo, and Wynants. Thus he combined these elements of the Dutch tradition with the swirling rhythms of the French rococo, adding his own loose, vigorous style to create an expression that is distinctly Gainsborough's.

After returning to his native Sudbury in 1748, and following a brief sojourn in Ipswich, Gainsborough settled in 1759 in Bath, a fashionable resort near London where he spent fifteen years --- his most important period of development as an artist. Although he showed less enthusiasm during this time for landscapes, he continued to produce them in great numbers, some on site in the forests near Bath, such as the drawing Beech Trees in the Woods at Foxley, with Yazor Church in the Distance (1760), which is in this exhibition.

While Gainsborough rarely made preparatory sketches for the faces or the compositions of his portraits, he did make studies of women's elaborate dresses, frequently using a costumed doll. One such example in the exhibition is Study of a Woman Wearing a Shawl (c. 1760). The most appealing figure drawings from his Bath period are not those made for the formal portraits, but the spontaneous drawings he made of his friends. One of the most charming of these, A Music

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Party (c. 1767), also exemplifies the artist's extraordinary portrayal of figures in candlelight.

As a successful painter in Bath, Gainsborough was able to study old master paintings in private collections and he was deeply influenced by the work of van Dyck, Rubens, and Claude. These influences led to new developments in his compositional schemes and a more dramatic use of light effects. Familiarity with the art of the old masters also expanded his technical virtuosity. Drawings like Wooded Landscape with the Country Cart and Faggot Gatherers (c. 1770) show an increasingly broad treatment and more rapid execution. In the course of the 1760s, he all but ceased to use pencil as a medium because it was too slow for his hand; he began to rely instead on watercolor and washes, which allowed more rapid application, and frequently applied them with sponges or his fingers.

In 1774, Gainsborough moved to London where he was quite successful and lived comfortably until his death in 1788. This exhibition includes four brilliantly executed drawings that were probably made around 1785 as preliminary studies for The Richmond Water-Walk, a painting commissioned by King George III that was regrettably never completed. The latter part of his career is characterized by an even greater freedom than before as he experimented with seascapes, such as A Coastal Scene with Shipping, Figures and Cows (c. 1784), and "fancy pictures" that concentrated on the kind

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of figures that had previously been mere staffage in his landscapes: Study of a Woodman Carrying Faggots (c. 1787) is typical of this genre.

The exhibition will also be seen at the Kimbell Art Museum, Fort Worth, Texas, from December 17, 1983 - February 19, 1984 and at the Yale Center for British Art, New Haven, Connecticut, from March 7, 1983 - April 29, 1983. A fully illustrated exhibition catalogue is being published by the International Exhibitions Foundation with an introduction by Dr. Hayes and individual catalogue descriptions by Ms. Stainton. The exhibition is being coordinated at the National Gallery of Art by Virginia Tuttle, curator in the Gallery's department of prints and drawings.

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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION or photographs please contact Katherine Warwick, Assistant to the Director (Information Officer) or Carolyn Amiot, Information Office, National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. 20565 (202) 842-6353.