GAINSBOROUGH AND BATH

High Society and the Season in Bath

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- supplemented by my own notes.

N.A.D.F.A.S.
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Thomas Gainsborough was born in Sudbury, Suffolk, in 1727 (he was christened on 14th May of that year).

He was the youngest son of John Gainsborough who was a local weaver and maker of woollen goods.

When Thomas was 13 years old, he impressed his father with his pencilling skills so that he let him go to London in 1740 to study art. He was financed by his uncle.

In London he first trained under the engraver Hubert Gravelot but eventually he became associated with William Hogarth and his school.
One of his mentors was Francis Hayman.

During those years he contributed to the decoration of what is now the Thomas Coram Foundation for Children and the supper boxes at Vauxhall Gardens.

The above self portrait was painted by Gainsborough in 1759 when he was 32 years old

In the 1740s, Gainsborough married Margaret Burr who was an illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Beaufort. The Duke settled a £200 annuity on the couple.

The artist's work, then mainly composed of landscape paintings, was not selling very well. He returned to Sudbury in 1748–1749, having married the pregnant Margaret, and concentrated on the painting of portraits.
During this period he painted “Mr & Mrs Andrews” – having been at school in Sudbury with Mr Andrews.

Sudbury could not provide enough wealthy potential clientele to support Gainsborough and so, In 1752, he moved with his wife and 2 daughters to Ipswich as he had been told that it had a wider cultural circle. There it was recommended by those in the “know” that he should go to Bath.

1758 Gainsborough went to Bath for a period of six months to determine whether he wished to move there with his family. He was 31 years old at the time.

1759: Gainsborough and his family moved to Bath permanently. There, he studied portraits by van Dyck and was eventually able to attract a better-paying high society clientele.

1761: he began to send work to the Society of Arts exhibition in London (now the Royal Society of Arts, of which he was one of the earliest members);

1769 onwards: he submitted works to the Royal Academy's annual exhibitions. He selected portraits of well-known or notorious clients in order to attract attention.

These exhibitions helped him acquire a national reputation, and he was invited to become one of the founding members of the Royal Academy in 1769. His relationship with the academy, however, was not an easy one and he stopped exhibiting his paintings there in 1773.

Why did Gainsborough identify Bath as a place to move to from Suffolk?
Bath, at the time, was seen by many as the place to be seen.
It was a slightly dangerous place as you could buy your way into Bath society if you had the right clothes!
If the lady's maid could be mistaken for her mistress simply by her clothing, what a dangerous notion!

Mrs Delaney pronounced Bath – "the busiest idle city in the world"

David Garrick, the actor, also wrote how Bath could exert a magical atmosphere over those visiting the city and that when he was there, he forgot his family in London and everything else!

There was an immense building programme going on in Bath when the Gainsboroughs arrived.

Bath's promenades were the talk of London – 3000 people could gather together in one place on them and they were LEVEL – this was very unusual.

Bath could hold its head high as far as its pavements etc were concerned – they were the equal of those in London and indeed abroad also.

Key people in Bath included apothecaries, doctors etc. Susan Sloman has written an interesting book entitled: "Gainsborough in Bath" and describes Gainsborough's development during his middle years as well as information about Bath and its role as a cultural centre of Europe.

Drawing on documents and a variety of little-known contemporary published sources, the book seeks to illuminate artistic activity in Bath, and Gainsborough's part in it. Sloman describes the supporting players in the artist's career, including his banker, patrons, suppliers, wine merchant, tailor and other artists and writers, and considers how Gainsborough's place in the commercial life of the town influenced his portrait practice and the evolution of his personal style. She also sheds light on how medicine was critical to Bath's development – as well as the great concerts, etc. This was important to Gainsborough who wanted the best medical opinion available to him and his family.
The Mineral Water Hospital opened in 1738 not so long before the Gainsboroughs moved there.

When Gainsborough first moved to Bath, his house was near the Baths and he had to put up with the smells etc because he needed to be in the centre of things. His sister, Mary Gibbon, moved with him also – she was a milliner (in those days a styling consultant) and she would ensure that Gainsborough's subjects were suitably attired etc. Men went to the milliner as well as women.

Gainsborough wanted to be painting landscapes but he had to earn money by "painting faces".
He was very learned and very witty. He could capture a likeness in the first 10 minutes and was known for the speed with which he worked - whereas his great rival, Joshua Reynolds, would struggle to get the likeness. Because of Gainsborough's talent to do this, his fame spread rapidly.
Where did he get this extraordinary ability to capture likeness? He was unusual in that he insisted that people wore the dress of the period that they were in – he got these ideas from his great tutor, William Hogarth.
From Hogarth he got a mastery of paint and the ability to attend to great detail.
Gainsborough picked up little details about his subjects – he had an acute interest in costume and dress.

Subsequently Gainsborough moved with his clientele to the Circus itself and had a house there.

People tended to spend six weeks on average in Bath for the season. When you arrived, the Master of Ceremonies would take you around the various Rooms. Gentlemen had to wear a fully trimmed suit and have their hair in a "bag" – not a curled wig.
Gainsborough would also advise as to what people should wear – what they looked good in. He loved this role.

Gainsborough was very definitely himself a man of fashion and followed the fashion.

Occupations you might choose in Bath:

- Taking the waters
- Attending Musical concerts
- Going for Tea at the Pump Room
- Sitting for Gainsborough – there would be a queue!

One of Gainsborough's very first portraits was of Lady Mostyn – who in the portrait was dressed in the absolute height of Bath fashion for the year – a sack back dress! She also was painted wearing the latest paste jewellery. Sack Back dresses (the latest French fashion) was declared by Beau Nash to be essential for ladies to wear at the balls in Bath! Gentlemen had to know whether their wigs should have 2 curls or 3 curls etc.

Beau Nash was the Master of Ceremonies in Bath before Gainsborough moved there and established Bath as a place which gained the edge over places like Tonbridge Wells etc that were contenders. Beau Nash established the rules to ensure that people were introduced to the right connections! His role was to introduce people to others who didn't know anybody. He was paid for the big key balls that he held.

William Hoare, described by Chalmers as 'an ingenious and amiable English painter', took Gainsborough under his wing. Hoare was closely involved with the running of the Royal Mineral Water Hospital in Bath from 1742 and served as a governor of the hospital. Hoare became acquainted with Bath's notable visitors and the neighbouring landed families. He died at Bath on 12 December, 1792.

Gainsborough painted full-length figures and enjoyed painting the silk through the muslin: texture through texture. He realised that because he chose to live in Bath, rather than London, he could not charge the London rates or what Reynolds did therefore.

To begin with, he charged 8 guineas for a head and shoulders portrait and 20 guineas for a half length one.
He increased these charges within a few years.
He always charged about 20 guineas below Reynolds because he wanted people to come to Bath and choose him above Reynolds.

Ann Ford, the wife of his biographer who was a contemporary and friend. She was a musician and a woman of culture and letters, Music was very important to Gainsborough and to Ann Ford. He painted her in 1760.
He painted her as what he called an exhibition piece, not a commission. It could be hung publicly and be a talking piece. Mrs Delaney commented upon it – a whole length with her guitar – "But I should be very sorry to have anyone I loved set forth in such a manner" - This was because of the pose – crossed legs. It was seen as extraordinarily provocative. Gainsborough would have known this, and knew just how much to push boundaries. He had very modern views towards women and believed they should be educated.

He was the Royal favourite painter but did receive a knighthood because he wouldn't "play the game" and keep to conventions.

He built up a huge patronage in Bath – occasionally for the odd duke he might have to go to London - but he managed to entice most people to Bath.

Gainsborough died at the age of 61 – which was quite premature for the time. He got quite exhausted towards the end. He owned a "layman" – a figure that would be dressed in the sitter's absence to remind him how the material draped etc.

Edward Turner came into a fortune and went to Bath – Gainsborough probably didn't like him – he painted him as he saw him and didn't try to influence his address.

The Blue Boy (c. 1770) is perhaps Gainsborough's most famous work and is an oil painting thought to be a portrait of Jonathan Buttall, the son of a wealthy hardware merchant (although this was never proved). It is a historical costume study as well as a portrait: the youth in his 17th-century apparel is regarded as Gainsborough's homage to Anthony Van Dyck, and is particularly close to Van Dyck's portrait of Charles II as a boy. The Blue Boy was painted as an exhibition piece like that of Ann Ford.

It would be worth getting hold of Gainsborough's letters – many were burned by his wife so the ones that survive are those that he sent to other people. They reveal his sense of humour. He was a great friend of David Garrick.

Gainsborough moved back to London in 1775 after spending 15 years in Bath. He then had 13 years in London before he died on 2nd August 1788.

Gainsborough moved to London, living in Pall Mall and had a coachman and all the trappings of wealth.
Reynolds visited him a few days before he died of cancer.

Gainsborough is quoted as saying that there must be effects in painting "that make the heart dance".