



SENSATION & SENSIBILITY

Viewing Gainsborough's "Cottage Door"

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*Upcoming Exhibition Will Explore How Audiences
Viewed Gainsborough's Landscapes in the Late 18th through Early 19th Centuries*

SAN MARINO, Calif. – An innovative exhibition featuring the work of Thomas Gainsborough at The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens will re-create the viewing experience of late 18th- and early 19th-century art audiences in England, replete with a sound-and-light show and a tent room encircled with mirrors and glowing lamps.

Sensation and Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's "Cottage Door" runs from Feb. 11 to May 14, 2006 in the MaryLou and George Boone Gallery. "The aim of the exhibition is to evoke for modern day viewers the modes of viewing that shaped Gainsborough's landscape vision and his audiences' emotional response to his works," says Ann Bermingham, curator of the exhibition. "The material on display in the exhibition also explores the fascination with special visual effects at the end of the 18th century."

Sensation and Sensibility takes as its focal point the Huntington's Gainsborough painting "The Cottage Door" (ca. 1780). The exhibition brings together for the first time a group of paintings, prints, and drawings related to this artist's pictorial treatment of the cottage and cottage life. His cottage door paintings were the first in Britain to focus on the subject of cottage life—depicting the life of rural peasantry in woodland settings. They also embodied the 18th-century idea of "sensibility"—similar to the modern notion of sympathy, an intense awareness of another's feelings and an ability to share them. The doctrine of sensibility underpinned a new civic and political ethic based on the assumption that mankind was inherently good and benevolent, says Bermingham.

It proposed that poor and unsophisticated people were less corrupted by civilization and thus more capable of feeling sympathy. It also held that the hardships of virtuous and simple people were the proper objects of another's sympathy. As a result, people who lived modestly and close to nature became both the examples and the objects of sympathy. "Gainsborough's paintings of cottage dwellers embody sensibility's idealized and nostalgic view of human nature by emphasizing the innocence and vulnerability of the rural poor and the unspoiled beauty of the cottage landscape," she says.

Gainsborough's major cottage door compositions, including the Huntington's painting, all show young, elegant-looking women and cherubic children clustered at the door of a cottage, which melts into its landscape setting. The artwork's overall emotive power is enhanced by Gainsborough's use of heightened color and theatrical treatment of light. "His cottage-door paintings are meant to tug at our heartstrings; they are full of visual stimuli meant to touch us and move us in new ways," explains Bermingham.

The Huntington exhibition re-creates models, viewing apparatuses, and period rooms, providing an opportunity for the modern viewer to step back in time. The exhibition features a modern re-creation of the *Eidophusikon*, a small mechanical theater designed in 1781 by Gainsborough's friend Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg, a Swiss artist and theater set designer who settled in London. De Loutherbourg's *Eidophusikon*, in many ways a precursor to motion pictures, combined theatrical painting, lighting effects, and sound to create sensational landscape scenes with convincing depictions of changing natural light and atmosphere in the context of thrilling and terrible events such as fires and storms. Scenic illusions were accompanied by sound effects and music. The *Eidophusikon* fascinated Gainsborough and influenced his later landscapes.

Equally exciting for visitors to the exhibition will be the display of the Huntington's "Cottage Door" in a room specifically created to evoke the tent room of Sir John Leicester's London townhouse, where it was displayed to great fanfare in 1818. A modern re-creation complete with fabric tenting, mirrors, and special lighting evoking the glow of oil lamps, allows 21st-century visitors to experience how earlier viewers would have encountered Gainsborough's painting.

The exhibition was co-organized by The Huntington and the Yale Center for British Art in New Haven, Conn., where it opened Oct. 6. It was curated by Ann Bermingham, Professor of History of Art and Architecture at the University of California, Santa Barbara, in collaboration with Shelley Bennett, Curator of British and European Art and Melinda McCurdy, Assistant Curator, British Art at The Huntington, and Julia Marciari Alexander, the Yale Center's associate director for programmatic affairs.

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ABOUT THE HUNTINGTON: The Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens is a collections-based research and educational institution serving scholars and the general public. More information can be found on the Web at www.huntington.org.

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[NOTE: High-resolution digital images are available on request for publicity use.]