

*ALLAN RAMSAY · PORTRAITS OF THE ENLIGHTENMENT*



MUNGO CAMPBELL with Anne Dulau  
and essays by Melanie Buntin, Rhona Brown, John Bonehill, Rica Jones

# ALLAN RAMSAY

*Portraits of the Enlightenment*

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## *Foreword*

The year 2013 marks the tercentenary of the birth of Allan Ramsay (1713–1784), one of the most accomplished of all portrait painters of the European Enlightenment. Ramsay is probably best known for a supreme elegance of manner which set him apart from his British contemporaries, particularly in his portraits of women. It is entirely appropriate that the most significant event marking this anniversary should be organised in Ramsay's native Scotland by The Hunterian, one of the greatest of all Enlightenment museums. It is not by chance that The Hunterian, at the University of Glasgow, is permanent home to a number of key works by Ramsay, chief among which is one of the finest of all his portraits, that of its founder, the painter's close friend and fellow Scot, William Hunter.

This publication and the exhibition which it accompanies represent the first major reassessment of Ramsay since that staged by the Scottish National Portrait Gallery in Edinburgh and the National Portrait Gallery in London in 1992. That substantial survey marked the culmination of a lifetime's scholarship by Alastair Smart; all who have worked on this present project must acknowledge their deep indebtedness to Smart for a depth of knowledge, a thoroughness and a connoisseurship which remain as robust today as they were at the time of his death in 1992. As is entirely appropriate for a university museum founded in the Enlightenment, The Hunterian's commemoration concentrates on Ramsay's intellectual career as a painter and in the other fields, literary, antiquarian and political in which he sought to make his mark.

Major exhibitions are significant expressions of collaborative personal and institutional engagement.

This publication is an outstanding example of shared research endeavour among colleagues in The Hunterian and the College of Arts at the University of Glasgow. Research undertaken for this book was supported by the Lewis Walpole Library, the Paul Mellon Centre and the Carnegie Trust. The Paul Mellon Centre and the Gordon Fraser Charitable Trust both provided substantial funds for this publication, for which we are particularly grateful.

The wonderful paintings that tell this story have been gathered from the walls of public galleries and private houses and lent with extraordinary generosity, in some instances for the first time in almost 250 years. Our final, and most considerable debt of gratitude must be to those institutions and individuals who made some of Ramsay's greatest portraits available for this exhibition.

PROFESSOR DAVID GAIMSTER

*Director, The Hunterian*

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## I

## *A Rational Taste for Resemblance: Redefining Ramsay's Reputation*

It is some 230 years since Allan Ramsay died at Dover, a Scot on his way home to London from a final journey to Italy. That Ramsay's life ended in this way should come as little surprise; in many respects those three circumstances of the geography of his death sum up neatly the trajectory of his whole career. Such geographical relationships, some fortuitous, others the products of their time, represent a key thread throughout the narrative of the essays in this book. Three essays, by Melanie Buntin and Rhona Brown, Anne Dulau, and John Bonehill, investigate particular aspects of Ramsay's connections with Scotland, France and Italy respectively. A fourth, by Rica Jones, offers new insights into Ramsay's technical processes. The intention of this introductory essay is to suggest new approaches for re-evaluating the career and ambition of a painter whose technical mastery created some of the most accomplished portraits produced anywhere during the eighteenth century. Today, Ramsay remains widely admired far beyond his native Scotland, while his often equivocal place within the wider context of eighteenth-century British art has frequently left his reputation and his paintings almost as entirely invisible as a participant in twenty-first-century accounts of British art as he was among those of his contemporaries.

From Jonathan Richardson, through Joshua Reynolds himself, to William Hazlitt, Edgar Wind and, more recently, Joanna Woodall, Marcia Pointon and Shearer West, the philosophy, the politics and the cultural and intellectual significance of that most Anglo Saxon of art-forms, the portrait, has provided a rich source around which to form any examination of cultural, and particularly British,

history.<sup>1</sup> Any survey on the literature of art in Britain during the eighteenth century will make one thing instantly clear: Reynolds still commands attention, through his teaching and writing, his leadership of the newly founded Royal Academy, and, of course, through his painting. However, if Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough are seen as rivals whose careers are almost impossible to discuss without mutual reference, the same cannot be said of Reynolds and Ramsay. Even at the peak (and what transpired to be the climax) of his career as a painter during the 1760s, Ramsay's work frequently appeared somewhat removed from the discourse which surrounded fellow British artists, finding better explanation through the context of a lifetime spent in intellectual engagement with his European contemporaries. For all the visual and literary evidence of his considerable and sustained contact with some of the greatest minds of the age, not least one of the greatest of all Enlightenment portraits, the result of his 1766 encounter with Jean-Jacques Rousseau remains the one work among Ramsay's output which continues to attract significant scholarly interest, among historians of all disciplines.<sup>2</sup>

In examining Ramsay's career through a select group of key works, it will be shown that Ramsay did indeed make it his business, from the early 1750s onwards, to disengage from contemporary domestic painterly 'rivalries' in the field of portraiture, at a time when, in the rapidly burgeoning public arenas for the display of art, matters of taste, style, content and consumption were a hotly and perpetually debated part of achieving fashionable success. In 1754, the Swiss-born writer and miniaturist, André Rouquet noted that Ramsay, whose finest portraits

[ 1 ]  
Allan Ramsay  
*Self-portrait*, ca. 1755–6  
detail of [17]

were still ahead of him, “acknowledging no other guide than nature, brought a rational taste of resemblance with him from Italy.” Rouquet complained that contemporary portrait painters were forced to contend and compete. Subsequent art-historical discourse surrounding the eighteenth century has tended to demand the same of its protagonists; with almost twenty years of painting still ahead of him, Ramsay had already disengaged from the workaday toil of what Rouquet described as the “puerilities” of fashionable London portrait painting.

To make such a claim for Ramsay’s deliberate non-participation might appear to be entirely at odds with the record of a career which achieved the very public accolade of “Principal Painter in Ordinary to the King”. Only once did Ramsay find his painting truly at the eye of a public storm. The furore had its origins and ending among leading figures of European Enlightenment thought, and it raged from Geneva and Paris to London and Edinburgh. Even at its height however, before his appointment at Court, Ramsay’s attention was drawn by the major political debates on the American colonies and the governance of India which so dominated Parliament during the 1760s and 1770s. The post-Union cultural and political discourse among Scotland’s élite which so filled his father’s Edinburgh book shop had prepared Ramsay exceptionally well to participate as an intellectual equal in the company of some of the most influential minds in Europe, both men and women. As Buntin and Brown demonstrate in their essay, this background explains clearly how Ramsay would later be entirely comfortable engaging publicly in major political debate. Ramsay’s greatest portraiture is scarcely programmatic in its intention however; for all his astonishing facility with chalk, paper, brush and canvas, he had few of the painterly axes to grind about which Rouquet complained so eloquently with regard to their various British

contemporaries. As Ramsay approached his sixties, and the circles in which he found his conversation and his sitters were aging with him, the act of painting was no longer a necessary feature of his social exchanges. As he had discovered in the difficult aftermath of his second marriage, no level of professional achievement could quite elevate the standing of the portrait painter, a trade which remained much as Rouquet had described it. Politics, literature, Horace and Antiquity would all supply his latter years with everything that portraiture could not.

Among the assorted jottings which make up the volumes of his *Book of Materials*,<sup>3</sup> Horace Walpole’s 1784 notes on Ramsay’s death make interesting reading in pointing the way to the artist’s posthumous reputation. Walpole responds to a brief newspaper obituary of Ramsay with a robust rebuttal of its estimation of his literary and political thinking; the only mention in either the obituary itself or in Walpole’s handwritten commentary of Ramsay as a painter is a line in the printed text that he was “principal portrait painter to their majesties.” By 1784, Ramsay’s reputation as a painter had almost entirely vanished even from the consideration of those who knew his work well, not to mention a wider public. This was the same Horace Walpole who had written, twenty-five years earlier in one of the most frequently quoted remarks on Ramsay and his place in British art in the eighteenth century that:

*He [Ramsay] and Mr Reynolds are our favourite painters and two of the very best we ever had ... Mr Reynolds and Mr Ramsay can scarce be rivals, their manners are so different. The former is bold and has a kind of tempestuous colouring, yet with dignity and grace; the latter is all delicacy.*<sup>4</sup>

Walpole’s subsequent remarks about Ramsay’s abilities as a painter of women sitters, when measured

against Reynolds, are addressed elsewhere in this volume by Anne Dulau. The intention of the present essay is to address the first part of Walpole's statement; "Mr Reynolds and Mr Ramsay can scarce be rivals, their manners are so different," and to set that statement in the context of Ramsay's wider career.

Perhaps because Ramsay's practice was formed at a point in the eighteenth century when portraiture, the most inescapably functional pictorial form to which an artist could turn to make a living, predominated in the output of British painters, the language of "rivalry", of practitioners simply competing in a trade, is an altogether unsurprising feature of the early part of his career. However, as Ellis Waterhouse noted, Ramsay's famous remark in a letter of March 1740, that he had "put all your Van Loos and Soldis, and Ruscas to flight and now play the first fiddle my Self", significantly omits any reference to British "rivals".<sup>5</sup> In examining the earlier part of the painter's output I will endeavour to show how at almost every turn, Ramsay saw himself as being apart from the native competition. For all his charm and sociable manner in company, he was also adept at maintaining an independence of mind, which could be interpreted as distance from those around him when it suited, with the result that he could come across as being of "hard manners ... without sensibility or the affection on't".<sup>6</sup> While this independent-mindedness became ever more apparent after his career was established in the 1750s, the critical period for establishing a new understanding of Ramsay relates to the years spanning the latter part of the 1760s and the early 1770s. Although these are the years of Ramsay's finest achievements as a painter, they also mark a vital element in the formation of a context for the path of this subsequent critical reception. The very qualities which so attracted Walpole's appreciation of Ramsay's finest achievements during these years would lie somewhat beyond the boundaries of

any narrative of a "British School" constructed by later eighteenth – and early nineteenth-century commentators, for whom the Scottish artist's painting was as admirable as it was inexplicable. James Northcote's thoughts, recorded by William Hazlitt, are frequently quoted for their recollection of Reynolds's views on Ramsay.<sup>7</sup> Quoted thus, the effect is frankly damning:

*Your ideas run on before your executive power. It is a common case. There was Ramsay, of whom Sir Joshua used to say that he was the most sensible painter of his time; but he has left little to show for it. His manner was dry and timid. He stopped short in the middle of his work, because he knew how much it wanted.*

In fact, Northcote's comments continue in a far more positive light:

*Now and then we find hints and sketches which show what he might have been, if his hand had been equal to his conceptions. I have seen a picture of his of the Queen ... – a profile and slightly done; but it was a paragon of elegance. She had a fan in her hand: Lord! How she held that fan! It was weak in execution and ordinary in features – all I can say of it is, that it was the farthest possible removed from every thing like vulgarity. A professor might despise it; but in the mental part, I have never seen anything of Van Dyck's equal to it. I could have looked at it for ever ... Sir Joshua was right in what he said of Ramsay's great superiority. His own picture of the King ... is a finer composition..., but I would find it harder to produce anything of Sir Joshua's that conveys an idea of more grace and delicacy than the one I have mentioned.*

The passage continues as a discussion on how opinions regarding the qualities of painters are generated and propagated. The oft-quoted remark of Northcote's that "You might say that Ramsay was