

ENGLISH PORTRAITURE AND ENGRAVING: THE REYNOLDS MEZZOTINT FILES

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FINE ARTS AND CONTEMPORARY ARTS MUSEUMS

A series of published engravings of the paintings of English portraitist Sir Joshua Reynolds is located in the Fine Arts Museum at Houston Baptist University. Throughout Reynolds' lifetime he painted a large number of portraits of the English aristocracy similar to the one currently hanging in the museum. However, all Sir Reynolds' paintings were reproduced later by a process called mezzotint. Within the Fine Arts museum here at HBU we have a complete set of the reproduced portraits that Reynolds produced. They are the mezzotint files and are divided into separate books for men, women, and children.

Most people may be un-aware of what a mezzotint is. A mezzotint is a dry point print making process belonging to the intaglio family. The process is typically performed on a plate of copper; however, a zinc plate may also be used. A sheet of copper is rocked with a metal wedge that has small teeth on it to create millions of small dots; this tool is called a rocker. The dots will be later filled with ink. Interestingly enough, this is where the phrase "Off your rocker" derives from. Engravers would rock a plate for hours on end day after day enough to slowly drive them mad to create a plate that was suitable to be printed from. Once the plate was rocked to completion an engraver would burnish the plate with different tools to smooth out the highlights and different values to create the varying tones of gradation. Then the smoothed out the plate is coated in ink and the surface is carefully wiped away finally revealing the engraved image. Naturally, the unburnished parts of the plate which contain the most chambers filled with ink will print darkest, while the more burnished parts will be printed in a lighter value. After the plate has been wiped the engraving is run in multiple editions on paper by a publisher who sells and distributes the prints.

One popular subject for these engraving houses was the reproduction of already completed paintings by other artists. This is where Sir Joshua Reynolds becomes part of the mezzotint process. Reynolds was not an engraver but a portrait painter for the upper echelons of English society. He was one of the leading English portrait painters alongside American born Benjamin West, Thomas Gainsborough, and Francis Hayman, to name a few, but Reynolds was the most celebrated during the eighteenth century. He entered into the world of art like many artists did which was to be apprenticed to a master. He studied under portraitist Thomas Hudson, whom he learned from and assisted in daily studio operations and prep work. Generally an apprentice would even assist his master in painting conspicuous parts of their commissions, parts like fabric, pets, and other aspects of the background. Reynolds' relationship lasted only a short while with Hudson before he left to travel the European continent. One of his first stops was to Italy where he developed an interest in the aesthetics of work from the late antiquity and renaissance. Although the personification of the perfect form that the classical style of art represented was ideal, he never truly identified with the concept that he was an academic painter. An academic painter at that time was an artist that painted in a classical manner. He, instead,

represented the “grand style” of painting which grew out of the concept of the classical properties of the Renaissance. The grand style, also termed great style, was to interpret one’s subject matter as classical or endowed with a sense of grandeur. He did not paint his clients in plain or simple attire, but he painted his clients in a way to exude elegance and wealth. The sitters possess’ that Reynolds were brought forth from the classical forms and figures. Reynolds’ grand style of compositions resemble the French rococo style of painting prior to the French Revolution.

Sir Joshua Reynolds, as previously mentioned, was England’s lead portraitist and never had a dearth of commissions from those that could afford to be painted by him. However, like all portrait painters, he had a system for pricing that his clients could choose from. For example, a full figure would cost more than just a standard portrait; hands and feet would cost extra due to their difficulty to paint, animals would cost more if you wanted them in your composition, etc. Ultimately the more that the commissioner wanted in their painting, the more the finished piece would cost. For Reynolds and other artists this simply meant a little more time and more money, however for his clients this represented to society a social statement. For his clients it showed how much money they had if they could not only afford the best but all the “accessories”. One of Reynolds’ goals also while painting was not just to capture the subject, but to beautify them as well. He, like other portraitists, would make the sitter more handsome or more beautiful; he would capture an ideal likeness of the subject rather than an actual likeness. In hindsight, Reynolds and his paintings became a commodity that only the rich could afford.

The importance of the mezzotint files when they were produced was to act as a bridge between the upper class and the growing middle class. Since the Renaissance, the standard social class system began to deteriorate and a new system began to grow out of it. Here we see the start of the first signs of what would be later be the middle class. The term “middle class” was not utilized until the later end of the eighteenth century. Prior to being dubbed “middle”, this group was called “bourgeoisie”. In order of stature, the class system would be upper class, aristocracy; bourgeoisie; and finally, the working class. While the new middle class had escaped the struggles faced by the working class, they still sought to move up in hierarchy. One of history’s best examples of social climbing would be the Medici family of Florence, Italy. They used their newly found capital, from banking, to buy their way into the upper class of Europe. One of the ways the Medici and other families did this was to put on the persona of the aristocracy; this included buying artwork. The phenomenon of buying high end luxury items to make a social statement is still seen today even. Being a luxury item was the purpose of Reynolds’s mezzotints. Even if the bourgeoisie could not afford to be painted by artists like Reynolds, they could still buy and display large high quality prints of the work he did, creating their own social statement.

The mezzotint collection at Houston Baptist University is a complete record of Sir Joshua Reynolds’s work. While not the original oil paintings they are still high quality reproductions and no less a work of art produced by printmakers during his time. The prints are beautiful but they symbolize more socially than their painted counterparts.

Works Cited

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