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Sir Thomas Lawrence

1769–1830

*Arthur Atherley*

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This exceptional painting was made by Sir Thomas Lawrence in preparation for his early masterpiece *Arthur Atherley* (Los Angeles County Museum of Art). Lawrence exhibited his painting of *Atherley* at the Royal Academy in 1792 at a key moment in his early career and it marked his transition from precocious youth to mature master. The present preliminary study shows how determinedly Lawrence pursued this path. The sketch - showing Atherley in a blue coat, rather than the distinctive red one which features in the final portrait – is a remarkably assured essay, both in virtuosic technique and penetrating characterisation. In the boldly direct pose, starkly lit from one side, Lawrence created one of the most intense portraits of the late eighteenth century. In the present sketch this is amplified by the spare use of paint and unfinished quality, which isolates and focus attention on the head. Last on the market in 1860, the present painting has remained in the same family and has never previously been exhibited, reproduced or fully published. As such it is an immensely important addition to Lawrence's *oeuvre*, shedding new light on his working practice at the outset of his career.<sup>[1]</sup>

Thomas Lawrence was the outstanding British portraitist of the first quarter of the nineteenth century, the third President of the Royal Academy and a hugely influential European master, whose paintings had a profound impact upon Continental portraiture.<sup>[2]</sup> Born in Bristol in 1769, the son of an excise officer, he was celebrated as a child prodigy, producing pastel portraits first in Devizes and then Bath, before moving to London in 1787. After studying at the Royal Academy Schools, Lawrence rapidly established himself as artistic heir to Reynolds, exhibiting 12 portraits at the Academy in 1790, including celebrated full-length depictions of *Queen Charlotte* (National Gallery, London) and the actress *Elizabeth Farren* (Metropolitan Museum, New York).<sup>[3]</sup> The following year he was elected an Associate of the Royal Academy, at the age of only 22.

At some point in 1791 Lawrence began his painting of Arthur Atherley. Atherley was the son of a Southampton based banker, also called Arthur, and was in his last year at Eton College.<sup>[4]</sup> Whilst the provenance of the Los Angeles painting suggests it was a family commission - it descended in the Atherley family until acquired by Joseph Duveen on behalf of William Randolph Hearst in 1928 - Lawrence clearly saw it as an opportunity to consolidate his public successes on the walls of the Royal Academy at the annual exhibition. This was a prospect given an added boost by the death of Reynolds in February 1792, which resulted in the position of Painter in Ordinary to the

King falling vacant. As a plan of the hang at the exhibition of the Royal Academy, made by Thomas Sandby, shows, *Atherley* was well placed on the west wall of the Great Room at Somerset House, slightly to the left of one of the main doors. Lawrence therefore transformed the commission into a major statement of his artistic abilities, at a crucial moment in his career. It was a project that would have demanded multiple sittings, and even multiple canvases, as the appearance of the present painting demonstrates.

In 1790 Lawrence observed that: 'I should think it is always better that the picture, whatever it is, be first accurately drawn on the canvas.' We know from contemporary accounts that this was the case. In 1794 Joseph Farington recorded: 'this morning I sat to Lawrence when He drew in my portrait with black chalk on the Canvass, which employed him near 2 Hours. He did not use colour today.'<sup>[5]</sup> Lawrence seems to have used liquid, light brown paint to work out Atherley's pose, traces of which can be faintly seen in the lower sections of the canvas. Lawrence normally used a canvas with a white or off-white ground, precisely as he has done in his portrait of Atherley. In providing advice on painting in 1790 to the amateur artist Lady Malden, he explained: 'I always endeavour to paint a picture as light as possible even at first colouring', adding, 'Now when an artist endeavours to paint bright at first, the next time he comes he will try to make it still more and so on, till by this struggle with himself he will at last gain a degree of brilliancy as unexpected as it must be gratifying...'<sup>[6]</sup> During the second sitting Lawrence would colour the face, bringing it more or less up to completion, before working on the background and costume in subsequent sessions. The present canvas was designed as a bust-length portrait and has only been slightly reduced in size along the top-edge, suggesting that Lawrence intended the picture to be more or less the current format, and therefore not the same size as the finished picture. This demands the question of the status of the current work, is it a second version or the first sketch?

The unfinished status of the present work is probably explained by Lawrence's desire to preserve the character and life-like quality captured in his first sittings. Lawrence's earliest biographer Andrew Cunningham, noted in 1833: 'Lawrence sometimes, nay often, laid aside the first drawing and painted on a copy.'<sup>[7]</sup> For 'drawing' in this case we should read 'painting' – in his use of liquid colour to suggest the costume and pose, Lawrence was literally drawing with the brush – making the present painting the first study from which he completed the Los Angeles canvas (the 'copy'). The status of this painting as the first sketch is substantiated by comparison with the finished portrait. In the Los Angeles painting Atherley's features are subtly different in their handling and execution: his face has been lengthened, his nose given greater definition, his eyes widened and hair made more glossy and voluminous. All this contributes to the sense that Atherley is slightly older in the Los Angeles version. Throughout the composition, the particularities of the present oil study have been replaced by bold generalisations in the finished canvas. This is precisely the process Lawrence would undertake in preparation for a major work for the walls of the Academy, where verisimilitude could be sacrificed to overall effect.

Several accounts of the Academy exhibition identified the sitter as Thomas Sheridan, the precocious son of the playwright Richard Brinsley Sheridan, rather than Atherley, confirming the ambiguity inherent in contemporary portraiture where stylisation was the norm.<sup>[8]</sup> In the finished painting it is clear to see that the sitter has become a vehicle for Lawrence's virtuosic handling of paint: dressed in a striking red jacket, slashed through with the white of his waistcoat and set against a brooding landscape with Eton College chapel in the distance. The present study has none of these theatrical elements. It is instead a penetrating portrait study of Atherley stripped of any of the conventional portrait painters' props and theatricality.

Rather than a red coat, Lawrence originally dressed Atherley in blue. This last detail may be explained by what we know of Lawrence's understanding of colour and his great desire to triumph on the overcrowded walls of the Academy. In 1828 John Burnet published his *Practical Treatise on Painting*, in which the author praised Thomas Gainsborough's portrait of *Gainsborough Dupont(?)*, then known as the 'Blue Boy' and now in The Huntington, for disproving Reynolds's rule that cool colours (blue, grey or green) should never predominate in a composition.<sup>[9]</sup>

Lawrence wrote to Burnet disagreeing with him, observing that: 'I should instance for one the ascendancy of white objects, which can never be departed from with impunity, and again the union of colour with light. Masterly as the execution of that picture is, I always feel a never-changing impression on my eye that the Blue Boy of Gainsborough is a difficulty boldly combated not conquered.'<sup>[10]</sup> Lawrence would have known Gainsborough's portrait of about 1770 well - it was auctioned in 1796 and again in 1802, when it was acquired by the portraitist John Hoppner - he was possibly even consciously emulating it in his portrait of Atherley.<sup>[11]</sup> It is highly suggestive that by 1860, when the present painting was sold in Edinburgh, the surviving receipt identifies it as: 'the first sketch of the Blue Boy by Gainsborough.'

The three-quarter length Los Angeles painting marks Atherley leaving school, attaining majority and entering adulthood. It would be natural to find multiple versions (given to family members, tutors etc.), but the present sketch seems to be the only other related painting and as a sketch occupied a vastly different and more important position from that of replica or copy. The present painting possibly remained in Lawrence's studio until his death, although it is not identifiable amongst the hundreds of canvases sold at his posthumous sale in 1830. As a preliminary study, the present painting preserves an intensity, vitality and freshness absent in the finished canvas; it is characteristic of Lawrence's virtuosic technique at a crucial moment of his career as well as being the highly engaging first study of one of his most celebrated paintings.

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## References

- 1 Whilst the present picture was listed by Garlick in 1962 and 1989, until the present catalogue it had never been professionally photographed or published.
- 2 For Lawrence's impact on French painting see: Ed. Patrick Noon, *Crossing the Chanel: British and French Painting in the Age of Romanticism*, exh. cat., London (Tate Gallery), 2003.
- 3 For Lawrence's early career see: Michael Levey, *Sir Thomas Lawrence*, New Haven and London, 2005, pp.25-65.
- 4 For a discussion of the Huntington portrait, see: Michael Levey, *Sir Thomas Lawrence*, exh. cat. London (National Portrait Gallery), 1979, cat. no.6; eds. Cassandra Albinson, Peter Funnell and Lucy Peltz, *Thomas Lawrence: Regency Power & Brilliance*, exh. cat. London, (National Portrait Gallery), 2011, cat. no.5.
- 5 Ed. Kenneth Garlick and Angus Macintyre, *The Diary of Joseph Farington*, New Haven and London, I, p.187.
- 6 London, Royal Academy Archive, LAW/1/32. Draft letter from Sir Thomas Lawrence to Viscount Malden, July 1790.
- 7 Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters*, London, 1833, 6., p.195.
- 8 Kenneth Garlick, *Sir Thomas Lawrence: A complete catalogue of the oil paintings*, 1989, p. 141.
- 9 John Burnet, *Practical Hints on Colour in Painting*, London, 1828, p.2. Recent research has challenged the traditional identity of the sitter as Jonathan Buttall to Gainsborough's nephew, Gainsborough Dupont. See: Susan Sloman, 'Gainsborough's *Blue Boy*,' *The Burlington Magazine*, 155, April 2013, pp.231-237.
- 10 Lawrence's comments were published in John Burnet's edited edition of Reynolds's *Discourses*. Ed. John Burnet, *The Discourses of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Illustrated by Explanatory Notes & Plates by John Burnet, F.R.S.*, London, 1842, p.155.
- 11 For the history of Gainsborough's portrait, see: Robyn Asleson and Shelley M. Bennett, *British Paintings at the Huntington*, New Haven and London, 2001, cat. no.17, pp.104-111.