

Gainsborough's signature style

Imitating the master's strokes

Caroline Ritchie

It is a charming rustic scene: amid dappled light, a man and two donkeys have stopped to rest in a clearing. With its loose washes and diagonal strokes, the drawing seems, at a glance, worthy of attribution to the great British landscape artist Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788). But further investigation into this drawing from the Baillieu Library Print Collection challenges this attribution, and reveals a fascinating strand in the history of imitation and intellectual property in 18th-century Britain.

The drawing (pictured right) came to the Baillieu Library in 1959 as part of a gift of more than 3,000 prints from Dr John Orde Poynton AO, CMG (1906–2001).¹ In his registration book for the print collection, Dr Poynton records how he and his father purchased items from various sources in London between 1924 and 1939, 'and of these the majority were checked at the British Museum', though 'unfortunately the notes recorded were lost'.² Attached to this particular drawing is a pencilled note by a hand later than the artist's, identifying it with Gainsborough. This attribution was presumably confirmed by authorities at the British Museum when the picture was acquired by Dr Poynton, but it would no doubt have been suggested by a previous owner, proud to be in

possession of what was seemingly a genuine Gainsborough. A printed card previously attached to the back of the drawing indicates that the item was at one stage in the possession of a Mr Willes Maddox of Cavendish Square, London. The card also bears a hand-written attribution to Thomas Gainsborough. Willes Maddox (1813–1853), protégé of the famous eccentric, author and art collector William Beckford (1759–1844) of Fonthill, was an orientalist artist who assembled a modest art collection. A student of art and later a practising artist, Maddox

is likely to have been the person who made the Gainsborough attribution. As the work itself is unsigned, further investigation was called for.

The lack of signature on this work does not in itself rule out the possibility that it is the work of the master. In fact, Gainsborough was rarely inclined to sign his artworks.³ Rather, he and several of his contemporaries viewed his style as a kind of signature: as the chronicler Edward Edwards wrote in 1808, 'Mr. Gainsborough's manner of penciling [*sic*] was so peculiar



Previous page: Artist unknown, Boy resting on a donkey, n.d., black ink with grey and sepia wash on paper, 21.4 × 28.9 cm (image). 1959.5596, gift of Dr J. Orde Poynton 1959, Baillieu Library Print Collection, University of Melbourne.

Opposite and below: Thomas Gainsborough, Churchyard with donkeys, c. 1750–88, graphite on paper, 15.7 × 19.6 cm (support). T08894, purchased as part of the Oppé Collection with assistance from the National Lottery through the Heritage Lottery Fund 1996, Prints and Drawings Rooms, Tate Britain. © Tate, London, 2017.

to himself, that his work needed no signature'.⁴ Gainsborough's contemporary and rival, Sir Joshua Reynolds, likewise attested to the originality and idiosyncrasy of Gainsborough's style. In a much-quoted passage, Reynolds commented on the way in which the 'chaos' created by Gainsborough's 'odd scratches and marks' appears, 'by a kind of magick' to 'assume form, and all the parts seem to drop into their proper places'.⁵ This swift, light quality of Gainsborough's landscape drawings is a hallmark of his style.

However, the very idiosyncrasy and novelty of Gainsborough's style

invited a plethora of imitations and emulations. Such was the vogue for Gainsborougesque tableaux that one *Morning Herald* report drew attention to 'attempts having been made by the *Fabricators* in the polite arts, to pass off some very *miserable imitations* of Mr. GAINSBOROUGH's Beautiful stile of drawing'.⁶ The comment reveals both the widespread admiration for Gainsborough's style, and the frequency with which it was imitated, giving the impression of a veritable Gainsborough mania.

The journalist's aversion to imitation also reflected contemporary

anxieties about protecting intellectual property. This concern had famously been brought to the fore in relation to printmaking, with the passing of the *Engravers' Copyright Act* of 1735, commonly referred to as 'Hogarth's Act' due to William Hogarth's militant opposition to the dissemination of unauthorised copies. In his perpetual efforts to ensure the idiosyncrasy and indeed inimitability of his style, Gainsborough reflected this growing perception that copying was both corrupt and a personal affront to the artist.

However, there remained a sense in which copying was also viewed as a





crucial learning exercise. In this sense, not all copyists were ‘fabricators’ who intended to pass off their own work as that of a more famous artist. Joshua Reynolds proclaimed in an address to the Royal Academy that ‘by imitation only, variety, and even originality of invention, is produced’.⁷ Gainsborough himself devoted much attention to assimilating elements of Old Masters from the Flemish school, borrowing several motifs and stylistic features from the works of Anthony van Dyck and Peter Paul Rubens, as well as the French artist Antoine Watteau. Although Gainsborough himself took on no students, it was inevitable that young artists and amateurs would turn to his work as a worthy model. By the early 19th century, it had become standard practice for students to imitate Gainsborough. The collection of more than 130 Gainsborough drawings owned by Dr Thomas Monro, along with a group of soft-ground etchings after Gainsborough that were made and published by John Laporte and William Frederick Wells at the beginning of the 19th century, had helped to canonise Gainsborough’s style. Students frequently copied both collections for purposes of education, rather than of forgery.

As the *Morning Herald* comment about ‘miserable imitations’ suggests

so censoriously, such imitations—whether ‘fabrications’ or student studies—tend to be inferior to the master’s originals. Imitators of Gainsborough’s style, whether amateur or students, often applied the master’s techniques a little too earnestly. This makes it possible, through close stylistic analysis, to differentiate between Gainsborough’s hand and imitations of his style. In the case of the Baillieu Library’s drawing, the use of loose washes, and looping strokes to describe foliage, certainly reflect an attempt to mimic Gainsborough’s technique in his landscape drawings from the late 1750s and 1760s. In terms of subject matter, the Baillieu drawing also calls to mind Gainsborough’s scene of donkeys in a churchyard, depicted in another pencil drawing from the 1750s or thereafter, held at the Tate Britain (pictured opposite and above). However, as comparison with the Tate drawing reveals, the handling in the Baillieu drawing is a little fussy in places, and the shadowing lacks Gainsborough’s characteristic subtlety. The drawing does not bear the true signature of Gainsborough’s style.

Who, then, is our artist? In order to come closer to identifying the hand, it is worth examining a few contemporary imitators of the master’s style. Although

Gainsborough took on no students, his nephew, Gainsborough Dupont (1754–1797), worked as his studio assistant for more than 16 years. An amateur artist himself, Dupont devoted much attention to studying and emulating the style of his uncle. However, differences between the two artists’ styles are quite marked, and can be observed in Dupont’s landscape drawings.⁸ These lack the agile flow and sparing quality of Gainsborough’s landscapes: the figures and trees lack definition, and the drawings are in general characterised by a ‘disjointed staccato effect’.⁹ Dupont’s approach is thus difficult to reconcile with the present artwork, in which the shapes are defined with heavier outline throughout.

George Frost (c. 1745–1821), too, tried his hand at reproducing Gainsborough’s sketching style. Frost’s admiration for Gainsborough’s work is well attested: in 1807, Frost wrote in a letter to John Constable, ‘You know I am extravagantly fond of Gainsbro’ perhaps foolishly so’,¹⁰ This influence reveals itself in Frost’s use of Gainsboroughesque light, diagonal strokes. Frost’s distinctive approach may be seen in a drawing in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, previously attributed to Thomas Gainsborough, which has

since been tentatively reattributed to George Frost.¹¹ Frost's style, with its uniform lightness of tone, offers an interesting contrast to the present work, in which the artist seems to have taken the opposite approach in heavily defining the figures and foremost tree.

The prolific copyist Thomas Barker (1769–1847) is one of the more probable candidates for the attribution of this work. Barker sought with some avidity to reproduce the style of Gainsborough, particularly as seen in Gainsborough's early landscapes of the 1750s and 1760s. In his catalogue raisonné of Gainsborough's oeuvre, John Hayes includes an important group of drawings by Barker, which had formerly been attributed to Gainsborough.¹² Of these, one landscape in particular is reminiscent of the Melbourne drawing, in its depiction of two donkeys in a wooded scene, and in its use of sparing, diagonal strokes to create a clipped yet fluid representation.¹³ The detailing of the foliage in both Barker's drawing and the Baillieu drawing is rather more heavy-handed than that seen in Gainsborough's work,¹⁴ while the washes are somewhat blocked in, and less blended than tends to be the case in Gainsborough's originals.¹⁵

Perhaps, perhaps not. Several unanswered questions surround this enigmatic artwork. Given the frequency with which contemporaries and later artists have attempted to reproduce Gainsborough's style, it is difficult to arrive at a definitive attribution for this drawing. Whether the creation of the work was an act of admiration, of education, or of pure fabrication, also remains unclear. But the very questions raised by the artwork reveal the many facets of Gainsborough mania, and the enduring mark left by his signature style upon the British landscape tradition.

Caroline Ritchie completed a Bachelor's degree in classics and English at the University of Oxford in 2017. She then undertook an internship with the Baillieu Library Print Collection as part of the Cultural Collections Projects Program. She is currently a curatorial assistant at the Hellenic Museum in Melbourne, and will soon undertake an internship in the Department of European Sculpture and Works of Art at Sotheby's, London.

The Baillieu Library Print Collection comprises some 9,000 individual works of art: engravings, etchings, woodcuts, lithographs, linocuts, print albums, drawings, paintings and books. Items may be requested for use in the Cultural Collections Reading Room on Level 3 of the Baillieu Library, Parkville campus. See library.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special-collections/print-collection.

- 1 For a detailed account of the Poynton bequest, see Kerriane Stone, 'The physiognomy of radicals, slayers and villains', in Kerriane Stone (curator), *Radicals, slayers and villains: Prints from the Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne*, University of Melbourne Library, 2014, pp. 1–8.
- 2 J. Orde Poynton, cited in Stone, 'The physiognomy of radicals, slayers and villains', p. 2.
- 3 Cristina S. Martinez, "Odd scratches and marks": Thomas Gainsborough and the idiosyncrasy of the brush', in Reginald McGinnis (ed.), *Originality and intellectual property in the French and English Enlightenment*, London: Routledge, 2009, p. 146.
- 4 Edward Edwards, *Anecdotes of painters who have resided or been born in England*, London: Leigh and Sotheby, 1808, p. 142.
- 5 Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on art*, ed. by Robert R. Wark, San Marino, Calif.: Huntington Library, 1959, pp. 257–8.
- 6 Cited in Martinez, "Odd scratches and marks", p. 147.
- 7 Reynolds, *Discourses on art*, p. 96.
- 8 John Hayes, *The drawings of Thomas Gainsborough: Plates*, London and Bradford: Lund Humphries, 1970, pl. 353–6.
- 9 John Hayes, *The drawings of Thomas Gainsborough: Text*, London and Bradford: Lund Humphries, 1970, p. 66.
- 10 Cited in Ronald Brymer Beckett (ed.), *John Constable's correspondence II: Early friends and Maria Bicknell (Mrs. Constable)*, vol. 6, Ipswich: Suffolk Records Society, 1964, p. 37.
- 11 George Frost, *Landscape with figures*, n.d., graphite on paper, 19.5 × 15.0 cm (sheet). 11.66.2, purchase, Rogers Fund, 1911, Drawings and Prints Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art.
- 12 Hayes, *Plates*, pl. 395–7.
- 13 Hayes, *Plates*, pl. 396.
- 14 For example, Hayes, *Plates*, pl. 397.
- 15 For example, Hayes, *Plates*, pl. 149, 161.