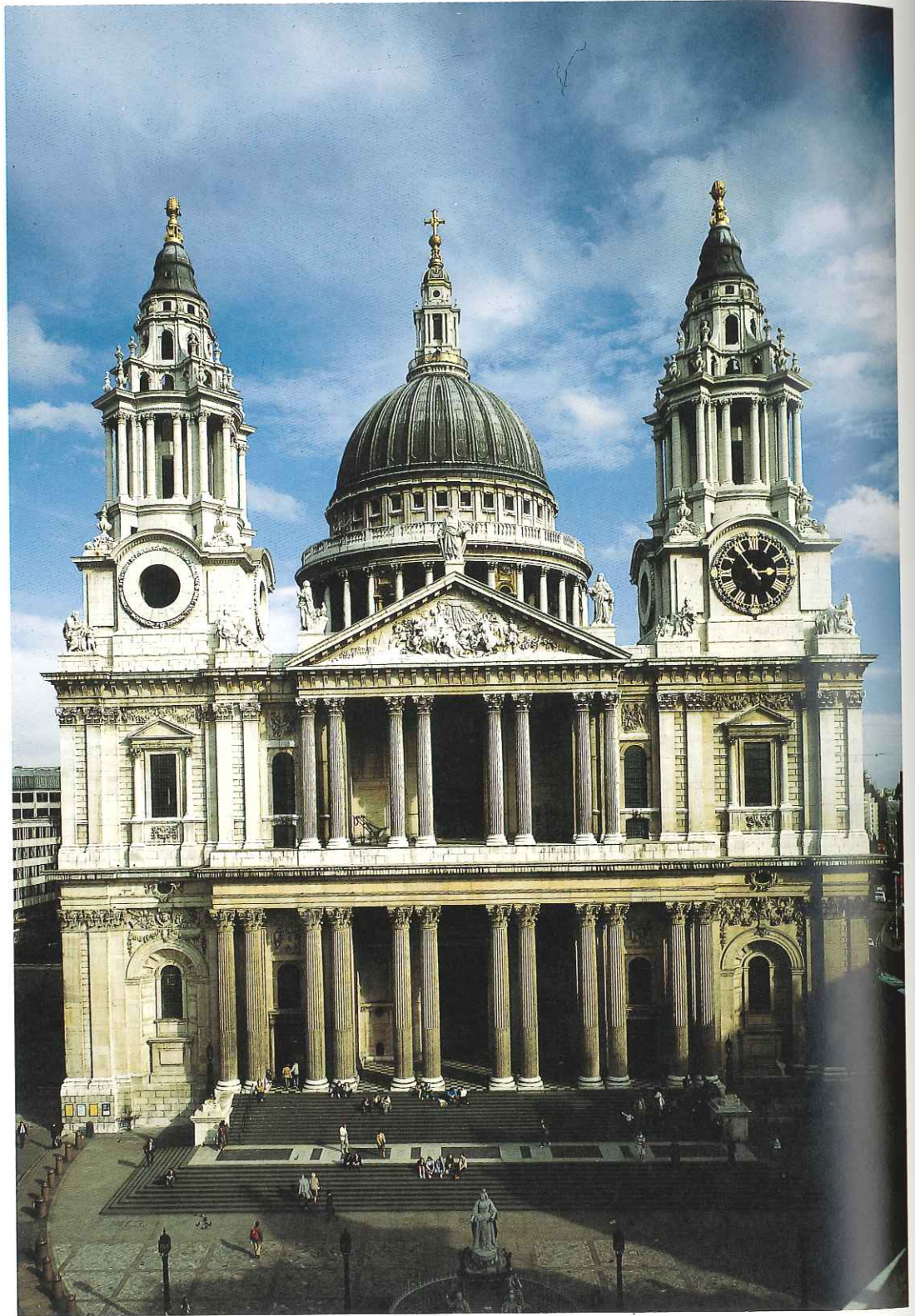


THE AGE OF REASON

England and France, eighteenth century

The period round about 1700 had seen the culmination of the Baroque movement in Catholic Europe. The Protestant countries could not help being impressed by this all-pervading fashion but, nevertheless, they did not actually adopt it. This even applies to England during the Restoration period, when the Stuart court looked towards France and abhorred the taste and outlook of the Puritans. It was during this period that England produced her greatest architect, Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723), who was given the task of rebuilding London's churches after the disastrous fire of 1666. It is interesting to compare his St Paul's Cathedral, *figure 299*, with a church of the Roman Baroque, built only some twenty years earlier, *page 436, figure 282*. We see that Wren was definitely influenced by the groupings and effects of the Baroque architect, although he himself had never been to Rome. Like Borromini's church, Wren's cathedral, which is much larger in scale, consists of a central cupola, flanking towers, and the suggestion of a temple façade to frame the main entrance. There is even a definite similarity between Borromini's Baroque towers and Wren's, particularly in the second storey. Nevertheless, the general impression of the two façades is very different. St Paul's is not curved. There is no suggestion of movement, rather of strength and stability. The way in which the paired columns are used to give stateliness and nobility to the façade recalls Versailles, *page 448, figure 291*, rather than the Roman Baroque. Looking at the details, we may even wonder whether or not to call Wren's style Baroque. There is nothing of the freakish or fantastic in his decoration. All his forms adhere strictly to the best models of the Italian Renaissance. Each form and each part of the building can be viewed by itself without losing its intrinsic meaning. Compared with the exuberance of Borromini, or of the architect of Melk, Wren impresses us as being restrained and sober.

The contrast between Protestant and Catholic architecture is even more marked when we consider the interiors of Wren's churches – for instance that of St Stephen Walbrook in London, *figure 300*. A church like this is designed mainly as a hall where the faithful meet for worship. Its aim is not to conjure up a vision of another world, but rather to allow us to collect

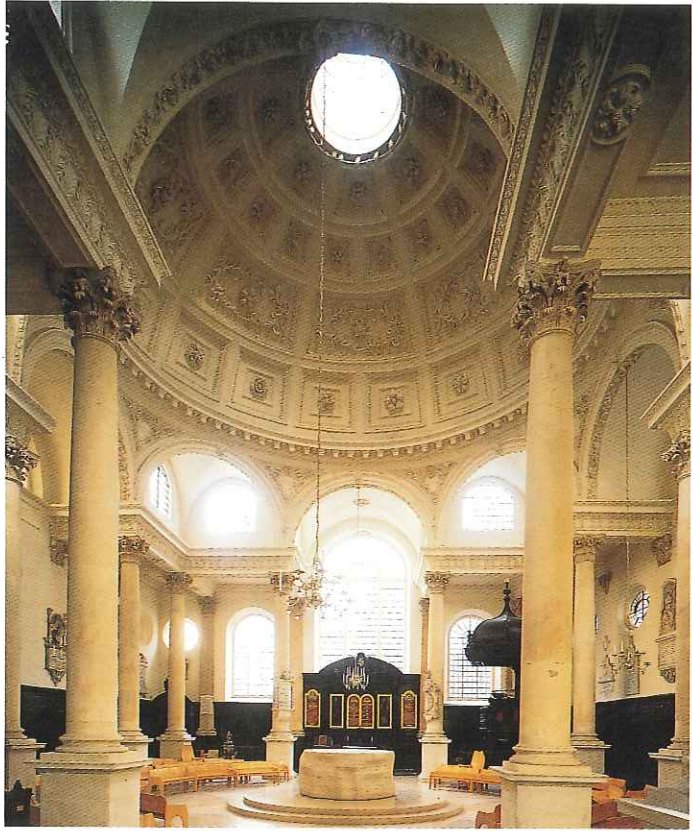


299

Sir Christopher Wren
St Paul's Cathedral,
 London, 1675–1710

300

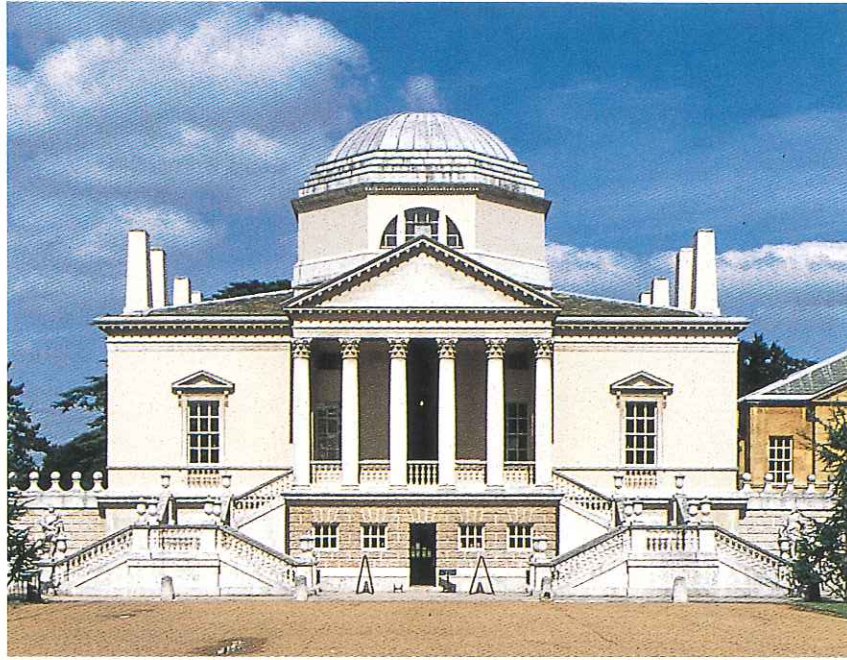
Sir Christopher Wren
Interior of the church of
St Stephen Walbrook,
 London, 1672



our thoughts. In the many churches he designed, Wren endeavoured to give ever-new variations on the theme of such a hall, which would be both dignified and simple.

As with churches, so with castles. No king of England could have raised the prodigious sums to build a Versailles, and no English peer would have cared to compete with the German princelings in luxury and extravagance. It is true that the building craze reached England. The Duke of Marlborough's Blenheim Palace is even larger in scale than Prince Eugene's Belvedere. But these were exceptions. The ideal of the English eighteenth century was not the palace but the country house.

The architects of these country houses usually rejected the extravagances of the Baroque style. It was their ambition not to infringe any rule of what they considered 'good taste', and so they were anxious to keep as closely as possible to the real or pretended laws of classical architecture. Architects of the Italian Renaissance who had studied and measured the ruins of classical buildings with scientific care had published their findings in textbooks to provide builders and craftsmen with patterns. The most famous of these books was written by Andrea Palladio, *page 362*. This book of Palladio's came to be considered the ultimate authority on all rules of taste in architecture in eighteenth-century England. To build one's villa in the 'Palladian manner' was considered the last word in fashion.



301

Lord Burlington &
William Kent
Chiswick House,
London, c. 1725

Figure 301 shows such a Palladian villa, Chiswick House. Designed for his own use by the great leader of taste and fashion, Lord Burlington (1695–1753), and decorated by his friend, William Kent (1685–1748), it is indeed a close imitation of Palladio's *Villa Rotonda*, *page 363, figure 232*. Unlike Hildebrandt and the other architects of Catholic Europe, *page 451*, the designers of the British villa nowhere offend against the strict rules of the classical style. The stately portico has the correct form of an antique temple front built in the Corinthian order, *page 108*. The walls of the building are simple and plain, there are no curves and volutes, no statues to crown the roof, and no grotesque decorations.

For the rule of taste in the England of Lord Burlington and Alexander Pope was also the rule of reason. The whole temper of the country was opposed to the flights of fancy of Baroque designs, and to an art that aimed at overwhelming the emotions. The formal parks in the style of Versailles, whose endless clipped hedges and alleyways had extended the architects' design beyond the actual building far into the surrounding country, were condemned as absurd and artificial. A garden or park should reflect the beauties of nature, it should be a collection of fine scenery such as might charm the painter's eye. It was men such as Kent who invented the English

302

The grounds of
Stourhead, Wiltshire,
laid out from 1741

'landscape garden' as the ideal surroundings for their Palladian villas. Just as they had appealed to the authority of an Italian architect for the rules of reason and taste in building, so they turned to a southern painter for a standard of beauty in scenery. Their idea of what nature should look like was largely derived from the paintings of Claude Lorrain. It is interesting to compare the view of the lovely grounds of Stourhead in Wiltshire, *figure 302*, which were laid out before the middle of the eighteenth century, with works by these two masters. The 'temple' in the background again recalls Palladio's Villa Rotonda (which was, in its turn, modelled on the Roman Pantheon), while the whole vista with its lake, its bridge and its evocation of Roman buildings confirms my remarks on the influence which the paintings of Claude Lorrain, *page 396, figure 255*, were to have on the beauty of the English landscape.

The position of English painters and sculptors under the rule of taste and reason was not always enviable. We have seen that the victory of Protestantism in England, and the Puritan hostility to images and to luxury, had dealt the tradition of art in England a severe blow. Almost the only purpose for which painting was still in demand was that of supplying likenesses, and even this function had largely been met by foreign artists such as Holbein, *page 374*, and Van Dyck, *page 403*, who were called to England after they had established their reputations abroad.



The fashionable gentlemen of Lord Burlington's days had no objection to paintings or sculptures on puritan grounds, but they were not eager to place commissions with native artists who had not yet made a name in the outside world. If they wanted a painting for their mansions they would much rather buy one which bore the name of some famous Italian master. They prided themselves on being connoisseurs, and some of them assembled the most admirable collections of old masters, without, however, giving much employment to the painters of their time.

This state of affairs greatly irritated a young English engraver, who had to make his living by illustrating books. His name was William Hogarth (1697–1764). He felt that he had it in him to be as good a painter as those whose works were bought for hundreds of pounds from abroad, but he knew that there was no public for contemporary art in England. He therefore set out deliberately to create a new type of painting which should appeal to his countrymen. He knew that they were likely to ask 'What is the use of a painting?' and he decided that, in order to impress people brought up in the puritan tradition, art must have an obvious purpose. Accordingly, he planned a number of paintings which should teach the people the rewards of virtue and the wages of sin. He would show a 'Rake's progress' from profligacy and idleness to crime and death, or 'The four stages of cruelty' from a boy teasing a cat to a grown-up's brutal murder. He would paint these edifying stories and warning examples in such a way that anyone who saw the series of pictures would understand all the incidents and the lessons they taught. His paintings, in fact, should resemble a kind of dumb show, in which all the characters have their appointed task and make its meaning clear through gestures and the use of stage properties. Hogarth himself compared this new type of painting to the art of the playwright and the theatrical producer. He did everything to bring out what he called the 'character' of each figure, not only through his face but also through his dress and behaviour. Each of his picture sequences can be read like a story or, rather, like a sermon. In this respect, this type of art was not perhaps quite as new as Hogarth thought. We know that medieval art used images to impart a lesson, and this tradition of the picture sermon had lived on in popular art up to the time of Hogarth. Crude prints had been sold at fairs to show the fate of the drunkard or the perils of gambling, and the ballad-mongers sold pamphlets with similar tales. Hogarth, however, was no popular artist in this sense. He had made a careful study of the masters of the past and of their way of achieving pictorial effects. He knew the Dutch masters, such as Jan Steen, who filled their pictures with humorous episodes from the life of the people and excelled in bringing out the characteristic expression of a type, *page 428, figure 278*. He also knew the methods of the Italian artists of his



103

William Hogarth
*The rake's progress: the
 rake in Bedlam, 1735*
 Oil on canvas, 62.5 ×
 75 cm, 24½ × 29½ in; Sir
 John Soane's Museum,
 London

time, of Venetian painters of the type of Guardi, *page 444, figure 290*, who had taught him the trick of conjuring up the idea of a figure with a few spirited touches of the brush.

Figure 303 shows an episode from the 'Rake's progress' in which the poor rake comes to his end as a raving maniac in Bedlam. It is a crude scene of horror with all types of madmen represented: the religious fanatic in the first cell writhing on his bed of straw like the parody of a Baroque picture of a saint, the megalomaniac with his royal crown seen in the next cell, the idiot who scrawls the picture of the world on to the wall of Bedlam, the blind man with his paper telescope, the grotesque trio grouped round the staircase – the grinning fiddler, the foolish singer, and the touching figure of the apathetic man who just sits and stares – and, finally, the group of the dying rake, who is mourned by none but the servant girl he once left in the lurch. As he collapses, they take off his irons, the cruel equivalent of the strait-jacket. They are no longer needed. It is a

tragic scene, made even more tragic by the grotesque dwarf, who mocks it, and by the contrast with the two elegant visitors, who had known the rake in the days of his prosperity.

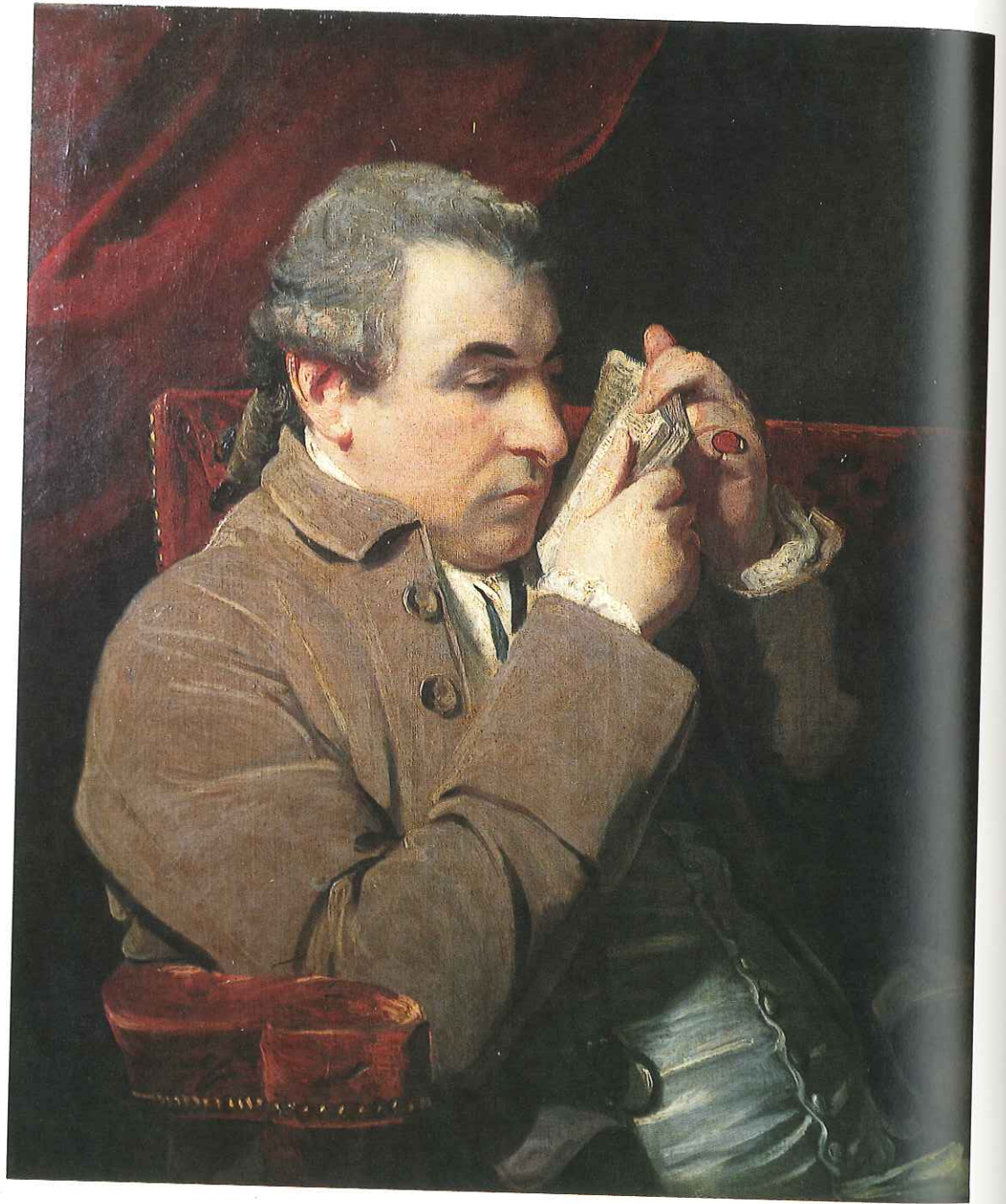
Each figure and each episode in the picture has its place in the story Hogarth tells, but that alone would not suffice to make it a good painting. What is remarkable in Hogarth is that, for all his preoccupation with his subject-matter, he still remained a painter, not only in the way he used his brush and distributed light and colour, but also in the considerable skill he showed in arranging his groups. The group round the rake, for all its grotesque horror, is as carefully composed as any Italian painting of the classical tradition. Hogarth, in fact, was very proud of his understanding of this tradition. He was sure that he had found the law which governed beauty. He wrote a book, which he called *The Analysis of Beauty*, to explain the idea that an undulating line will always be more beautiful than an angular one. Hogarth, too, belonged to the age of reason and believed in teachable rules of taste, but he did not succeed in converting his compatriots from their bias for the old masters. It is true that his picture-series earned him great fame and a considerable sum of money, but his reputation was due less to the actual paintings than to reproductions he made of them in engravings which were bought by an eager public. As a painter, the connoisseurs of the period did not take him seriously and, throughout his life, he waged a grim campaign against fashionable taste.

It was only a generation later that an English painter was born whose art satisfied the elegant society of eighteenth-century England – Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–92). Unlike Hogarth, Reynolds had been to Italy and had come to agree with the connoisseurs of his time that the great masters of the Italian Renaissance – Raphael, Michelangelo, Correggio and Titian – were the unrivalled exemplars of true art. He had absorbed the teaching attributed to the Carracci, *pages 390–1*, that the only hope for an artist lay in the careful study and imitation of what were called the excellences of the ancient masters – the draughtsmanship of Raphael, the colouring of Titian, and so on. Later in his life, when Reynolds had made a career as an artist in England and had become the first president of the newly founded Royal Academy of Art, he expounded this ‘academic’ doctrine in a series of discourses, which still make interesting reading. They show that Reynolds, like his contemporaries (such as Dr Johnson), believed in the rules of taste and the importance of authority in art. He believed that the right procedure in art could, to a large extent, be taught, if students were given facilities for studying

the recognized masterpieces of Italian painting. His lectures are full of exhortations to strive after lofty and dignified subjects, because Reynolds believed that only the grand and impressive was worthy of the name of Great Art. 'Instead of endeavouring to amuse mankind with the minute neatness of his imitations, the genuine painter', Reynolds wrote in his third *Discourse*, 'must endeavour to improve them by the grandeur of his ideas.'

From such a quotation it might easily appear that Reynolds was rather pompous and boring, but if we read his *Discourses* and look at his pictures, we soon get rid of this prejudice. The fact is that he accepted the opinions about art which he found in the writings of the influential critics of the seventeenth century, all of whom were much concerned with the dignity of what was called 'history painting'. We have seen how hard artists had to struggle against social snobbery which made people look down on painters and sculptors because they worked with their hands, *pages 287-8*. We know how artists had to insist that their real work was not handiwork but brain work, and that they were no less fit to be received into polite society than poets or scholars. It was through these discussions that artists were led to stress the importance of poetic invention in art, and to emphasize the elevated subjects with which their minds were concerned. 'Granted,' they argued, 'that there may be something menial in painting a portrait or a landscape from nature where the hand merely copies what the eye sees, but surely it requires more than mere craftsmanship: it requires erudition and imagination to paint a subject like Reni's "Aurora" or Poussin's "Et in Arcadia ego"?' *pages 394-5, figures 253, 254*. We know today that there is a fallacy in this argument. We know that there is nothing undignified in any kind of handiwork and that, moreover, it needs more than a good eye and a sure hand to paint a good portrait or landscape. But every period and every society has its own prejudices in matters of art and of taste – ours, of course, not excluded. Indeed, what makes it so interesting to examine these ideas, which highly intelligent people in the past took so much for granted, is precisely that we learn in this way also to examine ourselves.

Reynolds was an intellectual, a friend of Dr Johnson and his circle, but equally welcome in the elegant country houses and town mansions of the powerful and the wealthy. And though he sincerely believed in the superiority of history painting, and hoped for its revival in England, he accepted the fact that the only kind of art really in demand in these circles was that of portraiture. Van Dyck had established a standard of society portraits that all fashionable painters





305

Sir Joshua Reynolds
*Miss Bowles with her
dog*, 1775

Oil on canvas, 91.8 ×
71.1 cm, 36¼ × 28 in;
Wallace Collection,
London

304

Sir Joshua Reynolds
Joseph Baretti, 1773

Oil on canvas, 73.7 ×
62.2 cm, 29 × 24½ in;
Private collection

of subsequent generations had tried to reach. Reynolds could be as flattering and as elegant as the best of them, but he liked to add an extra interest to his paintings of people to bring out their character and their role in society. Thus *figure 304* represents an intellectual from Dr Johnson's circle, the Italian scholar Joseph Baretti, who had compiled an English-Italian dictionary and later translated Reynolds's *Discourses* into Italian. It is a perfect record, intimate without being impertinent, and a good painting into the bargain.

Even when he had to paint a child, Reynolds tried to make the picture into more than a mere portrait by carefully choosing his setting. *Figure 305* shows his portrait of 'Miss Bowles with her dog'. We remember that Velázquez, too, had painted the portrait of a child and

dog, *page 410, figure 267*. But Velázquez had been interested in the texture and colour of what he saw. Reynolds wants to show us the touching love of the little girl for her pet. We are told what trouble he took to gain the child's confidence, before he set out to paint her. He was asked to the house and sat beside her at dinner 'where he amused her so much with stories and tricks, that she thought him the most charming man in the world. He made her look at something distant from the table and stole her plate; then he pretended to look for it, then he contrived it should come back to her without her knowing how. The next day she was delighted to be taken to his house, where she sat down with an expression full of glee, the expression of which he at once caught and never lost.' No wonder that the outcome is more self-conscious, and much more thought out, than Velázquez's straightforward arrangement. It is true that, if we compare his handling of paint and his treatment of the living skin and the fluffy fur with that of Velázquez, we may find Reynolds disappointing. But it would hardly be fair to expect of him an effect at which he was not aiming. He wanted to bring out the character of the sweet child, and to make her tenderness and her charm live for us. Today, when photographers have so

accustomed us to the trick of observing a child in a similar situation, we may find it difficult fully to appreciate the originality of Reynolds's treatment. But we must not blame a master for the imitations which have spoiled his effects. Reynolds never allowed the interest of the subject-matter to upset the harmony of the painting.

In the Wallace Collection in London, where Reynolds's portrait of Miss Bowles hangs, there is also the portrait of a girl of roughly the same age by his greatest rival in the field of portrait painting, Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88), who was only four years his junior. It is the portrait of Miss Haverfield, *figure 306*. Gainsborough painted the little lady as she was tying the bow of her cape. There is nothing particularly moving or interesting in her action. She is just dressing, we fancy, to go for a walk. But Gainsborough knew how to invest the simple movement with such grace and charm that we find it as satisfying as Reynolds's invention of a girl hugging her pet. Gainsborough was much less interested in 'invention' than Reynolds. He was born in rural Suffolk, had a natural gift for painting, and never found it necessary to go to Italy to study the great masters. In comparison with Reynolds and all his theories about the importance of tradition, Gainsborough was almost a self-made man. There is something in the relationship of the two which recalls the contrast between the learned Annibale Carracci, *page 390*, who wanted to revive the manner of Raphael, and the revolutionary Caravaggio, *page 392*, who wanted to acknowledge no teacher except nature. Reynolds, at any rate, saw Gainsborough somewhat in this light, as a genius who refused to copy the masters, and, much as he admired his rival's skill, he felt bound to warn his students against his principles. Today, after the passage of almost two centuries, the two masters do not seem to us so very different. We realize, perhaps more clearly than they did, how much they both owed to the tradition of Van Dyck, and to the fashion of their time. But, if we return to the portrait of Miss Haverfield with this contrast in mind, we understand the particular qualities which distinguish Gainsborough's fresh and unsophisticated approach from Reynolds's more laboured style. Gainsborough, we now see, had no intention of being 'highbrow'; he wanted to paint straightforward unconventional portraits in which he could display his brilliant brushwork and his sure eye. And so he succeeds best where Reynolds disappointed us. His rendering of the fresh complexion of the child and the shining material of the cape, his treatment of the frills and ribbons of the hat, all this shows his consummate skill in rendering the texture and surfaces of visible objects. The rapid and impatient strokes of the brush almost remind us of the work of Frans Hals, *page 417, figure 270*. But Gainsborough was a less robust artist. There are, in many of his portraits, a delicacy of

306

Thomas
Gainsborough
Miss Haverfield,
c. 1780

Oil on canvas, 127.6 ×
101.9 cm, 50¼ × 40½ in;
Wallace Collection,
London



shades and a refinement of touch which rather recall the visions of Watteau, *page 454, figure 298*.

Both Reynolds and Gainsborough were rather unhappy to be smothered with commissions for portraits when they wanted to paint other things. But while Reynolds longed for time and leisure to paint ambitious mythological scenes or episodes from ancient history, Gainsborough wanted to paint the very subjects which his rival despised. He wanted to paint landscapes. For, unlike Reynolds, who was a man about town, Gainsborough loved the quiet countryside, and among the few entertainments he really enjoyed was chamber music. Unfortunately



307

Thomas
Gainsborough
Rural scene, c. 1780

Black chalk and stump,
heightened with white, on
buff paper, 28.3 × 37.9 cm,
11¼ × 15 in; Victoria and
Albert Museum, London

308

Jean-Baptiste-
Siméon Chardin
Saying grace
(*Le Bénédicité*), 1740

Oil on canvas, 49.5 × 38.5
cm, 19½ × 15¼ in;
Louvre, Paris

Gainsborough could not find many buyers for his landscapes, and so a large number of his pictures remained mere sketches done for his own enjoyment, *figure 307*. In these he arranged the trees and hills of the English countryside into picturesque scenes which remind us that this was the age of the landscape gardener. For Gainsborough's sketches are no views drawn direct from nature. They are landscape 'compositions', designed to evoke and reflect a mood.

In the eighteenth century, English institutions and English taste became the admired models for all people in Europe who longed for the rule of reason. For in England art had not been used to enhance the power and glory of god-like rulers. The public for which Hogarth catered, even the people who posed for Reynolds's and Gainsborough's portraits, were ordinary mortals. We remember that in France, too, the heavy Baroque grandeur of Versailles had gone out of fashion in the early eighteenth century in favour of the more delicate and intimate effects of Watteau's Rococo, *page 454, figure 298*. Now this whole aristocratic dream-world began to recede. Painters began to look at the life of the ordinary men and women of their time, to draw moving or amusing episodes which could be spun out into a story. The greatest of these was Jean-Baptiste-Siméon Chardin (1699–1779), a painter two years younger than Hogarth. *Figure 308* shows one of his charming paintings – a simple room with a woman setting dinner on the table and asking two children to say grace. Chardin liked these quiet glimpses of the life of ordinary people. He resembles the Dutch painter Vermeer, *page 432, figure 281*, in the way in which he feels and preserves the poetry of a domestic scene, without looking for striking effects or pointed allusions. Even his colour is calm and





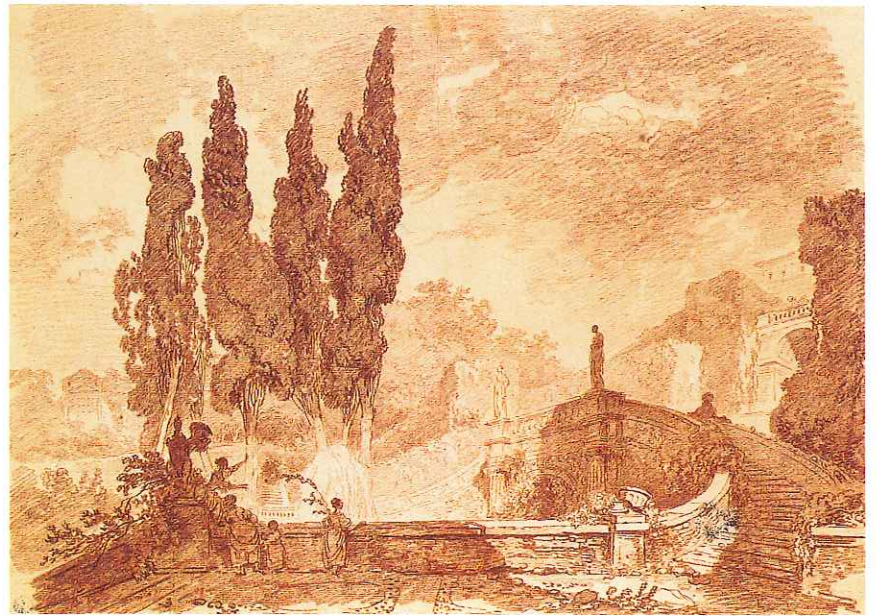
309

Jean-Antoine
Houdon*Voltaire*, 1781Marble, height 50.8 cm,
20 in; Victoria and Albert
Museum, London

restrained and, by comparison with the scintillating paintings of Watteau, his works may seem to lack brilliance. But if we study them in the original, we soon discover in them an unobtrusive mastery in the subtle gradation of tones and the seemingly artless arrangement of the scene that makes him one of the most lovable painters of the eighteenth century.

In France, as in England, the new interest in ordinary human beings rather than the trappings of power benefited the art of portraiture. Perhaps the greatest of the French portraitists was not a painter but a sculptor, Jean-Antoine Houdon (1741–1828). In his wonderful portrait busts, Houdon carried on the tradition which had been started by Bernini more than a hundred years earlier, *page 438, figure 284*. *Figure 309* shows Houdon's bust of Voltaire and allows us to see, in the face of this great champion of reason, the biting wit, the penetrating intelligence, and also the deep compassion of a great mind.

310

Jean-Honoré
Fragonard*The park of the Villa
d'Este, Tivoli, c. 1760*Red chalk on paper, 35 ×
48.7 cm, 13¾ × 19½ in;
Musée des Beaux-Arts et
d'Archéologie, Besançon

The taste for the 'picturesque' aspects of nature, finally, which inspired Gainsborough's sketches in England, is also found in eighteenth-century France. *Figure 310* shows a drawing by Jean-Honoré Fragonard (1732–1806), who belonged to the generation of Gainsborough. Fragonard, too, was a painter of great charm who followed the tradition of Watteau in his themes from high life. In his landscape drawings he was a master of striking effects. The view from the Villa d'Este in Tivoli, near Rome, proves how he could find grandeur and charm in a piece of actual scenery.

*The Life School at the
Royal Academy with
portraits of leading
artists including
Reynolds (with an ear
trumpet), 1771*

Painting by Johann
Zoffány; oil on canvas,
100.7 × 147.3 cm, 39¾ ×
58 in; Royal Collection,
Windsor Castle

