

MADAME LE BRUN

[1755-1842] FRENCH SCHOOL

PORTRAIT OF THE ARTIST AND HER CHILD

(LOUVRE, PARIS)



THIS artist was the daughter of a portrait-painter, and married into a family of artists, her husband being both painter and picture-dealer. He was grand-nephew of Charles Le Brun, head of the French school after the death of Le Sueur in the days of Louis XIV. She was a popular rather than a great artist, and owed not a little of her early success to the patronage of Marie Antoinette, whose portrait she painted no less than twenty-five times. Her best known and most attractive pictures, however, are her portraits of herself, which goes to show that she was a true woman. She is said to have profited by the excellent advice of Joseph Vernet, who took much interest in her career, and himself proposed and secured her election to the French Academy in 1783. The French Revolution broke up her clientèle. She spent the years of unrest wandering first in Italy, afterwards visiting Vienna and St. Petersburg. She was three years in England and two in Switzerland. Everywhere she was well received and found plenty of work to do, the result being that her pictures, which are mainly portraits, are very widely scattered. She painted many well-known people. Even Lady Hamilton, "as a Sybil," and "as a Bacchante," did not escape her. Returning to France, she bought a house and settled down at Marly, but she doubtless repented of having done so, for the allied armies pillaged it in 1814. Thereupon she retired to Paris, and lived there till 1842, the centre of a pleasant coterie. As an artist she does not properly fall within the area intended to be covered by this series of reproductions. There is a clear modern note in her work; yet she belongs by heart and ideals to the old world before the days of steam and science. Some of her pictures are popular favourites, and though they cannot be regarded as great masterpieces, they well deserve their place in the second rank, for they possess the power of charming, and especially of opening the eyes of persons usually unsympathetic to the beauties of art.

THOMAS GAINSBOROUGH

[1727-1788] ENGLISH SCHOOL

MISS LINLEY AND HER BROTHER

(LORD SACKVILLE'S COLLECTION)



MISS ELIZA ANN LINLEY, afterwards Mrs. Sheridan, was a favourite subject of Gainsborough's brush. Who can wonder at it? A charming sketch of her belongs to Mr. Willett at Brighton. There is also a famous full-length portrait of her, belonging to Lord Rothschild, painted in her early married days, where she is shown as a fashionable lady should be, seated like a nymph in a woodland, which everybody then knew was the normal way fashionable ladies had of spending their time. Here she seems to be gipsying it with her brother, and a pretty pair of ragamuffins they make. Gainsborough also painted her and her sister Maria in a large and very charming portrait-group, now in the Dulwich College Gallery. Nor was Reynolds behindhand. He depicted Mrs. Sheridan seated at a harpsichord, attended by angel-children to sing with her. There is a sketch of her by the same painter at Glasgow. The Linley family were children of a composer. They were called "a nest of nightingales." Eliza was the beauty. Plenty of men fell in love with her when she was only sixteen, notably one Mathews. Sheridan, however, aged nineteen, escorted her off to a nunnery in France, marrying her by the way, it is said, and then returned home and fought two duels with Mathews. A year later the young couple were publicly married. Miss Linley before these events had been successful as a concert singer. She appeared at Bath, Oxford, and London, and attracted the attention of the King. In the picture before us Gainsborough attempts what Reynolds often accomplished with great success. No one ever surpassed him with children acting parts—"his inimitable urchins masquerading as heathen deities, his strawberry girls, his deliciously naive little ladies gazing at you with timid mouse-like eyes out of the transparent shadow cast by huge extinguishing hats." Gainsborough had not that kind of facility. These gipsy children are too sleek, too well-washed and well-kempt to take us in; but they are also too solemn. We miss the prankishness of Reynolds' child actors, who do not expect or desire to be mistaken for the parts they play. Yet what does it matter? The picture is the thing. And this picture is superb—a masterpiece of the first rank, full of charm and beauty—an absolutely satisfying object to look at.

SIR JOSHUA REYNOLDS

[1723-1792] ENGLISH SCHOOL

THE LITTLE FORTUNE TELLERS

(SIR CHARLES TENNANT'S COLLECTION)



THE eighteenth century was, in English art, a century of portraiture. It marked, indeed, the culmination of a movement with which the country had been peculiarly identified from the first years of its interest in painting. Holbein came to the court of Henry VIII to paint portraits; Van Dyck came to the court of Charles I for the same purpose, and when British artists arose, worthy of those great predecessors, they were, with only some such exception as Hogarth, committed to portraiture as though by some mysterious racial impulse.

Sir Joshua Reynolds's pre-eminence in that shining company which included Gainsborough, Romney, and Hoppner, was due, above all things, to his instinctive continuance of the tradition of Van Dyck. Like that foreign master, he had a gift for the court painting, for the portrait which would embody the very form and movement of a social epoch. He knew how to paint the great nobleman of his time, the stately *grande dame*, with precisely the right touch. For consummate elegance and dignity, for the note which we associate with aristocracy in its finest flower, he is, if not incomparable, at all events only rivalled by artists of the calibre of Van Dyck. But the picture of "The Little Fortune Tellers" in the collection of Sir Charles Tennant presents his art under an aspect well calculated to remind us that genius is not satisfied by the imposing character of court life alone.

This painting of little Lady Charlotte Spencer, telling the fortune of her brother, Lord Henry, holding his hand in hers like any roguish young gypsy and quaintly examining its palm, is eloquent of one of the gentlest sides of Sir Joshua's rather mundane nature. In the course of his long life (he was born in 1723 and died in 1792) he not only painted hundreds of distinguished sitters, but shared, to a great extent, in the pleasures of fashion. It is not surprising, therefore, that a finished worldliness was characteristic of him from beginning to end, and with it there went a kind of hard sophistication which reacted upon his art. It reacted beneficially. If he was to do justice to the lords and ladies who passed through his studio, it was well for him to be at home with their point of view. But beneath the worldly wisdom of the court painter there throbbed the heart of the lover of children, and there is a goodly procession of portraits in existence to show with what felicity he interpreted their charm; but in all the long list there is not a single canvas which surpasses "The Little Fortune Tellers" in sweetness of sentiment and distinction of style. Nothing could be happier than the way in which Sir Joshua groups his graceful models; nothing could be more tender than the feeling with which he paints their innocent faces and just accents the naiveté of their childhood with the expression of faintly mischievous curiosity befitting the mood he has persuaded them to assume. He had a way with him where children were concerned. He could beguile them with the magic of affection, and he beguiled these little Spencers into playing their exciting game with complete naturalness. Yet observe how, when the lover of children has done all that there is for him to do, the court painter steps in and puts the finishing touch to a masterpiece. "The Little Fortune Tellers" is, in its way, quite as much as any of Sir Joshua's portraits of grown men and women, a souvenir of a high-bred, courtly period.