



Portrait of Eleanor, Lady Wigram, c. 1815-16

Sir Thomas Lawrence (English, 1769-1831)

Oil on canvas | 94 ½ x 58 7/16 in. (240 x 148.5 cm)

- Artists often use clothing, material, and style to convey something about their subjects. What does this subject's dress imply about her?

VISUAL ANALYSIS

The portrait's subject wears a lush black velvet gown, white lace collar and cap, and a luxurious, brightly patterned shawl wrapped around her shoulders. She sits placidly on a couch in an airy

room, hands in her lap, but her gaze is active, directed straight at the viewer. The painting is framed by a swath of red velvet curtain draping down from the top. To the right, a window opens onto a slice of landscape and sky, painted more loosely and with wider brushstrokes, evoking a sense of distance. The *pastoral* quality of the landscape implies a quiet life that was ideal and dignified. Overall, the elements of the work point to the woman's wealth and status as landed aristocracy.

The warm, concentrated color in the painting contributes to the freshness and vivacity that was so characteristic of Lawrence's style. In the portrait of Lady Wigram, his brushstrokes are indeed lively, especially in the rich clothing and fabrics, where *impasto* is visible. His rendering of her facial features is delicate and bright, capturing her piercing blue eyes and rosy cheeks.

FUNCTION/Form & Style

Thomas Lawrence's grand, large-scale painting *Portrait of Eleanor, Lady Wigram* was created as Lawrence was reaching the height of his international reputation, around 1815. The woman in the portrait is Eleanor Wigram, the youngest daughter of John Watts, who held the position of Secretary of the Victualling Office. In 1787, she married Sir Robert Wigram, who was a wealthy and successful merchant, a former ship's surgeon, and a Member of Parliament. They had 17 children together. Lawrence portrays a woman who is refined, quiet, and dignified—quite unlike the busy society woman and mother that she was. The landscape that can be seen through the open window serves as a visual link to a portrait of her husband Robert, to which Eleanor's portrait was created as a companion, or *pendant* piece.

The rich, costume-like clothing is reminiscent of Elizabethan style, which

had recently come back into fashion during this period. For those who could afford such ornate clothing, the style had become re-popularized as a result of British patriotism following the defeat of Napoleon. Even her shawl holds cultural significance—it was most likely an Indian tapestry, a popular accessory for women during the 18th and 19th centuries. The shawl may also allude to her husband, and his work with the East India Company in London, which probably counted these shawls among its imports.

There is a sense of elegance and ease in Lawrence’s work, which, in actuality, he worked very hard to accomplish. He was a thoughtful and meticulous painter, as well as an incredibly precise draughtsman who drew inspiration from the Old Masters and Italian Renaissance artists. He often repainted or reworked sections of his paintings over and over to get the desired effect. Artists such as Anthony van Dyck, Thomas Gainsborough, and Sir Joshua Reynolds were among the greatest influences on Lawrence and his art.

CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL IMPORTANCE

At this time, England was experiencing many important changes, which had a strong influence on Lawrence’s paintings and the way that he worked. First, it was the dawn of the Romantic period in England, and while Lawrence adhered strictly to portraiture that remained mostly classical, some elements of *Romanticism* can be seen in his works, such as the subtle pastoral landscape in the background of the *Lady Wigram* portrait.

Also at the beginning of the 19th century, England’s battles with France and eventual defeat of Napoleon Bonaparte established the country as the foremost world power. This was especially vital to Lawrence and his position as one of England’s finest and well-known painters. As a court painter for the King of England, he traveled, interacted with, and painted many foreign dignitaries.

Finally, coinciding with all of this was the dawn of the Industrial Revolution

VOCABULARY

Impasto: The application of thick layers of pigment to a canvas or other surface in painting.

Pastoral: Having the simplicity, charm, serenity, or other characteristics generally attributed to rural areas; pertaining to the country or to life in the country; rural; rustic.

Pendant: A match, parallel, companion, or counterpart.

Romanticism: An artistic and intellectual movement originating in Europe in the late 18th century and characterized by a heightened interest in nature, emphasis on the individual’s expression of emotion and imagination, departure from the attitudes and forms of classicism, and rebellion against established social rules and conventions.

OHIO ACADEMIC CONTENT STANDARDS

Study of this work and its related classroom activities meets some or all of the following K-12 benchmarks:

- **Language Arts:** Acquisition of Vocabulary; Concept of Print, Comprehension Strategies and Self-Monitoring Strategies; Literary Text; Information, Technical, and Persuasive Text; Research; Communications: Oral and Visual
- **Mathematics:** Measurement; Geometry and Spatial Sense; Mathematical Processes
- **Sciences:** Science and Technology
- **Social Studies:** History; People in Societies; Geography; Economics; Skills and Methods
- **Visual Arts:** Historical, Cultural, and Social Contexts; Analyzing and Responding; Valuing the Arts/Aesthetic Reflection; Connections, Relationships, and Applications

in England, which introduced new technology and means of production, new jobs, new buildings, and migration patterns to urban areas, among other enormous changes. The Industrial Revolution would have a huge impact on the arts as well, acting as one catalyst for Romanticism, and providing artists, writers, and musicians of all backgrounds material with which to respond.

ARTIST BIOGRAPHY

Sir Thomas Lawrence was the leading portrait artist in England, and later Europe, during the Romantic period. By the end of his life he had acquired a worldwide celebrity and renown for his elegant and true-to-life portrayals of his varied subjects.

Born in 1769, Lawrence was the son of an inn-keeper who encouraged the boy from an early age to draw and sketch

portraits of guests at the inn. This both demonstrated and aided Lawrence's enormous natural talent. He was so skilled that by age 12 he was making money from his portraits, eventually becoming the main source of income for his family. In 1787, his family moved to London so he could study oil painting at the Royal Academy of Art. Here, he also closely studied the work of Joshua Reynolds, who he would later succeed as official painter to the Royal Family.

After selling a few portraits, he became well-known in London, and then Europe, especially after his 1790 portrait, often considered his greatest masterpiece, of Miss Ferren (Lady Derby). Lawrence's newfound fame and celebrated talent eventually led to his job painting for the Royal Family under King George III (his official title was Painter-In-Ordinary). He continued to paint many political celebrities and public

CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

LANGUAGE ARTS: British Romantic poets like Keats and Shelley were very influential on later writers and artists. Read and discuss some of their works after examining Portrait of Eleanor, Lady Wigram. What connections can be made between the poems and the painting, if any? (*High School*)

SCIENCE: Lawrence was a master of oil painting on a canvas surface. Research the scientific or chemical make-up of oil paints, and why they can be difficult to control and master. Why are oil paints more conducive to painting light and shadow? What advancements have been made in the manufacture of oil paints that would have benefitted artist's like Lawrence? (*High School*)

SOCIAL STUDIES: Study the battles between the French and the English leading up to Napoleon's defeat at Waterloo. Then examine portraits of royalty, military generals, and other important figures painted by English court painters like Reynolds and Lawrence, and portraits of similar subject matter by French court painters. Compare their similarities and differences and discuss what these details suggest about the attitudes and perceptions of each side during the war. (*Middle and High School*)

VISUAL ARTS: A painting like this would have taken many sittings for the artist to complete. Spend time working on a detailed portrait of a classmate or someone close to you. As you create the 'studies' for the work, think about what objects to include or what setting to place them in and how it sheds light on that person's character. (*All ages*)

figures, manipulating setting, light, and shadow to emphasize strength and intelligence in his subjects—usually men. His portraits of women are softer, and often less individualized or distinguishable than his portraits of men. He is known for his dynamic and “spirited” portrayals of his patrons—despite their often formal settings and “proper” poses—capturing the true sense of their character and personality with luminous and lively brushwork.

In 1818, Lawrence was sent to an international conference by the British

government, to paint the Allied leaders who had defeated Napoleon. He painted leaders like Francis I of Austria and Frederick William III of Prussia. In 1819, he painted Pope Pius VII.

Lawrence never married, and in fact seems to have been quite reluctant to approach intimacy or close involvement of that nature—whether this had to do with his travels, his celebrity, or the nature of his work, is unknown. In 1820, he was made president of the Royal Academy, a position he held until his death in 1831.