

Margaret & Mary

By Griff Rhys Jones, comedian, writer, actor and television presenter

In room 35 of the National Gallery a parade of Gainsborough's work hangs on the north wall. Here you can find Mr. and Mrs. Andrews looking peaky on a blustery Suffolk day, John Plampin of Lavenham relaxing with his dog, under a fine oak, with his own distant hurdled fields of sheep behind him, and two portraits of his own daughters.

I like the Gainsborough here, not with his later, flamboyant swaggering portraits of the wealthy with their finest flouncey white hair, shaggy dogs or lace frillies further on in the gallery, but a plainer Suffolk Hogarthian man – a “warts and all” man. The picture of Margaret and Mary, though, that everybody seems to prefer here is the more idealized one of the two charming toddlers chasing a butterfly. My wife wanted me to choose that as a favourite: pointing out the

Van Dyke style of brushwork on the silver dress and the charm of the composition, so why do I really love the other one – the unfinished picture of the sisters with a barely discernable cat in their arms? It is moving without being sentimental. Only a year separates the two girls in age. They were painted in this picture around 1761, possibly after the family

impatient. We can feel her wanting to escape from her father's insistent gaze. He is making them stand still long enough to “take” them both. Mary knows this is important to him. Margaret, younger and a favourite, seems more cheeky: caged, captured. It is a moment, pregnant with character, emotion and love. Formal and yet utterly free of affectation. An Instagram

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had just moved to Bath when they were nine and ten. It lacks the slight naive straightforwardness of his youthful Suffolk commissions, but the two girls are so totally alive in their passivity. Mary is holding Margaret still and quiet. The younger looks

for its times, perhaps, yet what incredible skill, what wonderful ability, what confidence, to be able to catch in children so young their individual character and quickness. We can read their eyes. We can see their feelings. We can feel their



liveliness. No wonder he never finished it. The cat, the background, the dresses are irrelevant to the knowledge of them that he has caught in the faces. He painted his daughters often. There is another really compelling double portrait in the V&A, but I don't think

the other portrayals are quite as stirring or true. Given the future history, with poor Mary falling into mental illness in later life, there is a poignancy here too, but only because they are both so real, posing here before us for their talented father.

Special thanks to the National Gallery for allowing Gainsborough's House to use their image free of charge.

Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88), THE PAINTER'S DAUGHTERS WITH A CAT, 1760–1, Oil on canvas © National Gallery, London