

### **Collector, Theorist and Artist**

*'A portrait is a general history of the life of the person it represents.'*

*- Jonathan Richardson the Elder, 1715*

Jonathan Richardson the Elder is widely recognised as one of the most influential figures in the visual arts of 18<sup>th</sup> century England. As an avid art collector, Richardson prided himself on his expertise on and passion for Old Masters, which is reflected in his collection and expressed through his scholarship. By the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century, Richardson was a highly acclaimed art theorist in England, and his publications served as guides for young men embarking on the Grand Tour of Europe. As an artist in his own right, Richardson studied under portrait painter John Riley, and continued to have a successful career as a portrait artist.

In this exhibition a selection of Richardson's portrait drawings are displayed, some of which have never been exhibited. In 18<sup>th</sup> century England it was common practice to produce chalk or graphite drawings as preparatory studies for paintings. Artists would often rework their drawings before painting as they explored variations in composition and styling that would ultimately be executed on the canvas. In contrast to this, though executed in chalk and graphite, Richardson's numerous drawings were not entirely preliminary studies or practices for larger works, but rather complete works of art in their own right. His rich and celebrated art collection – which included drawings by European masters such as Rembrandt – indicates his respect for fine draftsmanship, and his belief in the ability of drawings to instantly and intimately capture individual characteristics in regards to portraiture.

'Drawing was an important and lifelong activity' for Richardson that 'related not only to his professional concerns as a portrait painter, but also to his preoccupations as a writer and to his personal life'<sup>1</sup>. Richardson drew himself and his son almost every day for a number of years, using 'his professional skills to document aspects of his life and to realise concepts that had verbal equivalents in some of his poetical and theoretical writings'<sup>2</sup>.

During his retirement, Richardson wrote poetry almost daily in a collection titled *Morning Thoughts*, produced between 1732 and 1736. These poems were dated to the day and in

some cases on the hour, much like his self-portraits and portraits of his son, Jonathan Richardson the Younger. The large number of drawings Richardson produced of himself and his son might appear to indicate the artist's vanity, or suggest that these drawings were a frivolous gentlemen's pastime, but Richardson in fact regarded them as visual elaborations of his poetry, which were also imbued with self-improvement sentiments and introspective self-reflections.

Richardson depicted himself adopting various personas not as a form of disguise but rather as a means of elaborating on and making visual the different aspects of himself. Depicting himself with [a long wig](#) positions Richardson amongst the scholarly circles of his time, since a wig of this sort was indicative of his social status. Richardson also commonly portrayed himself wearing [a soft hat](#) in informal dress, recalling a tradition set forth by earlier portrait artists, thereby aligning him as part of a lineage of virtuoso artists. Although these portraits were largely completed in the mid-1730s when the artist was an elderly man, Richardson depicted himself at various stages of his life. Made for his own private satisfaction, the drawings helped Richardson to review his life and accomplishments, which is supported and contextualised in his surviving writings. He used self-portraiture as a vehicle for moral improvement or awareness.

### ***Portrait of the Artist As... Attribution Project***

Richardson's self-portraits and portraits of his beloved son are most meaningful in their numbers. The serial nature of self-representation is an interesting and recurring theme in this exhibition, one which extends from the historical to contemporary works on display. Through countless depictions of himself, Richardson was both crafting and highlighting his profession and persona as an artist, a role that he inscribed with inherent introspective tendencies. Richardson's preoccupation with his life has been made visual and tangible through the many drawings he made of himself, revealing his belief in the power of portraiture to be both exploratory and explanatory.

When selecting works for this exhibition from the collection of Richardson's drawings in The Courtauld Gallery we were confronted by questions of attribution, brought to our attention by Stephanie Buck, the Martin Halusa Curator of Drawings. At this point it was unclear whether all of the works were by Jonathan Richardson the Elder, or if some of them may have been by his son, Jonathan Richardson the Younger, who is portrayed in many of them and who was also an

artist. It was essential for the integrity of the show, and of the works themselves, that we verified who the artist and sitter of each work was before the works were exhibited. Stefanie Lenk, my research partner, and I began this task by reading the files on the works in The Courtauld's collection and noting down their individual provenance and any scholarship that accompanied the works. In some cases curators from years ago confirmed attributions, a useful starting point.

This task also led us to the British Museum to examine their large collection of Richardson drawings for more comparative material. Jonathan Richardson the Elder made most of his drawings as an older man and yet chose to depict himself in a more youthful, idealised way. This complicated matters of attribution slightly. During this process we examined the different signatures on the works and through a close study of handwriting and handling of ink we were able to identify which works were made by the Elder. Most of our work was a visual exercise in which we scrutinised the facial features of the subjects and the drawing style of the artist. We compared the manner of the graphite strokes, how shadows and lighting were handled, as well as the bone structure and hair styles of the sitter. Through this process we were able to distinguish father and son through facial features, and subsequently adjust the works' attribution.

This fascinating research project revealed much about the nature of the drawings and shed light on Jonathan Richardson the Elder as an artist. Our findings clarified the purpose of his drawings and also brought us closer to the works as objects demanding close examination, reinforcing Richardson's strength and singularity as a draughtsman.

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<sup>1</sup> Carol Gibson-Wood, 'Jonathan Richardson as a Draftsman', *Master Drawings*, 32: 3 (1994): 203.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 203.