

## 18<sup>th</sup> Century Art Star

A review of the exhibiton: *Thomas Lawrence: Regency, Power and Brilliance*, at the Yale British Art Gallery, February 2011

By Geoffrey Detrani

If you lived in 18<sup>th</sup> century Britain, were a dandy, shot through with vanity and a sense of self entitlement, thought much of having your visage, however fair or foul, preserved for posterity in the form of a dazzling portrait painting, then (Sir) Thomas Lawrence was your man. Just sit still in the chair for him– he brought the set design, the high-end special effects of his brush, colors and forgiving technique. He was the ur-portrait painter for the rich and famous of his era.

This exhibition's sub-titled (Regency, Power and Brilliance) foretells the deal: it's about regency and power – the power of martial prowess, social class, economic might and eroticized beauty. It's about the power to make the images that shaped the historical record in an era that antedates photography.

Lawrence's lavish and luscious canvases – in turns seductive, hilarious and repellent - constituted a sort of visual echo chamber for the British aristocracy and their allies (including at least one Pope, one Prussian Field Marshall and sundry other anti-Napoleon hotshots and business leaders). His was the hand that crafted the media that etched privilege and rank into a picturesque morsel of visual candy that excelled at doing its rhetorical work.

Which is nice work if you can get it. Lawrence, born of modest means, got it through dint of sheer talent. Apparently, a child prodigy, he was discovered sketching in the roadside inn his father land-lorded over. At eleven years old he had a remarkable ability to capture the topography of a person's face in chalk and charcoal. Good thing for the Lawrences' too – the year he was “discovered,” his dad went bankrupt and young Thomas' drawings became the family's chief source of income.

The Lawrence clan moved to London, where young Thomas set up shop and began to show his works at the Royal Academy – an esteemed institution at which he would exhibit over 40 times during his life and later become the President of. The big-time commissions followed.

Lawrence was heaped with praise and admiration for his talents. He got filthy rich from his commissions, served the state (went on an official mission to paint the key players in the Congress of Vienna talks that reshaped Post – Napoleonic Europe), was a social dandy, a lifelong bachelor and went hugely into debt.

Lawrences' studio was reputed to have been the place to be – a happening nexus of social fashion and soft power – like Andy Warhol's factory but with snuff and

powdered wigs. When Field-Marshal von Blücher, the Prussian military leader of recent fame, sat for his portrait, the local constables had to be called in to keep curious fans at bay.

This show originated at the National Portrait Gallery in London. The lavish catalog that accompanies the exhibition includes many works that are not seen here. Most of what we see in Yale's version of "Thomas Lawrence: Regency, Power and Brilliance" are tame full body or head and shoulder portraits. They are appealing in their gauzy, subject heralding way, but limited in their transcendent reach. Was Lawrence exposed to the works of William Hogarth (one generation preceding him) with their moral implications and social critique? Nothing in this exhibition leads one to believe he was.

But Lawrence, in episodes of critical self-reflection, lamented that he might be wasting his time and talent on so much fluff. He had an ambition to do more – to try his hand at important historical themes. Included in the catalog, but, disappointingly, not in the exhibition, is his bewildering but compelling "Satan Summoning his Legions." Was this one such attempt? To the contemporary eye this canvas is comically overwrought. Satan – the viewer looks up at him – stands arms raised, square jawed, over-muscled, with a thin filament of something covering his loins. It reads like a homoerotic poster for a theatrical adaptation of Paradise Lost.

It's difficult to assess the products of the past with the criteria of the present. Sure, before photography people with drafting talent were needed to capture the likeness of those who had the means to be immortalized. But compelling art is a reach further than that mark. While Lawrence's technique was unquestionably superlative, his effects were not always so. Or too much so; too much theater - not enough art.