

# *Devizes*

One of Wiltshire's Illustrious Sons

## Sir Thomas Lawrence

*by Ann Russell*



Sir Thomas Lawrence, the most successful English portrait painter of his day, is particularly remembered as a “society” painter. His subjects included kings, queens and princes, great diplomats and famous generals, and even the Pope himself sat for him.

Thomas Lawrence was born at Bristol on the 4<sup>th</sup> May, 1769. His father was an innkeeper and when his son was four years old the family moved to Devizes, where Mr. Lawrence became “mine host” at the Black Bear. Very soon everyone was aware of the great gift which Thomas possessed. His earliest works were mainly profiles, done in pencil, and his first subjects were doubtless the worthy Wiltshiremen of Devizes, sitting in meditation or conversation as they slaked their thirst with his father’s ale.

By the time he was ten he had won a reputation as a prodigy and become accepted as a serious portraitist. He was still only thirteen years old when his family moved to Bath, and yet despite very little conventional education or artistic training, he now felt competent to set up as a professional. By this time he was working in pastels but it was not until he moved to London, in 1786, that he began to experiment with oils.

In London he spent a short time studying at the Royal Academy schools and here he first met the famous Devonian, Sir Joshua Reynolds, who helped and encouraged him and into whose shoes he was ultimately destined to step. Lawrence, although still very young, was not only exceptionally gifted but handsome in looks and manners and charming to all around him.

So highly was he regarded that in 1789, when he was only twenty, he was summoned to Windsor to paint Queen Charlotte. This portrait, now in the National Gallery, is considered one of the great masterpieces of that time. Then within the next two years he completed his ravishing full length portrait of Miss Farrer, later to become the Countess of Derby, and the phenomenal success of these two works was largely responsible for his meteoric rise to fame.

In 1791 he was elected an associate of the Royal Academy, three years later became an academician, and on the death of Reynolds in the following year, crowned these achievements by succeeding him as painter in ordinary to the King and painter to the Dilettanti society.

Although Lawrence had by now completely abandoned pastel painting, he continued to do complete portraits in pencil and in chalks. Also, being a skilled draughtsman as well as a painstaking artist, even when using oils he would make a careful drawing of his subject on the canvas itself and then paint over it.

Another effect of Reynolds death was that Lawrence's position as the fashionable portrait painter of the day was secure and undisputed. Presumably as a result of this, he now began to present his sitters in dramatic, even theatrical, manner which resulted in an altogether more romantic type of portraiture.

His women subjects, in particular, benefited from this development, as from his remarkable talent for transferring to canvas the pearly bloom of cheeks and brows and the eager sparkle or the limpid, distant gaze in their eyes. Their gowns, also, were brought to life by the inspired strokes of his brush, whether of light evanescent muslins or deep, rich silks and velvets.

Despite this great success in the form of art which he had first practised in his father's Wiltshire inn, Lawrence was very anxious to extend his talents and widen his interests. Especially, he wished to be recognised as a history painter in the grand manner. His most ambitious attempt in this direction was a work entitled 'Satan' and shown at the Royal Academy in 1797 but he was finally forced to acknowledge that it was not a success.

Soon after this disappointment, however, Lawrence was given the opportunity to make his mark on history in an even more definite and enduring way. After the death of John Hoppner, in 1810, he was patronized by that gayest and most trend setting leader of fashionable London, the Prince Regent.

The Prince, who had already "discovered" Brighton and had the pavilion built, was an influential patron of both art and architecture. In 1815 he conferred the honour of knighthood on Thomas Lawrence and three years later detailed him to travel to the continent and to execute a pictorial record of the allied military leaders and heads of state.

Thus Sir Thomas was a prominent figure at Aix-la-Chapelle, and at Vienna, during the famous meetings which decided the fate of Europe after the downfall of Napoleon. He portrayed these great diplomats and generals, with regal verve and elegance, in large full-dress portraits. The resulting twenty-four canvases, which faithfully mirror and immortalize the Holy Alliance, are now suitably housed in the Waterloo Chamber at Windsor Castle; a collection of official portraits which form a unique historical document.

Lawrence was now hailed as the leading portrait painter of Europe and his perfect likeness of Pope Pius VII, one of the twenty-four, is undoubtedly his masterpiece and recognised as a work of European distinction. On his return to England, after five years on the continent, he was elected President of the Royal Academy in succession to Benjamin West.

Lawrence then, is notable as the painter of George IV and his court, distinguished statesmen and exalted members of society. But in addition to these tangible achievements, and despite humble beginnings and lack of formal education or training, he also exerted an important influence on the development of art. This influence was left primarily in France, after Delacroix's visit to London, and from there spread throughout the world.

Delacroix was seeking, as Gericault had before him, to resist the systematic desiccation of the school of David. Lawrence demonstrated to him that by a return to harmony and richness and depth of colouring, based on the example of the great masters of earlier days, it was possible to create a contemporary art which was still full of vigour and adaptable to every circumstance.

So Lawrence stimulated and invigorated the French art of his time, with an influence hardly less than that of Constable. And later, artists throughout the civilized world turned to Lawrence's work when searching for a sensitive interpretation of the true quality and reality of life.

Yet with all this fame and fortune, Sir Thomas Lawrence was ever aware of the younger, still struggling artists, and remembering no doubts his own hopes, fears and dreams as he sat with pencil and pad in the "Black Bear." he constantly dipped his hand in his pocket on their behalf.

Furthermore he was held in universal respect as a distinguished connoisseur, having a genuine and instinctive feeling for all forms of art and craftsmanship. Thus when he died in London, on the 7th January, 1830, he possessed what was recognised as one of the finest collections of old master drawings ever made. Even so, his endeavours had by no means all been aimed at personal acquisition, for this worthy Westcountry artist had worked tirelessly towards both securing the Elgin marbles for the nation and helping to found the National Gallery.

*(Original Source not recorded)*