

For immediate release: 12 August 2021

## Rediscovered drawings by young Gainsborough to go on display for the first time across England and Ireland

Twenty-five landscape drawings reattributed to Thomas Gainsborough (1727–88) will go on display for the first time in an exhibition **Young Gainsborough: Rediscovered Landscape Drawings**, travelling to York Art Gallery, the National Gallery of Ireland and Nottingham Castle in 2021 and 2022. Produced in the late 1740s when Gainsborough was in his early twenties, the drawings offer an intimate glimpse into the early career of one of Britain's best-loved artists.



Thomas Gainsborough,  
*Study for Cornard Wood, c.1748*

The drawings were previously believed to be by the painter Sir Edwin Landseer, having been acquired by Queen Victoria from his studio in 1874. They were then housed in the Print Room at Windsor Castle, bound in an album titled 'Sketches by Sir E Landseer'. In 2013, the art historian Lindsay Stainton identified one of the drawings as a study for Gainsborough's most celebrated landscape painting, *Cornard Wood* (c.1748), leading to the reattribution of the drawings to Gainsborough. This discovery represents a major contribution to Gainsborough's work as a draughtsman, and dramatically expands the number of known drawings from this early part of his career. To place the drawings in context, the exhibition will feature other paintings and drawings from Gainsborough's early years. Visitors will gain an understanding of how Gainsborough made his drawings and experience the brilliance of his close attention to every detail in nature.

The youngest son of a cloth merchant from Sudbury, Thomas Gainsborough displayed artistic promise from a young age, and much of his youth was spent producing landscape views of his home county of Suffolk. He later excelled in the more fashionable and lucrative genre of portraiture, becoming a founding member of the Royal Academy and official court painter to George III, rivalled in prestige only by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Although portraiture brought Gainsborough wealth and fame, his preference for landscape remained a constant throughout his life. He famously wrote in the 1760s: 'I'm sick of Portraits and wish very much to take my Viol da Gamba and walk off to some sweet Village where I can paint Landskips and enjoy the fag End of Life in quietness and ease.'

The study for *Cornard Wood* will hang alongside the finished painting, newly conserved and loaned by The National Gallery, London, uniting the painting with its preparatory drawing for the first time since they were last together in Gainsborough's studio. The drawing offers a fresh glimpse into Gainsborough's creative process. He ruled a squared grid over the preparatory drawing, a common technique that allowed an artist to transfer (and enlarge) a composition square by square from a study sheet onto a larger canvas. Numbers pencilled along the lower edge of the sheet allowed him to keep track of the transfer process, while traces of oil and paint suggest that he had the drawing close to hand while working on the painting in his studio.

The now-famous painting depicts an area of woodland near Great Cornard, about two miles from Gainsborough's childhood home. In contrast to his formal society portraits, which tended to depict landed gentry within their private estates, the subject here is common land, shown bustling with local people gathering wood and grazing animals. The richly coloured and affectionately painted scene reflects both Gainsborough's observational skill and his deep love of the Suffolk countryside.

When conservators at Windsor Castle removed the drawings from their album in preparation for the exhibition, four of the sheets were discovered to have further drawings on the reverse, where Gainsborough used both sides of the paper to experiment with compositions. One is a small study of the head of a young woman, in the slightly naive figure style of Gainsborough's early portraits. The sheet will be displayed double-sided in the exhibition, encapsulating the fluidity with which Gainsborough switched between - and often combined - portraiture and landscape as he sought to make his mark on the British art scene.

A section of the exhibition will explore the decisive formative influence that Dutch landscape painting had on the young Gainsborough, having been employed by an art dealer in London to restore and copy works by 17th-century artists such as Jacob van Ruisdael and Jan Wijnants. The shared features of the Netherlands and East Anglia – their flat fields punctuated with windmills and winding paths – enabled Gainsborough to incorporate Dutch motifs directly into his Suffolk landscapes. He admired the naturalistic approach of Dutch artists and emulated their depictions of brooding skies, dense foliage and fallen trees, evident in his *Landscape with a Pool* (c.1746-47), on loan from the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. Ruisdael's *A Pool surrounded by Trees, and Two Sportsmen coursing a Hare* (c.1665), on loan from The National Gallery, London, clearly shows the influence that this artist had on Gainsborough's approach to composition and detail.

The final section of the exhibition will consider Gainsborough's drawing practice and use of materials. Most of the drawings are on coarse paper imported from France, usually used for wrapping and packing. This cheap paper presumably appealed to Gainsborough as its rough surface provided good friction for drawing in chalks, while its grey tone meant he could experiment with using both black and white. His chalks were held in a split-stick known as a *porte-crayon* and blended onto the paper using a wad of tightly rolled leather called a 'stump', to create subtle light effects and gradations in tone. By contrast, seven of the drawings are on a fine white artists' paper, which came from the Netherlands, its smoother surface allowing for detailed foliage drawn in sharp black chalk, as seen in *Trees beside a path winding into the distance* (c.1748-50). Three of the drawings feature large brown oil stains, suggestive of an accident in the studio where a jar of linseed oil was knocked onto a pile of drawings.

Gainsborough often sketched outdoors, and pin holes visible in the corners of several drawings suggest that he pinned the paper to a portable drawing board. These open-air (*plein air*) sketches, such as *Trees beside a descending path* (c.1746-48) reveal Gainsborough's drawing process, which began with outlining trees and foliage in black chalk, before working up more detail from the centre outwards. He also made observational studies of individual plants and animals, such as *A study of a tree, possibly a sycamore* (c.1746-48), which would later serve as stock motifs to be drawn upon when composing studio paintings. As the *Morning Herald* noted in its 1788 obituary of Gainsborough, 'nature was his teacher and the woods of Suffolk his academy.' The beauty and immediacy of these rediscovered drawings are testament to Gainsborough's innate talent and his enduring love of landscape.

## Ends

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***Young Gainsborough: Rediscovered Landscape Drawings* is a touring exhibition curated by Royal Collection Trust in collaboration with York Art Gallery; the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; and Nottingham Castle with additional works generously loaned by The National Gallery, London; The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; The Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester; and Colchester and Ipswich Museums.**

[York Art Gallery, York](#)

1 October 2021 – 13 February 2022

[National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin](#)

5 March – 12 June 2022

[Nottingham Castle, Nottingham](#)

2 July – 25 September 2022

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#YoungGainsborough

### Notes to Editors

**Royal Collection Trust**, a department of the Royal Household, is responsible for the care of the Royal Collection and manages the public opening of the official residences of The Queen. Income generated from admissions and from associated commercial activities contributes directly to The Royal Collection Trust, a registered charity. The aims of The Trust are the care and conservation of the Royal Collection, and the promotion of access and enjoyment through exhibitions, publications, loans and educational programmes. Royal Collection Trust's work is undertaken without public funding of any kind.

**The Royal Collection** is among the largest and most important art collections in the world, and one of the last great European royal collections to remain intact. It comprises almost all aspects of the fine and decorative arts, and is spread among some 15 royal residences and former residences across the UK, most of which are regularly open to the public. The Royal Collection is held in trust by the Sovereign for her successors and the nation, and is not owned by The Queen as a private individual.

**York Art Gallery's** collection of paintings spans more than 600 years and works range from 14th century Italian panels and 17th century Dutch masterpieces to Victorian narrative paintings and 20th century works by LS Lowry and David Hockney. The Gallery also holds the most extensive and representative collection of British Studio Ceramics, thanks to the acquisition of collections from Dean Milner-White, WA Ismay and Henry Rothschild and the recent long term loan of Anthony Shaw's collection. Highlights are on show in the Centre of Ceramic Art (CoCA). The Gallery and its collections are cared for by the charity York Museums Trust, established in 2002. For more information visit [www.yorkartgallery.org.uk](http://www.yorkartgallery.org.uk)

**The National Gallery of Ireland** is one of Ireland's most popular visitor attractions housing the nation's collection of European and Irish art from about 1300 to the present day, and an extensive Library & Archive. Entry to the collection is free for all to enjoy, learn and be inspired. [www.nationalgallery.ie](http://www.nationalgallery.ie)

**Nottingham Castle**, operated by not-for-profit charity Nottingham Castle Trust, is the must-see heritage attraction for 2021. Situated on the historic "Castle Rock", visitors can step into the epic retelling of Robin Hood and experience 1,000 years of history of the rebellious city in a more accessible and revealing way than ever. The historic landmark has undergone a £30m conservation, renovation, and redevelopment, which includes the creation of new art galleries housing permanent collections of fine-art and touring exhibitions, new mixed reality games, a new visitor centre and an outdoor family adventure playground, Hood's Hideout. Nottingham Castle's Temporary Exhibitions space welcomes prestigious touring exhibitions throughout the year, where visitors can see an ever-changing variety of must-see pioneering works from a range of international artists. [www.nottinghamcastle.org.uk](http://www.nottinghamcastle.org.uk)

**The National Gallery, London** is one of the greatest art galleries in the world. Founded by Parliament in 1824, the Gallery houses the nation's collection of paintings in the Western European tradition from the late 13th to the early 20th century. The collection includes works by Bellini, Cézanne, Degas, Leonardo, Monet, Raphael, Rembrandt, Renoir, Rubens, Titian, Turner, Van Dyck, Van Gogh and Velázquez. The Gallery's key objectives are to enhance the collection, care for the collection and provide the best possible access to visitors. Admission free. More at [www.nationalgallery.org.uk](http://www.nationalgallery.org.uk)