

# THE FITZWILLIAM MUSEUM

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Fact Sheet

## The Braddyll Family by Sir Joshua Reynolds



Title:	The Braddyll Family
Maker:	Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 - 1792)
Medium:	Oil on Canvas
Date:	1789
Dimensions:	h. 238.1 x w. 147.3 cm
Museum No:	PD.10-1955
Gallery:	2

## The Sitters

Wilson Gale-Braddyll was a Member of Parliament and Groom to the Bedchamber of the Prince of Wales, who later became George IV. He was aged 33 when this portrait was painted. He married Jane Gale in 1776 and the family lived at Conishead Priory in Lancashire. From Reynolds' record books we know that he seemed to have enjoyed painting Jane Braddyll. He had portrayed her alone the previous year when she sat for him eleven times, and we know she sat for him a further eight times for this group portrait. Her son, Thomas, and Wilson sat only five times each. Thomas grew up to become an officer in the Coldstream Guards and served England in the Napoleonic Wars.

## The Artist

Sir Joshua Reynolds was born into a large and scholarly family, albeit of modest means, who lived in Devon. His father was a clergyman and headmaster of the local grammar school. Joshua was apprenticed to Thomas Hudson, then the most fashionable portraitist in London, and spent a few years working independently in London and Devon. In 1749 he had the chance to accompany his friend, the Honourable Augustus Keppel to the Mediterranean, where he stayed until 1752. It was during these years that he immersed himself in the works of the Old Masters. This research was put to use throughout his career in the way he composed his portraits and positioned his sitters. Although he had ambitions to become a painter of history pictures which would initially have brought him higher status, it was as a portraitist for nearly forty years that he established his reputation. His record books show how busy he was, and how carefully he planned his working day. Reynolds is widely acknowledged to have raised the professional status of the artist, and the respect in which he was held is reflected in his appointment as the first President of the newly founded Royal Academy in 1768, his knighthood in 1769 and ultimately his burial in St Paul's Cathedral, joining kings, great men and national heroes in 1792.

## The Portrait

This portrait must be one of the last that Sir Joshua Reynolds ever painted, as in July 1789 he gave up painting because of failing eyesight. Reynolds was criticised during his lifetime for the way in which many of his paintings had faded and cracked because of his use of unstable materials. Sir Walter Blackett (1707-1777), a disgruntled client, wrote:

*"Painting of old was surely well designed  
To keep the features of the dead in mind,  
But this great rascal has reversed the plan,  
And made the pictures die before the man."*

In this case we are lucky because the picture is well preserved.

The composition of this group portrait is traditional, with the family group placed centrally with parkland as a background. The three faces form a triangle, and this shape is echoed at the bottom of the painting with Thomas' left leg and the fall of Jane's skirt. The figure of Wilson stands out due to a number of painterly devices: he is shown as taller than the other figures; he looks straight out of the picture at us, the viewers, wherever we stand; his red coat commands attention and his pose reflects confidence and authority. Thomas echoes his father in the style of his costume, in his pose (particularly the bent left elbow) and also in his glance towards us, although his face is painted from a three-quarter viewpoint. All this reinforces Thomas as the heir to Wilson's wealth and social position. Jane is seated looking at Thomas, expensively dressed but passive, apart from the fondling of the ear of her spaniel who sits in her lap.

The spaniel's position at the heart of the painting could be symbolic. Dogs were used in painting to represent fidelity, and perhaps the spaniel's role here is to suggest the trust and loyalty within this family group. Similarly, directly over Thomas' head there is a carved figure of a Greek warrior depicted on a copy of the Medici Vase, a popular ornament in eighteenth century landscapes. It has been suggested that this could represent the military ambitions of the parents for their son Thomas, who did indeed go on to have a distinguished career in the Coldstream Guards.

## The Golden Age of the Society Portrait

The later part of the eighteenth century is often called the Golden Age of the Society Portrait. In previous centuries portraits had been reserved for royalty and the nobility. With the eighteenth century came huge industrialisation and commercial development, as well as advances within the academic and artistic communities. Besides royalty and aristocrats, there were now the gentry, merchant classes, men of letters and politicians all wanting the immortality and contemporary status of a formal portrait.

Sitters would sometimes pay for the portrait themselves, or the commission often came from an institution. Between 1750 and 1790 Sir Joshua Reynolds and his main rival Thomas Gainsborough produced well over 2000 portraits between them. Reynolds charged for a portrait according to its size, charging extra for subordinate figures. The rise in his popularity is reflected in the rapid rise in his prices. For instance the cost of a whole-length portrait rose from 48 guineas in the early 1750s to 200 guineas by the 1780s.

In 1760 Reynolds bought a house in Leicester Fields on to which he added a gallery and studio. His sitters were expected to come to him and they were seated on a so-called throne, raised eighteen inches from the floor. The studio had only one, high, window with the sill being 9ft 4in above the floor and Reynolds always painted from a standing position. Reynolds would receive sitters from 10 or 11am in the morning until 4pm in the afternoon, requiring a minimum of three sittings to achieve a likeness, and his studio was arranged to keep the production line moving. Lay models were used for the drapery. He employed assistants who were chiefly used for painting drapery and accessories, whereas Reynolds' responsibility was always the face and hands.