

Joseph Wright of Derby (Derby 1734-1797)

Portrait of Richard Sacheverell Bateman as a boy

Inscribed with a four-line Italian verse and the name of the sitter's father and dated:

'Hugh Bateman 1795'

To sulla Tela solitaria e mesta
Voi souvente [sic] in voi cerco, e trovo solo
Un silenzio, un orro, ch d' alto duolo
M' empie, e gli occhi mi bagna, e' L piè m' arresta.'

Oil on canvas

50 ³/₈ x 40 in. (128 x 102 cm.)

Executed c.1792-94



Provenance

In the family of the sitter until 2022.

Literature

Benedict Nicolson, *Joseph Wright of Derby. Painter of Light*, 2 vols, London/New York, 1968, vol. I, pp. 17, 48, 71, 128, 181, no. 13 and vol. II, p. 212, pl. 336.

Exhibited

London, Graves' Galleries, *Catalogue of the exhibition of works by Joseph Wright, A.R.A. of Derby*, 1910, cat. no. 60.

Derby, Corporation Art Gallery, *Wright of Derby: Catalogue of the bi-centenary exhibition of paintings*, 1934, cat. no. 1.

From the mid-eighteenth century onwards, a major sociocultural shift in perceptions of childhood took place. Crucial to this shift were the intellectual and philosophical foundations provided by John Locke's *Some Thoughts Concerning Education* (1693), and the publication of the French philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau's influential writings on childhood in the 1760s. Rousseau (1712–78) argued that childhood was an age of innocence, challenging the belief of earlier generations that childhood was a perilous time (and more specifically that children had to be saved from immoral behaviour). Rousseau's novel *Émile or on Education* (1762), in which he recommended for children unrestricted freedom and familial intimacy rather than rigidity, helped to establish a cult of childhood

which found its first visual expression in the work of British artists like Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough. Finding artistic strategies that could reinforce the innocence and vulnerability of children occupied both portrait painters and patrons alike.

Joseph Wright raised his own children according to Rousseau's principals, and in his portrait of Richard Sacheverell Bateman (1788-94) many of the artistic references can be unpicked in relation to Rousseau's ideas. Richard was the only son of Hugh Bateman (1758-1824) of Hartington Hall, Derbyshire, and Temperance Bateman (née Gisborne), and the boy would sadly die the year after it was painted. The portrait has been misunderstood as being posthumous owing to the Italian inscription which was added in 1795 on instruction from Hugh Bateman to commemorate his son's recent death. It is much more accurately read, and interesting, as a portrait of a beloved son being raised by forward-thinking and involved parents, and Wright tackles his subject with a typically individual approach.

The book illustrated is *L'Ami des Enfants* by Arnaud Berquin (1747-91), a collection of short stories which was popular at the time. Berquin's name and work would have been as familiar to British children growing up in the late eighteenth century as that of almost any native writer, and indeed *L'Ami des Enfants* was successful enough for translation into English (though one of its primary purposes would have been to teach children French). If the book has a theme, it is that parents and children live in a perfect symbiosis, the parents looking after their children's interests and the children, if behaving properly, filling their parents with joy (an idea expressed best in '*The Little Brother*'). To the modern reader this seems a truism, or at least something that it is natural for a family to aspire to, but the paradigm of the nuclear family was not so universally accepted in the eighteenth century, especially in many upper-class households. Many children were still schooled on books in which parents seem to intrude only to castigate their children and ram pious lessons home. Berquin's approach, which chimed with Rousseau's, must have been refreshing. By

including this book in the portrait of Richard Sacheverell, Wright is clearly signalling that the Batemans were favouring a more holistic upbringing for their only son.

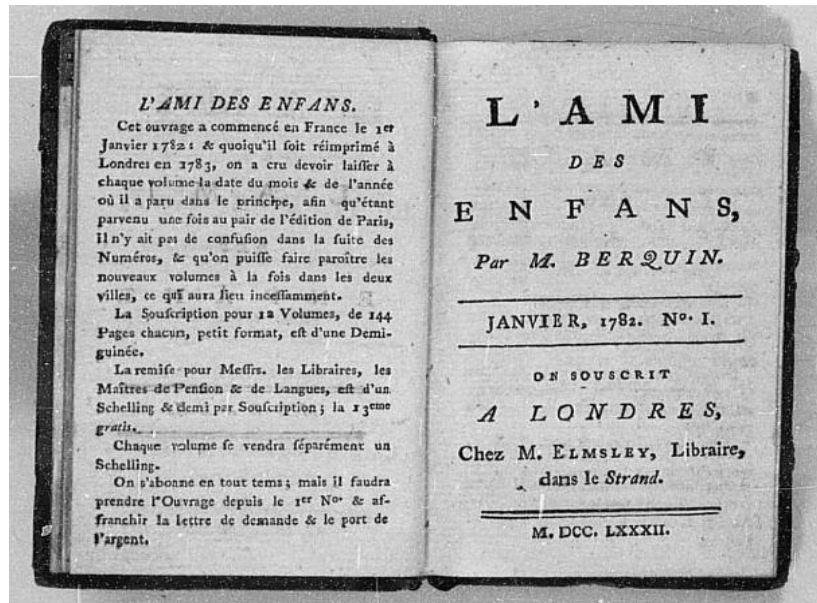


Fig. 1: Title page from Arnaud Berquin, *L'Ami des Enfants* (1782)

The book is placed next to a very fine pale blue hat belonging, we can assume, to the boy's mother. Putting these objects together implies that she is involved in an immediate way in her son's life, with the specific suggestion here that she reads to him. Rousseau, in his assertions on motherhood, stressed that he believed children benefitted when mothers ordered their priorities to place the wellbeing of their children above all else, so Wright would have been keen to demonstrate a mother-son connection. Symbolism aside, the hat stands on its own as a dazzling detail which demonstrates Wright's particular flair for costume. Benedict Nicholson judges that 'no detail is more exquisite than this in the whole of Wright's late portraiture.'¹

Enlightenment and Romantic notions of the nature of childhood led to dramatically new ideas not only on how to raise but also how to clothe British children. English parents were beginning for the first time to dress children beyond toddlerhood in garments specific to childhood rather than in essentially miniature adult styles, and Richard Sachaverell's frock

¹ Benedict Nicholson, *Joseph Wright of Derby: Painter of Light*, Paul Mellon Foundation for British Art, 1968, p.71

worn over a slip is quite typical for this date. It is interesting to compare his clothes with those worn by Master John Heathcote in Gainsborough's portrait (fig.3), and by the Blunt brothers in a portrait by Johan Zoffany (fig.4). All of these children wear low-necked white frocks with similar broad blue sashes (although the gender association of blue for a boy did not yet exist). The whiteness of children's clothing around this date is relevant in terms

of the notion of innocence, and it is interesting that in real terms this took precedence over practicality.



Fig 3. Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788)
Master John Heathcote, c.1771/2
National Gallery of Art, Washington



Fig 4. Johan Zoffany (1733-1810)
The Blunt Children, c.1766-70
Birmingham Museums Trust