

= Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball =

Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball , also known as The Misses Williams @-@ Wynn , is a 173 by 150 cm ( 68 by 59 in ) oil on canvas by English artist William Etty , first exhibited in 1835 and currently in the York Art Gallery . Although Etty was then known almost exclusively for history paintings featuring nude figures , he was commissioned in 1833 by Welsh Conservative politician Charles Watkin Williams @-@ Wynn to paint a portrait of two of his daughters . Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball shows Williams @-@ Wynn 's daughters , Charlotte and Mary , in lavish Italian @-@ style costume : Charlotte , the eldest , is shown standing , helping the seated Mary decorate her hair with a ribbon and a rose . Etty put a good deal of effort into the piece and took much longer than usual to finish it .

The painting was completed for and exhibited at the 1835 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition . It was generally well received , even by critics usually hostile to Etty and his work . Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball demonstrated that Etty was both capable of high @-@ quality work and deserving of patronage by the English elite , and the success led to further commissions . The painting remained in the collection of Mary Williams @-@ Wynn 's descendants , and other than an 1849 retrospective exhibition , was not shown publicly for 160 years . A private collector purchased the piece from the Williams @-@ Wynn family in 1982 , where it remained until its 2009 acquisition by the York Art Gallery . It now forms part of a major collection of Etty 's work there .

= = Background = =

William Etty , the son of a York baker and miller , began as an apprentice printer in Hull . On completing his seven @-@ year apprenticeship he moved to London at the age of 18 , with the intention of becoming a history painter in the tradition of the Old Masters . Strongly influenced by the works of Titian and Rubens , he submitted paintings to the Royal Academy of Arts and the British Institution , all of which were either rejected or received scant attention when exhibited .

In 1821 the Royal Academy accepted and exhibited one of Etty 's works , The Arrival of Cleopatra in Cilicia ( also known as The Triumph of Cleopatra ) . The painting was extremely well received , and many of Etty 's fellow artists greatly admired him . He was elected a full Royal Academician in 1828 , ahead of John Constable . He became well respected for his ability to capture flesh tones accurately in painting and for his fascination with contrasts in skin tones . Following the exhibition of Cleopatra , Etty tried over the next decade to replicate its success by painting nude figures in biblical , literary and mythological settings . Between 1820 and 1829 Etty exhibited 15 paintings , of which 14 depicted nude figures .

Some nudes by foreign artists were held in private English collections , but Britain had no tradition of nude painting , and the display and distribution of nude material to the public had been suppressed since the 1787 Proclamation for the Discouragement of Vice . Etty was the first British artist to specialise in the nude , and the reaction of the lower classes to these paintings caused concern throughout the 19th century . Many critics condemned his repeated depictions of female nudity as indecent , although his portraits of male nudes were generally well received . ( Etty 's male nude portraits were primarily of mythological heroes and classical combat , genres in which the depiction of male nudity was considered acceptable in England . ) From 1832 onwards , needled by repeated attacks from the press , Etty remained a prominent painter of nudes but made conscious efforts to try to reflect moral lessons in his work .

= = Elizabeth Potts = = =

Although he was almost exclusively known at the time for painting nudes , Etty was commissioned in 1833 by Thomas Potts of Clapham Common to paint a portrait of his daughter Elizabeth . Potts paid him 65 guineas ( £ 68 @. 25 ; about £ 5 @, 800 in 2016 terms ) for the piece . Etty exhibited Elizabeth Potts at the Royal Academy Summer Exhibition of 1834 under the title of A Portrait , as the subject 's mother requested her identity be kept secret . As he had been too ill to

paint for much of the period preceding the exhibition he only exhibited one other picture there , The Cardinal .

Elizabeth Potts was poorly received by critics . Etty 's admirers were angered by his apparent abandonment of history painting for the then poorly regarded field of portrait painting , while Etty 's critics felt he had demonstrated that he did not have the technical skills to produce high quality portraits , and was simply trying to use his name to make money in the more lucrative field of portraiture . History paintings were generally sold at exhibition for no less than the asking price , and as a consequence often remained unsold . Portraits were commissioned by the subject or their family , providing a guaranteed source of income to the artist . History painting was much more highly regarded as an art form ; portrait painting was seen as reflecting nature whereas history painting involved more creativity and also gave the artist the opportunity to tell moral lessons .

Etty retained close connections with York throughout his life . After Jonathan Martin 's arson attack on York Minster in 1829 caused major damage , Etty was prominent in the effort to restore the building to its original state . One of his colleagues in that campaign was Welsh politician Charles Watkin Williams @-@ Wynn , the long @-@ serving Conservative Member of Parliament for Montgomeryshire .

= = Composition = =

In late 1833 Etty was commissioned by Williams @-@ Wynn to paint a portrait of two of his seven children . Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball depicts Williams @-@ Wynn 's daughters Charlotte and Mary , dressing up in lavish Italian @-@ style costume . Although their dress is generally described as Italian , Dennis Farr 's 1958 biography of Etty speculates that elements of the costumes were possibly intended to be Russian , based on Charlotte 's headdress . The Italian @-@ style clothing likely represents the high level of interest in Italian culture in early 19th @-@ century England . The popularity of the style of music now known as bel canto , widely associated with Italy , was at its peak ; likewise , the Italian plays of William Shakespeare had become extremely popular in the period . Etty , who had spent a good deal of time in Venice and other Italian cities , would have been very familiar with Italian clothing designs , and the costumes worn by the Williams @-@ Wynn sisters closely resemble those of women in Venetian scenes painted by Etty , such as 1831 's Window in Venice , During a Fiesta . As art historian Leonard Robinson points out , despite the title the sisters are not in fact shown preparing for the ball , but are fully dressed . The style of the work reflects that of Thomas Lawrence , who had been Etty 's teacher in 1807 ? 08 , as well as that of Joshua Reynolds , of whom Etty was a great admirer and of whose works Etty had often made copies as an exercise .

The sisters are depicted in three @-@ quarter length portrait ; Charlotte , the eldest , stands and helps Mary , who is seated , to decorate her hair with a ribbon and a rose . Their arrangement is similar to the positioning of the central female figures of Etty 's The Lute Player , painted around the same time , and Farr views Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball as a direct continuation of the theme of that work . ( The Lute Player was exhibited at the British Institution in early 1835 alongside Turner 's The Burning of the Houses of Lords and Commons , and was somewhat overshadowed by it . The Spectator commented that in comparison to the vibrant colours of the Turner , The Lute Player looked " as if mud had been the vehicle of the pigment " . )

The painting 's depiction of preparation for a fancy dress party would have been familiar to Etty 's generally wealthy audience . In both London and the English provincial cities , such balls and parties had become extremely fashionable by the 1830s . Though conservative in comparison to some costumes worn at contemporary fancy dress events , the richness of the design of the sisters ' dress indicates the high status of the Williams @-@ Wynn family in fashionable circles .

Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball took Etty some time to complete in comparison to his usual work , and he apologized to the sisters for his " inability to render [ repeated sittings for him ] less tedious " . He justified the slowness of the process by saying that he was not simply trying to capture the Williams @-@ Wynn sisters ' appearance , but " to make a fine work of Art as well as a resemblance " .

I can only regret I had it not in my power to render it less tedious . A mere " likeness " may be manufactured in a few sittings . If it is desirable to make a fine work of Art as well as a resemblance , it becomes another affair . This has led me to extend my attention to it , beyond the limits usually assigned to Portrait . I am sure , if rightly viewed , the time will not be deemed uselessly employed . " What is worth doing at all , is worth doing well . " ? " Whatsoever thy hand findeth to do , do it with all thy might ! "

= = Reception = =

Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball was one of eight works exhibited by Etty at the 1835 Royal Academy Summer Exhibition , the others being The Bridge of Sighs , Phaedria and Cymochles on the Idle Lake , Study from a Young Lady : A York Beauty , Study of the Head of a Youth , Venus and her Satellites , The Warrior Arming and Wood Nymphs Sleeping : Satyr Bringing Flowers . Art historian Sarah Burnage believes Etty 's choice of Venus and her Satellites may have been to draw attention to similarities with Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball and possibly to link the Williams @-@ Wynn sisters ' beauty with the legendary Venus .

Reviewers , even those usually hostile to Etty , were generally positive about the work , and towards Etty 's demonstration of his ability to paint a major piece depicting visual matter that did not depend on nudity or sensuality . Leigh Hunt 's London Journal noted that they were " glad to see him turn his abilities into a channel acknowledgedly more profitable than others are apt to be , and we heartily wish him success in it " ; the same reviewer did , however , savagely criticise Venus and her Satellites for its gratuitous nudity and a " total absence of soul " .

= = Legacy = =

Although Etty painted many private portraits of his friends and acquaintances , he produced very few publicly exhibited portraits , fewer than 30 of which were shown during his lifetime . Portraiture was seen as a vulgar and generally worthless form of painting throughout much of the 19th century , and portrait painters continued to be disparaged as a greedy and unimaginative group who survived by feeding the vanity of the emerging middle class . Other than Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball , critics generally disliked his portraits , preferring his history paintings in spite of reservations over his depictions of nudity . Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball did , however , serve as an indication that Etty could successfully paint works as commissions for the English elite , boosting his status and leading to further commissions . Etty died in November 1849 and soon fell from fashion ; by the late 19th century the cost of all his paintings had fallen below their original prices . Charlotte Williams @-@ Wynn became a noted letter writer and diarist ; Mary Williams @-@ Wynn married Member of Parliament James Milnes Gaskell . Both Charlotte and Mary died in April 1869 .

Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball was exhibited in a major retrospective of Etty 's works at the Royal Society of Arts in June 1849 , but after that was not exhibited publicly for 160 years . Charlotte Williams @-@ Wynn had died childless , and the painting was inherited by the family of Mary Williams @-@ Wynn . In 1982 it was sold to a private collector by Mary Williams @-@ Wynn 's great @-@ granddaughter Mrs Lewis Motley . The York Art Gallery purchased the work in 2009 for £ 120 @, @ 000 with the assistance of the Art Fund and the V & A / MLA Purchase Grant Fund , and it formed part of a major exhibition of Etty 's work at the York Art Gallery in 2011 ? 12 .