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## **An Analysis of the Shifting Perceptions of Identity, Art, and Legacy in Joshua Reynolds's Portraits: A Study of *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*, and *The Age of Innocence***

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**Abstract:** The research attempts to study three important crucial portraits by Sir Joshua Reynolds viz-a-viz *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784), *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces* (1763–65), and *The Age of Innocence* (c.1788) to understand how the artist represented identity, art, and social legacy in the late eighteenth century. The study uses ideas from John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and E. H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art* to explain how Reynolds used the Grand Style to make portrait painting more serious and meaningful. However, there has only been scanty research focussing on Reynolds's portraits which shows the changing ideas of identity and legacy. The main aim of this qualitative study is to show how Reynolds changed the traditional purpose of portraits from simple likenesses to powerful images that combine beauty, power, and memory. *Mrs. Siddons* and *Lady Sarah Bunbury* present women as noble and myth-like figures whose presence, posture, and setting elevate them beyond ordinary portraiture into the realm of dignity, refinement, and cultural authority noble framing challenges the narrow expectations placed on women at the time; instead of appearing frivolous, decorative, or passive, they become figures of authority, composure, and symbolic meaning. These myth-like portrayals are important because they reveal how portraiture could elevate women beyond the limits of their historical roles. By aligning women with ancient myths, Reynolds connects them to universal qualities: strength, virtue, beauty, intellect, and emotional depth. *The Age of Innocence* shows the growing popularity of emotional and commercial art; it changed the meaning and function of portraiture: art was no longer created solely for elite families or intellectual admiration. Art was now expected to evoke empathy, affection, and emotional response, creating a new visual culture grounded not in status but sentiment. The paper concludes how Reynolds's portraits go beyond appearances to become visual stories that connect art, identity, and status, creating a lasting cultural image.

**Keywords:** Allegory, Art, Grand Style, Identity, Legacy, Portraiture.

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The contemporary scholarship on eighteenth-century British portraiture continues to expand, owing to renewed critical interest in the visual politics of identity formation and the interpretive flexibility of canonical artworks. Much like the evolving afterlives of literary texts, portrait paintings too acquire new meanings as they circulate across time. With this understanding, this research delves into three of Sir Joshua Reynolds's most significant works viz-a-viz *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* ( 1755-1831 ), *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*( 1765 ), and *The Age of Innocence*( 1773 ). A close, sustained study of these portraits provides an essential point of entry into Reynolds's visual strategies, allowing one to grasp not only the formal and symbolic structures that shape each representation but also the shifting cultural ideals of femininity, performance, virtue, and childhood that the artist both mirrors and constructs. The research is also We are also seeing the works through the lens of identity, art and legacy. The richly layered compositional techniques, classical allusions, and rhetorical visual language that characterize these paintings enable a deeper comprehension of Reynolds's artistic method and the aesthetic priorities of eighteenth-century portraiture.

The research draws from two fundamental secondary texts, John Berger's *Ways of Seeing* and E.H. Gombrich's *The Story of Art*, to bolster and improve its interpretive framework. Gombrich provides a crucial historical foundation for placing Reynolds within the larger evolution of Western art through his observations on visual tradition, stylistic evolution, and meaning-making. In order to examine how these portraits mediate identity and create cultural authority, Berger's sharp critique of spectatorship, representation, and the gendered gaze offers important critical tools. When taken as a whole, these secondary texts make it possible to engage with Reynolds's work in a nuanced way by shedding light on the complex interpretations and changing reactions that accompany his portraits over time.

Against this backdrop, Reynolds participates in, negotiates with, and at times challenges these inherited conventions. By placing these works side by side, we can trace how meaning is made through portraiture, how identity is shaped visually, and how an artist's legacy is constructed through the representation of women and girlhood. Simultaneously, the painting uses the language of the "Grand Style" to legitimize Siddons's professional success, thereby navigating social concerns about female public visibility. Reynolds uses classical imagery in *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces* to create an image of aristocratic femininity based on virtue, devotion, and selflessness. Here, narrative action and gesture visually shape



identity, implying moral agency within the bounds of social decorum. In contrast, Reynolds's treatment of identity and legacy undergoes a dramatic change in *The Age of Innocence*. The child figure becomes a universal symbol of purity and emotional authenticity when it is separated from portraiture's traditional emphasis on ancestry and status. However, this seeming naturalness is carefully crafted, demonstrating how even "innocence" is an ideological and artistic fabrication. The painting's ongoing appeal highlights how Reynolds's legacy is preserved through both elite portraiture and pictures that speak to larger cultural ideals of sentimentality and childhood.

Art during the 17th and 18th century England witnessed the creation of remarkable paintings that defined new artistic styles and types. Not only the artist became important but what was equally important was whether the artwork was approached as a textual medium or as a visual one, that is, the way a painting is seen, read, and interpreted. John Berger, a renowned art critic, theorist, and author of *Ways of Seeing* (1972), transformed how modern audiences think about images, representation, and meaning in art. His work challenged the traditional assumptions of art history and encouraged viewers to question not only what they see but how and why they see it that way. Berger argued that seeing is never neutral; it is shaped by culture, ideology, power, and context.

In this framework, Berger suggests that there are two primary ways of seeing an artwork: through a visual lens and through a textual lens. Visual Art encompasses a wide range of creative forms, including paintings, drawings, printmakings, sculptures, ceramics, photographs, films, videos, designs, crafts, and architecture. Several other artistic fields such as performing arts, conceptual art, and textile arts also incorporate visual elements alongside aspects of other art forms. Alongside, textual art is a type of art that combines language and visual imagery using text, words, and letters as its main medium. It can use text and with words for its linguistic meaning to tell stories, or for its aesthetic features like shape and texture. Typography, graffiti, conceptual art, and ASCII art made with text characters are a few examples. In this context, John Berger's seminal work *Ways of Seeing* provides a critical framework for understanding the interpretation of visual imagery. Berger argues that meaning is not only inherent in an image but is constructed through a dynamic process influenced by the viewer's knowledge, beliefs, and social conditioning. Seeing, according to Berger, is an active choice rather than a passive act, shaped by cultural background and personal experience. He



further explains that the meaning of an image can be altered by its context, particularly in modern reproductions that detach images from their original time and place. As Berger notes, *“A reproduction, as well as making the work of art accessible to a larger public, inevitably destroys the uniqueness of the image”* (Berger 29). Moreover, *“The meaning of an image changes according to what one sees immediately beside it or what comes immediately after it”* (Berger 29). We can examine Sandro Botticelli's masterwork, *The Birth of Venus* (1486), to show how the meaning of an art form has evolved over time. The interpretation of the painting when it was painted, was seen as a sophisticated philosophical allegory based on Neoplatonism, and was commissioned for the powerful Medici family's private viewing. In addition to being purely sensual, Venus's nude form represented Venus Humanitas, or humanity, and the introduction of spiritual beauty and divine love into the world. It honored classical antiquity and the humanistic quest for knowledge, which its affluent, well-educated clientele could understand. In the 21st century, the painting's meaning has been largely stripped of its complex Neoplatonic allegory. It is now widely regarded as a symbol of Western art history, an early example of the female nude in art, and an icon of classical feminine beauty. It is a commodity that is used on everything from art prints to advertisements, often simply to indicate "beauty" (Berger 52) or "high culture." Its reproducibility and widespread use are the primary factors that determine its meaning. Berger's primary concern is that the object's status has shifted from that of an intellectual allegory to that of a universally recognized image of beauty whose primary value is its market value and notoriety. This phenomenon has a direct connection to mechanical replication. Here, Berger emphasizes how context and reproduction alter meaning, detaching the artwork from its original time, place, and purpose. Berger also asserts, *“Men act and women appear. Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at”* (Berger 47). The fundamental claim made by John Berger is *"Seeing comes before words"* (Berger 3) is illuminated by this change in meaning from rarefied philosophy to mass-market commodity. The relationship between the viewer and the image has been profoundly changed by the development of the camera and subsequent reproduction, which has multiplied and fragmented the image's meaning. But when applied to paintings with female characters, the act of seeing becomes much more complicated, and serious.

According to Berger's analysis, the image of a woman is frequently created in accordance with the social norms of the era which includes pieces with female characters like



Botticelli's Venus. This is a result of women appearing and men acting. Consequently, “*she turns herself into an object and most particularly an object of vision: a sight*” (Berger 47). While a man's presence in a painting implies a power or capability that goes beyond his physical appearance, a woman's presence is mostly a display, a sight to be appreciated. According to Berger, the woman is the “surveyed” ( Berger 55 ) object of vision because the “surveyor” ( Berger 47 ) of the woman in herself is typically a man. The audience of the twenty-first century is therefore faced with a dual perspective when viewing historical paintings featuring female characters. While we are viewing the work through a contemporary lens, we also need to identify and critically examine the original system of viewing, in which the woman painted was frequently positioned as an object for the male “spectator-owner.” (Berger 56) These lines illustrate how traditional European oil paintings and later, modern advertising construct women as objects for male pleasure, reinforcing patriarchal systems of power and consumption.

In “From Work to Text,” Roland Barthes (1971 /1984) proposed that meaning is not made by an artist/author depositing meaning into a work through a series of signifiers that then produce a fixed meaning or true significance that must be extracted or uncovered by the reader/viewer. (Olivia Gude 1) As illustrated in the diagrammatic representation below, he further illustrates this transformation of seeing a painting through an everyday example: “Adults and children sometimes have boards in their bedrooms or living-rooms on which they pin pieces of paper: letters, snapshots, reproductions of paintings, newspaper cuttings, original drawings, postcards. On each board all the images belong to the same language and all are more or less equal within it, because they have been chosen in a highly personal way to match and express the experience of the room's inhabitant. Logically, these boards should replace museums” (Berger 30). This reflection underscores how modern reproduction personalizes and democratizes visual experience, allowing individuals to curate their own meanings detached from institutional hierarchies of art.



Source: John Berger, *Ways Of Seeing*, pp. 30

According to John Berger's *Ways of Seeing*, art creates ways of looking that are influenced by gender, class, power, and the cultural ideologies of the time rather than presenting a neutral truth. Berger's framework reveals how the portrait creates identity, turns a real woman into an idealized cultural symbol, and upholds specific ideas of artistic legacy and female representation when applied to Reynolds's *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* (1784). Instead of providing a clear picture of reality, John Berger contends that traditional European oil painting serves as a language of privilege, a visual system that encodes status, hierarchy, and cultural authority. This concept is best expressed by Reynolds's *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse*, in which Siddons is absorbed into an elite allegorical tradition that turns her into a monumental emblem rather than an individual. Reynolds places Siddons in the high-art vocabulary typically associated with aristocratic sitters or mythological figures by dressing her in thick draperies, placing her in a throne-like chair, and setting her pose with dramatic solemnity. The constructed nature of Reynolds's *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces* is revealed by combining John Berger's observation that European oil painting functions as a language of privilege with E. H. Gombrich's contention that artworks are shaped by conventions rather than pure transparency.

The Grand Style, with its classical draperies, elevated gestures, and moralized allegory, is one of the pictorial schemata Gombrich describes that shaped Reynolds's portrait, which is not a neutral record of Lady Sarah but rather a meticulously planned performance. Reynolds uses a visual code typically associated with gods, heroes, and aristocratic lineages by removing Lady Sarah from the social realities of eighteenth-century England and setting her in a mythological, temple-like setting. According to Berger, he places her in a privileged visual





language that both determines how she must be perceived as graceful, moral, and culturally sophisticated and raises her status. However, Gombrich shows us that this elevation is a purposeful application of artistic convention rather than an impromptu inspiration; Reynolds makes Lady Sarah into an allegorical figure by utilizing a pre existing repertoire of poses, symbols, and classical allusions. Berger moves ahead to highlight how power structures and ideologies shape our perception of art, particularly in his analysis of European oil paintings and modern advertisements that objectify women, transforming them into visual commodities for male gaze.

John Berger says that, "men act and women appear"(Berger 47) the woman is almost always the subject of the male gaze. This theory sheds light on how Joshua Reynolds creates female identity in all of his portraits. In Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, Reynolds's male artistic authority still mediates Siddons's portrayal despite the fact that she was a formidable celebrity and a great actress with actual professional agency. He controls the meaning of what she represents, turning her into a symbolic, allegorical figure rather than a professional actress. This reading is deepened by Gombrich's observations in *The Story of Art: The Grand Style's* well-established visual theatrical posture, thick draperies, and elevated symbolism are used to idealize Siddons rather than personal insight, demonstrating Reynolds' reliance on artistic convention to create an identity. A similar structure, Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces. Lady Sarah is taken out of her historical setting and placed in a mythological setting by Reynolds, where she performs a ritual in front of the Graces. Berger's analysis shows how this metamorphosis turns her into an elegant display of aristocratic femininity, a creation meant to be admired by society. Instead of being a woman with a unique story, she comes across as an elegant ideal. Gombrich explains how this idealization is created: Reynolds creates an identity that conforms to the standards of privileged portraiture by utilizing classical conventions, such as choreographed gestures, and temple-like architecture. The cultural and artistic norms of Lady Sarah's era shape her image into a meticulously crafted work of fiction. The dynamic becomes deeper but no less ideological in *The Age of Innocence*. According to Berger, the young girl is positioned to appear as innocence itself, quiet, reflective, and open to the viewer's sentimental gaze.

Her youth makes her the ideal vehicle for adult fantasies of virtue and purity rather than shielding her from being turned into a symbol. Once more, Gombrich's concept of schema



explains how this effect is produced: the pastoral tones, lowered eyes, serene composition, and soft lighting all adhere to accepted standards for depicting ideal childhood. Like Siddons and Lady Sarah, her identity is created by artistic formula rather than lived personality. Together, Berger and Gombrich show how Reynolds creates, rather than documents, female identity in these three portraits. The women behave in real life, but in the paintings, they are portrayed as ideals molded by the Grand Style's visual norms and the male gaze. Their legacies turn into staged pictures rather than true representations of themselves, demonstrating how privilege, art, and tradition come together to determine what women in portraiture are permitted to be. Reynolds is directly influenced by Berger's theory that oil portraiture developed alongside capitalism and frequently served as a symbol of possession, status, and social display. His portraits function as commodities of status and legacy: Siddons is positioned within an artistic canon shaped by male institutions, and her monumental portrayal becomes cultural capital for both sitter and artist. In the same way, Lady Sarah's portrait raises her social visibility in aristocratic circles, and *The Age of Innocence* presents an idealized picture of childhood that can be replicated, shared, and appreciated. In all three instances, Reynolds's portraits not only capture identity but also create it, transforming his subjects into artifacts that uphold his authority, his intellectual principles, and the social structures of eighteenth-century Britain. Reynolds's work is also illuminated by Berger's concept of mystification, which holds that traditional art conceals the actual, material conditions behind a façade of timeless beauty. The grandeur of the Tragic Muse obscures Siddons's struggles as a working woman, negotiations with patrons, and hard-won career. The tranquil classical scene obscures Lady Sarah's personal life, marriage, and political involvement. Even the child in *The Age of Innocence* loses her social context in favor of sentimental universalism, turning her into an abstraction of virtue rather than a real person. These portraits support Berger's assertion that traditional art frequently distorts reality in order to uphold elite ideals by transforming lived experience into icons of grace, tragedy, and innocence. According to Gombrich, viewers "make and remake" meaning based on their knowledge and beliefs, and these portraits are prime examples of this continuous reinterpretation. They were praised as idealized representations of virtue and taste in the eighteenth century, praised for their refinement in the nineteenth, and reexamined through feminist and socio-historical lenses that emphasize power, gender, and artistic construction in modern scholarship.





Thus, understanding paintings from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries requires not only an appreciation of their visual and textual dimensions but also a critical awareness of the social and ideological forces that govern the act of seeing itself. Berger's discussion of the nude in European oil painting further reveals how meaning is shaped by power. When he states that "*women were the principal, ever-recurring subject*" (Berger 47 ) and that the nude reveals "*the criteria and conventions by which women have been seen and judged as sights*, (Berger 47), he highlights how meaning-making is also tied to gendered visual traditions (Berger 54). Meaning making therefore is not only contextual, historical but also highly gendered. The paintings of nude women are not simply a representation of a body; it becomes meaningful within a patriarchal system that encourages men to look and women to be looked at. In this system, meaning is produced through objectification, where the female figure becomes a visual commodity. Reynolds does not sexualize Mrs. Siddons in Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, but he does subject her to the same logic that organizes the nude: she is presented as an idealized, admired, and judged object. Instead of being portrayed as an actual working actress, Siddons turns into a spectacle of tragic femininity—calm, elevated, composed. Her theatrical aura, draperies, and posture all follow aesthetic norms intended to catch the viewer's attention. In line with Berger's claim that women in art become "sights" whose identities are created for others, the two shadowy figures, Melpomene and Thalia, frame her not as a person but as an embodiment of an ideal. As a result, the portrait turns her lived labor into a passive, iconic presence an additional instance of what Berger refers to as "the nude," in which the female figure is positioned to be observed rather than to take action.

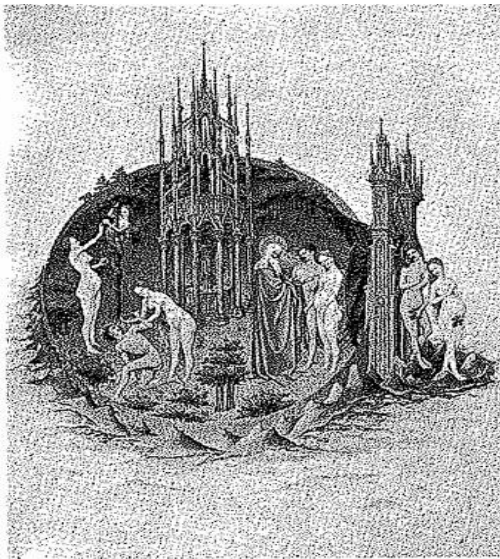
Similar to this, Reynolds depicts the sitter in a classical ritual in Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces, recalling the long history of women in art being connected to sensual grace, beauty, and virtue. Despite being fully clothed, Lady Sarah's body is arranged in a way that highlights her grace and physical attractiveness through flowing draperies and expertly choreographed movement. Berger reminds us that since the focus is on how a woman's presence is framed for visual consumption rather than actual undress, even clothed women in art can be viewed as nude. Lady Sarah is portrayed as a graceful ornament performing in front of legendary symbols of beauty rather than as a complex social figure or political actor. Instead of being a person with agency, her identity becomes a gendered construction, a body aestheticized for cultural display.



Berger's argument also sheds light on *The Age of Innocence*, in which the young child is reduced to a symbol of purity and innocence. Despite being a young girl, she is portrayed within the same patriarchal framework that transforms female characters into symbolic forms rather than distinct subjects. Her body is transformed into an image intended to arouse sentimental pleasure and moral reassurance through her seated position, gentle expression, and sentimentalized natural setting. According to Berger, she transforms into a "sight" molded by ideal femininity norms that are submissive, kind, and reflective. The painting demonstrates how gendered meaning-making starts at a young age: Reynolds's inherited visual culture even objectifies and aestheticizes girlhood. According to Berger's theory, Reynolds engages in a custom that gives women significance based more on their appearance than their behavior in all three portraits. Meaning is created by gendered visual systems that dictate how female bodies, whether adult or child, should be perceived, in addition to historical context and artistic convention. John Berger further iterates about the ideological construction of the nude by returning to its earliest appearance in the Western tradition with in the biblical story of Adam and Eve. He notes that the first nude images depicted in European art draw directly from Genesis, a narrative that establishes foundational ways of seeing the human body. In this account, Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness only after eating the forbidden fruit, and, as Berger observes, "they became aware of being naked because each saw the other differently." (Berger 48) This proposition is crucial for understanding meaning-making in visual culture. Nakedness, Berger argues, is not an inherent or natural state but a condition produced through perception—a meaning created in the mind of the beholder. The body becomes "naked" (Berger 51) only when it is looked at in a particular way, and this interpretive act shapes how the body is morally and aesthetically understood. Equally significant is the gendered dimension of the Genesis story. Berger points out that the narrative assigns blame to the woman, who is subsequently punished by being placed under male authority: "thy desire shall be to thy husband and he shall rule over thee." (Genesis 3:16) This framing introduces a hierarchical relation in which the man becomes the agent of divine judgment, while the woman becomes the one judged. In the development of European visual conventions, this hierarchy translates into a persistent structure of looking: men are positioned as active spectators, and women as passive objects of sight.



Berger also notes that medieval artists frequently illustrated the Genesis scenes sequentially “as in a strip cartoon,” (Genesis 37-50) ensuring that these meanings circulated visually across generations. Through repeated representation, the story reinforced a cultural logic that associated women with visibility, shame, temptation, and display. In this way, Berger demonstrates that the meaning of the nude, like all images, is historically constructed, culturally transmitted, and deeply embedded in power relations.



Source: Fall and Expulsion from Paradise    Source: John Berger, Ways Of Seeing,  
pp.51 By Pol De Limbourg Early 15th Century

Berger deepens his analysis of the ideological construction of the nude by examining the symbolic use of the mirror in European oil painting. Traditionally, the mirror is presented as a moral emblem of female vanity. Yet, as Berger points out, “the moralizing... was mostly hypocritical.” (Berger 51) The supposed moral criticism masks the true intention of the image: “You painted a naked woman because you enjoyed looking at her, you put a mirror in her hand and you called the painting *Vanity*, thus morally condemning the woman whose nakedness you had depicted for your own pleasure.” (Berger 51) Berger through this refers to the mirror as a device that shifts responsibility from the male viewer’s desire to the female subject’s supposed self-absorption. This rhetorical move transforms the act of objectification into a moral judgment against the woman herself. More importantly, Berger argues that “the real function of the mirror was to make the woman connive in treating herself as, first and foremost, a sight.”



The mirror guides the woman to internalize the male gaze, teaching her to view herself as an object to be seen, evaluated, and displayed. The idea of the mirror, which is essential to eighteenth-century portraiture and its theories, functions metaphorically throughout Sir Joshua Reynolds works, even though he does not show an actual mirror in Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces, or The Age of Innocence. The mirror in portraiture, according to Art historians like Svetlana Alpers, represents the act of self-fashioning and the conversion of an individual into an image. The portrait itself turns into a mirror that reflects a meticulously created ideal shaped by artistic intention and cultural expectation rather than the sitter's actual reality. In this regard, Reynolds creates images on his canvases that his sitters and subsequent viewers use to see who these people were supposed to be, serving as mirrors of identity. Reynolds creates idealized identities rather than likenesses, supporting Gombrich's observation from *The Story of Art* that artists "do not copy what they see; they make choices," choosing visual forms that represent virtue, convention, or status. The portrait turns into a mirror in Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, reflecting not Siddons as a working actress but her idealized, mythical self. In keeping with Berger's claim that art depicts "how women are seen," not who they are, Reynolds replaces the realities of her labor with a timeless symbol of tragic grandeur, reflecting patriarchal and artistic expectations rather than Siddons herself. The allegorical setting serves as a symbolic mirror reflecting society's standards of aristocratic femininity in Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces. In this instance, Lady Sarah becomes a mirror for cultural ideals grace, decorum, moral refinement rather than an image of her personal life, supporting Berger's criticism of the gendered gaze. As Mary Sheriff points out, eighteenth-century portraits frequently transformed women into representations of virtue or beauty.

The mirror effect is more subdued in *The Age of Innocence*, where the child's image represents adult notions of innocence and purity rather than her own identity. Reynolds's portrait becomes a mirror for these ideals, as Anne Higonnet contends that representations of children in the eighteenth century frequently serve adult sentiment. Once more, cultural ideology rather than lived reality is the source of the painting's meaning, supporting Berger's assertion that artworks create meanings rather than merely documenting reality. Across all three portraits, the "mirror" reveals the gap between identity as lived experience and identity as visually constructed. The same ideological pattern is reinforced by Berger's allusion to *The*





Judgement of Paris (1976). This mythological scene, which shows a man selecting the "most beautiful" (Berger 51–54) of three nude goddesses, perfectly captures what Berger refers to as "the unwritten idea of a man or men looking at naked women." (Berger 52) The story incorporates a hierarchical structure into the act of looking, normalizing female display and male spectatorship. By placing the male figure as the judge and the female figures as objects to be judged the essence of objectification this composition integrates a hierarchical structure into the act of viewing. Berger illustrates how the visual tradition continuously creates meaning by depicting women as objects of desire for men by emphasizing this and related conventions, such as the use of the mirror motif. In the end, viewers' perceptions of bodies, beauty, and basic gender roles are greatly influenced by the composition of these mythological scenes as well as the impact of artistic conventions. By highlighting these instances, Berger demonstrates how the visual tradition consistently creates meaning by portraying women as objects of desire for men. In addition to reflecting artistic conventions, the mirror's symbolism and the way mythological scenes are composed influence viewers' perceptions of bodies, beauty, and gender roles.



Source: Vanity By Memling 1435- 1494  
Cranach 1472-1553

Source: The Judgement Of Paris By



Interestingly, Berger points out that in many non-European artistic traditions such as Indian, Persian, African, and Pre-Columbian, when naked bodies appear, they are not shown as passive or submissive. If the artwork deals with sexual attraction, it usually shows mutual desire: both partners are active, equally involved, and absorbed in each other. The woman is not merely displayed for someone else's gaze rather she participates. Here, he draws a distinction between what it means to be naked and nude. He contrasts this with the European tradition by bringing in Kenneth Clark's idea that "naked" simply means without clothes, while "the nude" is an artistic category (Berger 53). In European art, the nude is not just a natural state but a constructed way of seeing, shaped by certain artistic conventions. A nude is created through rules and expectations that come from a long history of gaze, not from real life. Berger argues that these conventions are important because they reveal something deeper: the nude is not only an aesthetic form but also reflects real social attitudes about sexuality and gender. The way the nude is painted, with especially the passive, displayed female body shows how European societies have historically understood desire, power, and the relationship between men and women. This is why the nude is always conventionalized as it follows the norms of a tradition that centers male desire. These conventions do not exist only inside paintings; they influence how real sexuality and gender roles are understood. In this way, the nude becomes a bridge between art and lived experience, revealing how societies construct ideas about desire, power, and the female body.



Source: Rajasthan 18th Cen Source: Vishnu and Lakshmi Source: Mochica Potter





When we look at Sir Joshua Reynolds painting of *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*, Reynolds does not merely capture the likeness of a famous actress, he transforms her into an emblem of tragic authority, moral gravity, and artistic grandeur. Lady Sarah was a celebrated beauty who attracted the attention of the young King George III when she was only fifteen. At seventeen, she married Sir Thomas Charles Bunbury, a baronet? Reynolds began his portrait of her when she was eighteen and completed it when she was twenty. Dressed in a loose, vaguely Roman costume, she is cast in the role of a devotee of the mythical Three Graces, companions of the Goddess of love and beauty, Venus. Standing astride a stool on which she does not quite rest her left knee, she pours a libation into a flaming tripod while looking adoringly up at a statue of the Graces on a tall altar garlanded with flowers. A slight ambiguity about the statue's position in space gives it the air of an apparition, and the central figure seems to respond to Lady Sarah's sacrifice by offering her a wreath. It is as if the statue has miraculously come to life and the Graces themselves are inviting her to join their number. Reynolds's Sarah Bunbury John Berger and E.H. Gombrich's insights together provide a deeper understanding of *Sacrificing to the Graces*. Reynolds turns eighteen-year-old Lady Sarah into a devotional figure whose worth is found in her embodiment of ideal femininity, which is explained by Berger's claim that "women appear" within patriarchal visual traditions. Berger's argument that art mystifies women into icons is supported by the statue of the Graces, which is rendered with a purposeful spatial ambiguity that makes it appear miraculously animated. The Graces seem to accept her offering, as if inviting her to join their divine sisterhood, marking her virtue and beauty as culturally accepted truths rather than manufactured ideals. By stressing that artists use established visual traditions rather than just observation, Gombrich deepens this reading. Reynolds presents Lady Sarah as she ought to appear within elite artistic culture by utilizing the Grand Style's classical vocabulary, which includes mythological setting, noble drapery, and elevated gesture. According to Gombrich, this kind of idealization reflects the ideals of the society that creates it; in this case, Lady Sarah is framed within an inherited ideal of aristocratic femininity.

The composition of the painting is a harmonious interplay of movement, symbolism, and classical refinement that elevates the sitter into an idealized realm. Lady Sarah stands in a graceful meaningful pose, her body subtly turning toward the sculpted relief of the Three Graces while her face remains angled toward the viewer, creating the sense of a ritual moment



suspended in time. Her right arm extends elegantly with a shallow offering bowl, while her left hand gathers the folds of her classical drapery gestures that convey poise, serenity, and reverence, aligning her with the moral and aesthetic qualities traditionally associated with the Graces. Reynolds dresses her not in contemporary eighteenth-century fashion but in flowing, antique-style robes that echo the forms of classical sculpture; the soft, sculptural folds of the fabric idealize her silhouette and draw attention to her elevated status within the painting. The relief of Aglaea, Euphrosyne, and Thalia is depicted not as living figures but as marble sculpture, a choice that prevents them from overshadowing Lady Sarah while situating her in a dialogue with the timeless ideals embodied in ancient art. This interaction unfolds against a backdrop of classical columns and an indistinct sanctuary-like setting that evokes a mythic, timeless atmosphere rather than a specific locale, allowing viewers to concentrate on the symbolic gesture rather than narrative detail. Reynolds enhances this ritualistic mood through warm, gentle lighting that illuminates Lady Sarah's face and upper body with a sculpture-like glow, while soft shadows and a palette of muted creams, golds, and earth tones reinforce the classical aura. Collectively, these elements produce a portrait that is deeply allegorical: Lady Sarah emerges not merely as an aristocratic woman but as an embodiment of elegance, benevolence, and refined sensibility. Her act of sacrifice represents an offering to the ideals of harmony, beauty, and virtue, transforming her into a morally elevated figure whose identity is defined through the language of classical refinement and aesthetic devotion.



Joshua Reynolds transformed the Graces into a statue within the painting rather than depicting them as living beings. This gave him several advantages, one that he could reduce their size since they were represented as a devotional sculpture and not real figures, they did not have to compete visually with Lady Sarah. They are subordinate elements rather than equal presences. Secondly, he could connect Lady Sarah to them naturally, instead of standing next to living nudes (which would be visually awkward), she is shown worshipping or paying homage to them. This creates a narrative link between her and the Graces. He could make the statue appear responsive although they are carved figures, the way Reynolds painted their poses and gestures makes them seem subtly animated, as if they acknowledge Lady Sarah's devotion. According to the painter Thomas Phillips, Mrs. Siddons told him that she accidentally found the attitude when she changed her position to gaze at a picture hanging on the wall with "Sir Joshua had begun the head and figure in a different view; but while he was occupied in the preparation of some colour she changed her position to look at a picture hanging on the wall of the room. When he looked at her, and saw the action she had assumed, he requested her not to

move; and thus arose the beautiful and expressive figure we now see in the picture”( McPherson 409- 410 )



Reynolds reveals the complex and deliberately constructed nature of Lady Sarah's identity, illustrating how portraiture in the eighteenth century functioned as a site where personal subjectivity could be reshaped, idealized, or strategically curated. Lady Sarah Bunbury renowned for her beauty, high social standing, and the aristocratic networks that defined her life was nevertheless a woman navigating the constraints and expectations imposed on elite women in Georgian society. Her identity, therefore, was not a static essence but a negotiation between personal freedom, social obligation, and cultural ideals of femininity. Reynolds seizes this instability and transforms it into an opportunity for reinvention. Rather than presenting her as a fashionable hostess or political consort, roles she regularly inhabited, he recasts her as a classical priestess engaged in a sacred offering to the Three Graces. This allegorical displacement is important because it relocates her identity within the elevated moral and artistic realm of antiquity and separates her from the circumstances, rumors, and emotional complexities of her actual biography, marital tensions, political affiliations, and personal relationships. Lady Sarah's identity in the portrait is shaped by ideals of harmony, beauty, virtue, and feminine elegance. Her composed demeanor, her poised body, and the traditional draperies she dons combine to create a self that is not just depicted but reimagined. Reynolds



illustrates how identity itself, particularly for women of rank, could be recast as allegorical fiction through this idealizing transformation, created to maintain cultural longevity, assert moral refinement, and stabilize one's public reputation. In this way, the painting operates as a powerful testament to how portraiture could mediate between the lived realities of an individual and the culturally sanctioned identities they were encouraged, or compelled to embody.

Reynolds's artistic strategy becomes central to the transformative power of *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*, for his decision to present the Three Graces not as animated, mythological beings but as a sculptural relief fundamentally alters the dynamics of representation. By rendering the Graces in marble rather than flesh, Reynolds ensures that they serve as stabilizing, symbolic anchors rather than competing figures protecting Lady Sarah from being visually or narratively overshadowed by divine presences. This choice subtly elevates her position within the pictorial hierarchy. Instead of being subordinate to mythological goddesses, she becomes the human agent who engages with, interprets, and even activates their symbolic power. In interacting with a work of art inside the painting, Lady Sarah herself becomes aestheticized, suspended between the animate and the sculptural, her identity poised between the realities of eighteenth-century aristocratic life and the timeless ideals of classical mythology. This interplay reflects a broader eighteenth-century conviction that portraiture could manufacture refined identities, using allegorical language to reshape the sitter's public image. Portraits like this one functioned as cultural tools that smoothed over the complexities of personal life, romantic entanglements, social controversies, emotional vulnerabilities by cloaking the sitter in the moral and stylistic purity associated with antiquity. In Reynolds's hands, Lady Sarah's gentle offering gesture, composed expression, and flowing drapery become more than visual details; they operate as signs of her moral sensibility, ethical refinement, and cultivated virtue. Her outward beauty is transformed into an allegory of inner harmony, suggesting that her character, not merely her appearance, embodies the ideals represented by the Graces. Thus, the painting constructs an elevated, aspirational identity one that transcends the ordinary world and positions Lady Sarah as a timeless embodiment of grace, sensitivity, and moral elegance.

If we see Lady Sarah's portrait through the legacy, she is remembered, demonstrating the power of portraiture to determine how a historical figure is perceived long after her lifetime. While Lady Sarah Bunbury's real life was marked by political connections, passionate





relationships, shifting alliances, and the social complexities typical of Georgian high society, these elements fade almost entirely in the cultural memory that her portrait constructs. Instead of being recalled as a figure enmeshed in the intrigues and vulnerabilities of her era, she becomes crystallized in the idealized form Reynolds gives her, almost a serene priestess offering homage to the Graces. This transformation means that her biography is not the primary lens through which posterity understands her; rather, it is the allegorical persona granted by Reynolds that endures. Through this elevated representation, Lady Sarah's legacy becomes inseparable from the symbolic values the Graces embody. The portrait replaces the impermanence of lived experience with the permanence of artistic vision, revealing how art can overwrite or selectively curate history. In doing so, Reynolds's work illustrates the broader eighteenth-century phenomenon in which portraiture did not merely record identity but actively manufactured and perpetuated it, enabling the sitter to inhabit a narrative crafted by both artist and viewer. *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces* therefore stands as a testament to how the collaboration between sitter, painter, and future audiences constructs a lasting cultural icon one who transcends personal biography to become a timeless emblem of classical virtue and aesthetic idealization. Together, the dimensions of identity, art, and legacy in *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces* reveal how Reynolds's portrait operates not simply as an image of an individual but as a powerful cultural mechanism that reshapes how she was and would continue to be understood.

As we move to Reynold's another most known painting, *A Study of Mrs. Siddons*, we see her as the Tragic Muse, extending exploration of how portraiture manufactures identity. But he does so by shifting from aristocratic allegory to theatrical divinity. The painting depicts a majestic and dramatically involved Siddons, seated on a cloud-borne throne as Melpomene, the classical personification of Tragedy, one of the nine Muses of the arts. The diadem, puffed-out hairstyle, fanciful opulent gold dress, and the fat-knot of looped pearls at her bosom, underscore her noble, almost queenly standing. Behind them, the backdrop of straightforward Roman architecture opens up to the sky and trees, striking a balance between the softness of nature and the orderliness of antiquity. Lady Sarah's identity is elevated beyond that of an 18th-century aristocratic woman by this classical setting, which places her in a world of myth and virtue and presents her as a timeless representation of grace, ritual devotion, and moral refinement.



The color seems to drain from the upper parts of Lady Sarah's robe as if she were meeting them halfway, becoming as marblelike in her draperies as in her flawless complexion. To the right, a younger assistant prepares a drink or a bowl of water for the mistress's ritual hand washing. The Graces' statue-like figures can be seen on the left. They are the objects of Lady Sarah's ceremonial offering. Their presence transforms the portrait into an allegorical statement about the sitter rather than just a simple likeness. The scene is set against a background of simple Roman architecture opening to the trees and sky (Warner & Reynolds 8). A problem that appears when artists try to use the classical motif of "the Three Graces" in their compositions is seen. In a relief sculpture the clothed, real-life figure ends up being overshadowed by the Graces. Relief sculpture is a kind of three-dimensional art in which, in contrast to freestanding sculpture, figures or designs project from a flat, solid background while staying attached. The word is derived from the verb "relevare" (to raise), which indicates that the sculpted elements are elevated above the surface. Because the Graces are nude, elegant, and visually dominant, the main figure looks awkward and seems disconnected from them as if she doesn't quite belong in the same space or narrative. If Reynolds had imitated that format exactly in his portrait of Lady Sarah, she would have looked absurd downright silly because



the contrast between a real woman in contemporary dress and three idealized nude goddesses would be too strong. Instead, Reynolds solved the problem with a clever strategy.

Viewed through the lens of shifting identity, *A Study of Mrs. Siddons* illuminates how public figures consciously manipulate, project, and stabilize their self-image in response to social expectations and cultural pressures. Mrs. Siddons occupied a uniquely complex position in eighteenth-century society, for the profession of acting especially for women was caught between admiration and suspicion. She was celebrated for her commanding performances on the tragic stage, yet actresses were often considered morally or socially inferior. Sarah Siddons belonged to the renowned Kemble acting family and was the unchallenged Queen of tragedy. Her ascent to fame was not straightforward; she first failed at Drury Lane in 1775 before making a victorious comeback in 1782. She was born into a group of impoverished traveling performers. Despite the difficulties she encountered both personally and professionally, she meticulously worked offstage to project an image of domesticity and private virtue, a loving wife and mother which helped raise the social standing of actresses in the 18th century. She sat for many portrait painters, such as Sir Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough, and went on to become a significant cultural icon and one of the first celebrities. In this tense environment, Siddons constructed a dual identity, one rooted in her public profession, and another carefully fashioned to command respectability and dignity. The study captures this duality in the dignified posture, composed gaze, and monumental bearing that elevate her beyond the perceived lack of seriousness in the theatre. Conscious of how she was seen, Siddons mastered the art of self-fashioning, cultivating a persona of emotional restraint, controlled intensity, and moral seriousness in portraits, letters, and even her public demeanor. Her identity becomes not merely a reflection of who she was but a strategic performance designed to rewrite how actresses were culturally understood. Most striking is how her likeness shifts from an individual to an allegorical presence. With depictions including this study she is not represented simply as Sarah Siddons but as the embodiment of Tragedy itself.

Through dramatic expression, sculptural stillness, and symbolic bearing, she becomes a vessel for a larger aesthetic and emotional tradition. This transformation from real woman to mythic figure demonstrates how her identity is repeatedly reimagined, constructed by herself, interpreted by artists, and elevated by posterity revealing the fluid, performative nature of identity in art. Through the lens of art, it simultaneously reveals a profound shift in how portraiture can function, dissolving the



traditional boundary between visual art and theatrical performance. The artist moves beyond mere representation of Siddons's features to capture the psychological and emotional depths that made her the most powerful tragic performer of her age. Her face becomes a vessel for thought, suffering, nobility, and restraint, suggesting that her expressive capacity and not her physical form is the true subject of the work. This approach aligns with the ideals of the Grand Style, where portraiture strives to transcend everyday reality and elevate the sitter into the realm of history, myth, and moral drama. Within this framework, Siddons becomes both actress and archetype; the studio transforms into a stage, and the careful work of lighting, posture, and framing echoes theatrical conventions, creating an atmosphere charged with dramatic significance. The painting thus inhabits an in-between space, merging the ephemeral nature of performance with the permanence of visual art. Crucially, the study foregrounds the artist's interpretive power: instead of pursuing photographic realism, the artist shapes Siddons into an emblem of tragic intensity, emphasizing her expressive grandeur over literal accuracy. In doing so, the portrait becomes an interpretive, imaginative art that not only records a sitter but constructs meaning, symbol, and emotional truth that far exceed her physical presence.

A subject's legacy is created and reconstructed through interpretations, replicas, and critical discourses that continue long after their passing; it is not inherited. Siddons was certainly praised during her career, but it is through artwork, writings, engravings, and subsequent scholarly attention that she is transformed from a well-known actress to a cultural icon whose image endures for centuries. She is fixed in the public's mind not only as a performer but also as the ultimate



representation of tragic grandeur in paintings and studies like this one, giving her a timeless quality that transcends the boundaries of theater. Her legacy is still being reshaped by changing critical viewpoints. While early admirers saw her primarily as a tragic heroine who was emotionally and morally strong, later critics and art historians examine her as a symbol of the expressive potential of the performing arts, a pioneer of celebrity culture, and a figure of female self-determination. Such changing interpretations show how legacy is a dynamic process that is constantly rewritten in response to fresh theoretical frameworks and cultural concerns. A Study of Mrs. Siddons, emphasizes how art imparts an immortality that is not possible through performance alone. With every curtain drop, her electrifying stage presence disappeared, and no recordings of her voice or movements have survived. However, her emotional intensity, expressive power, and authoritative persona are preserved and passed down to future generations through the visual language of portraiture. In this way, her legacy becomes inextricably linked to her artistic portrayals since it is through these pictures that she lives on and is reinterpreted, her memory continuously revitalized by the enduring power of art.

The idealized portrayal of childhood in Sir Joshua Reynolds' *The Age of Innocence* (c. 1788) captures the late eighteenth-century fixation with innocence as a moral and natural state. The painting depicts a young girl sitting peacefully in the middle of a lovely, pastoral scene, her hands gently folded in her lap and her eyes turned outward in a calm, contemplative way. Even though the sitter is







left anonymous, Reynolds deliberately removes the piece from the portraiture category and transforms the child into an allegorical figure that represents purity itself. This sense of timelessness is enhanced by her draperies, which resemble classical robes rather than modern clothing, and the delicately blended modeling of her face, which aligns her with classical ideals rather than with everyday reality.

The child is placed in a natural world that is perceived as pure, gentle, and uncorrupted by the indistinct, almost dreamlike background, while the muted palette dominated by whites, creams, and soft earth tones reinforces the painting's tranquil atmosphere. Reynolds permits the character to represent the more general Enlightenment view influenced by Rousseau that childhood is a time of inherent goodness and moral simplicity by omitting certain narrative details. A sentimental image that struck a deep chord with modern viewers was created by the child's motionlessness, her humble demeanor, and the radiant serenity surrounding her. The Age of Innocence, which demonstrates Reynolds's ability to combine portraiture, idealization, and moral significance into a single, enduring image, thus transcends its immediate moment to become a cultural symbol of childhood virtue. The best way to interpret Sir Joshua Reynolds' Age of Innocence, is as a deliberate transformation of a young child into a universal representation of moral virtue, sentimental idealism, and purity. In order to present the child as an allegorical figure whose innocence is emphasized through classical simplicity and carefully controlled visual cues, Reynolds deliberately removes all signs of individuality, even though the sitter is left anonymous. The girl's delicately folded hands, softly rounded features, and quiet, contemplative expression create a contemplative calm that suggests an inner world unaffected by experience. Her robe-like draperies, which are more akin to classical clothing than modern children's attire, place her in a timeless aesthetic tradition linked to moral elevation and virtue.



The background with a gentle, hazy pastoral scene serves as an atmospheric extension of her purity rather than a realistic setting, conjuring up images of nature as a place of harmony and innate goodness. Reynolds invites the audience to project significance onto the child by eschewing narrative detail and emotional drama, creating meaning via sentiment and creativity. In this sense, the painting both exemplifies Reynolds's ability to combine portraiture with classical idealization and contributes to broader Enlightenment-era shifts that idealized childhood as a privileged moral state, influenced by thinkers like Rousseau. In the end, *The Age of Innocence* which was created through artistic convention, cultural aspiration, and the painter's sophisticated sense of emotional nuance becomes less a picture of a child and more a visual representation of innocence itself. Reynolds's *The Age of Innocence*, which shows how identity could be created, abstracted, and idealized through artistic strategy rather than recorded through likeness, marks a turning point in the evolving idea of identity in eighteenth-century portraiture. Reynolds uses this image of an anonymous child to show that identity itself can become an aesthetic fiction, in contrast to his grand, theatrical depictions of famous women like Mrs. Siddons or Lady Sarah Bunbury. Reynolds liberates the child from the limitations of personal history and turns her into a cultural icon by purposefully keeping the sitter anonymous. Her identity is now rooted in what she stands for rather than who she is. Reynolds's construction of identity is intrinsically connected to the changing ideologies of time, as this idealized identity reflects broader Enlightenment and sentimental philosophies, especially Rousseau's conviction that childhood embodies natural goodness. The central idea of Rousseau's treatise on education, *Émile*, or *On*



Education (1762), is his belief that childhood embodies natural goodness. He famously states at the beginning of the piece that the natural state is inherently perfect: "Everything is good as it leaves the hands of the Author of things; everything degenerates in the hands of man." (Rousseau 14)

The knowledge of visual elements reinforces this cultural rewriting of identity. The child's quiet, composed, and introspective posture projects a type of purity that is not observed but imposed, a purity that aligns with what eighteenth-century British society wanted childhood to symbolize. Her folded hands and lowered gaze resemble devotional imagery, echoing the visual language of piety and spiritual humility used in Renaissance Madonnas. By drawing on these canonical forms, Reynolds situates the child within a lineage of idealized feminine virtue, revealing how artistic conventions shape and stabilize identity in portraiture. This lack of context is deliberate: Reynolds removes every external signifier that might anchor the child to a social position or personal biography, leaving only a distilled moral essence. Identity, therefore, becomes a visual construction created through removal of the objects.

In addition, the painting also highlights the conflict between artifice and authenticity in portraiture. Although the title and sentiment suggest naturalness, the well-crafted composition serves as a reminder that innocence in this context is a manufactured ideal rather than a documented reality. The child exhibits a controlled stillness that is more consistent with adult projections of childhood than with actual youthful experience. This demonstrates how identity in Reynolds's art frequently arises from the viewer's aspirations, fantasies, and ideological requirements rather than from the sitter. The "innocence" constructed here reflects the aspirations of eighteenth-century culture, its investment in moral purity, in sentimental domesticity, and in the redefinition of femininity as gentle, passive, and virtuous. As a result, Reynolds idealizes and instrumentally shapes the child's identity, turning them into a canvas on which cultural values are etched.

By transforming the sitter into an allegory, Reynolds also shapes his own artistic legacy. He demonstrates that portraiture need not depend on celebrity or likeness; it can create enduring identities through symbol and sentiment. The longevity of *The Age of Innocence* frequently reproduced, sentimentalized, and absorbed into Victorian visual culture shows how the power of this constructed identity far outlived the anonymous child herself. Her identity did not disappear with anonymity; rather, it expanded. She became a universal image of innocence, one that reinforced Reynolds's reputation as an artist capable of turning private subjects into cultural archetypes. In this sense, the



shifting perception of identity is tied to the shifting perception of portraiture itself: from the representation of the individual to the creation of ideals that contribute to an artist's legacy.

Reynolds's work in *The Age of Innocence* reveals how identity is constructed and malleable. The painting depicts identity as an image formed by artistic intention, cultural ideology, and the viewer's desire to find meaning in innocence rather than as a psychological truth or biographical fact. Reynolds illustrates how portraiture can move from recording a life to producing a moral and cultural symbol by creating a child who is both unique in form and universal in symbolism. The sitter's individuality vanishes while her symbolic identity persists, demonstrating the significant shift in the definition of identity in eighteenth-century art and the ways in which artists such as Reynolds employed portraiture to influence not only the identities of their subjects but also the identity and legacy of art itself. The Age of Innocence, perceptions of art in the late eighteenth century, shows how Reynolds took part in and influenced a turning point in portraiture's development from simple likeness to sentiment, allegory, and idealization. Reynolds's choice to center an unidentified child in a serene, reflective composition signified a subtle but important shift in artistic practice during a period when the Grand Manner, with its emphasis on classical allusions, dramatic poses, and moral grandeur, dominated elite portraiture. The painting reflects a shift toward valuing emotional resonance over social display, and intimate sentiment over public spectacle. Reynolds moves away from the theatrical gestures and symbolic complexity seen in works like *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* or *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*, employing instead a stripped-down, almost minimalist visual language. By doing so, he signals a changing perception of what art could represent: not only heroic actions or elevated virtues but the tender, internal states associated with childhood and domestic life.

Reynolds's stylistic decisions also reflect this change. The grandeur and bravura of his previous academic style stand in stark contrast to the softness of his brushwork, the muted color scheme, and the delicate modeling of the child's face. Reynolds employs restraint as an aesthetic principle instead of heavy chiaroscuro or ornate costumes, allowing simplicity to become the source of beauty. Childhood was viewed as a privileged state of purity during the Enlightenment, and this new kind of art is sentimental, intimate, and morally charged. Therefore, the painting turns into a probe of the creative potential of sentiment, implying that a subject's emotional reality could be just



as visually striking as heroic or mythological stories. Reynolds thus contributes to an increasing trend in art that would eventually blossom in Romanticism: the celebration of individual emotion.

Moreover, *The Age of Innocence* reveals how art in this period was increasingly understood as a site for crafting cultural ideals rather than merely representing social reality. The work does not depict a child as she exists, but as art imagines her: pure, contemplative, timeless. By drawing from classical drapery and Madonna-like pose, Reynolds combines realism with idealization, showing that art could blend observation with aspiration to create images that convey cultural meaning rather than literal truth. This blending reflects a changing perception of artistic purpose, one where art's role extends beyond capturing the visible world to shaping collective values. The painting thus exemplifies the evolving belief that art has the power to construct moral narratives and emotional atmospheres, not simply record appearances. Finally, the painting's enormous popularity in the Victorian era illustrates how its style aligned with long-term shifts in artistic taste. While grand historical portraiture declined, sentimental imagery and representations of childhood flourished, allowing works like *The Age of Innocence* to become touchstones of moral and aesthetic refinement. Reynolds's experimentation with sentiment anticipated this cultural shift, reinforcing the idea that art's significance lies not only in innovation or virtuosity but in its capacity to adapt to and reflect changing emotional and cultural priorities. In this light, *The Age of Innocence* stands as an evidence of a broader transformation in art: from grandeur to gentleness, from heroic narrative to moral sentiment, and from depicting individuals to expressing cultural ideals. Reynolds's *The Age of Innocence* occupies a paradoxical position within the construction of his artistic legacy: although an unassuming pastoral image of a young girl, it has become one of the most widely reproduced and culturally enduring works of his oeuvre. Interpreted through the framework of shifting perceptions of legacy, the painting reveals the complexities of how an artist's reputation is manufactured, reinterpreted, and stabilized not only by contemporaneous artistic values but also by later historical, social, and institutional forces. Far from a mere sentimental vignette, the work functions as an emblem of the ways in which Reynolds's identity both as the founding President of the Royal Academy and as an architect of modern portraiture has been constructed through the circulation of images that seemingly contradict the intellectual rigor and classical ambition he espoused in his *Discourses*.

A central tension emerges between Reynolds's self-fashioned legacy and the legacy that posterity ultimately assigned to him. Reynolds sought to be remembered as a history painter





committed to the “Grand Manner,” elevating portraiture through classical allusion, rhetorical structure, and idealization. Yet *The Age of Innocence*, with its disarmingly simple composition and emphasis on childhood purity, exemplifies a genre that Reynolds himself often considered lower in the artistic hierarchy. Its afterlife flattened into a decorative, sentimental motif in Victorian culture demonstrates how the material durability of an image can override the intellectual intentions of its creator. The painting’s transformation into a cultural icon thus exposes the instability of legacy itself: it is not authored by the artist alone but is the cumulative product of institutions, reproductions, public taste, and ideological shifts.

Ultimately, viewing *The Age of Innocence* through the lens of shifting perceptions of legacy illuminates the disjunctions between artistic intention, historical reception, and cultural memory. The painting becomes a case study in how an artist’s identity and posthumous authority are continually renegotiated. It reveals that legacy is neither linear nor controlled but a dynamic process shaped by broad cultural currents, institutional endorsement, mass reproduction, and changing ideological investments in childhood, femininity, and sentiment. Reynolds’s most intellectually ambitious works may define his place within academic art history, but *The Age of Innocence* arguably defines his public legacy as an enduring reminder that the images that persist are not always the ones their creators intended to be remembered.

Through three of his most significant portraits Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces, and *The Age of Innocence* it explores how Sir Joshua Reynolds creates, negotiates, and transforms ideas of identity, artistic significance, and cultural legacy. The research emphasises how Reynolds employs composition, gesture, costume, setting, and symbolic motifs to shape changing views of femininity, performance, virtue, and childhood within the cultural landscape of eighteenth-century Britain through a comparative visual and contextual analysis. The investigation places these pieces in the larger artistic, social, and gendered discourses that shaped portraiture during that time. It looks at how each painting maintains, modifies, or questions the Grand Style’s tenets, its hierarchy of genres, and its dependence on classical allusion. The research places these pieces in the larger artistic, social, and gendered discourses that shaped portraiture during that time. It looks at how each painting maintains, modifies, or questions the Grand Style’s tenets, its hierarchy of genres, and its dependence on classical allusion.



The other interpretive changes that result from looking at these portraits as a whole. Comparing them side by side demonstrates how Reynolds deliberately places himself and his subjects within a range of cultural ideals, contributing to the creation of both personal identity and artistic legacy. Importantly, the study also aims to show how portraiture and visual representation continue to influence modern conceptions of identity, art, and value and are not limited to the cultural circumstances of the eighteenth century. The research highlights how eighteenth-century artworks are still relevant today, influencing discussions about gender, spectatorship, artistic legacy, and the social power of images by analyzing Reynolds's portraits as dynamic cultural texts with enduring afterlives. Reynolds's enduring contribution to British art and his changing perspective on visual identity, as well as the ongoing importance of historical portraiture in modern visual culture.

This study is significant because, even centuries after they were produced, Sir Joshua Reynolds's portraits still have an impact on our understanding of identity, representation, and artistic legacy. *The Age of Innocence*, *Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces*, and *Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse* are all from the eighteenth century, but they address issues of how society views women, how performance shapes identity, how childhood is idealized, and how images shape cultural memory that are still relevant today. Reynolds's portraits are intricate artistic creations that combine classical symbolism, social expectations, and individual expression; they are more than just visual documentation of specific subjects. Both the figures of their era and the emotional tensions that are still recognizable today are represented by the figures in these paintings, whether it is the strong actress portrayed as a muse, the aristocratic woman taking part in a ceremonial gesture, or the calm child. The pieces have a universal quality that enables them to be interpreted in a variety of ways across various eras due to their blend of grandeur and human detail. The study's justification also stems from how these portraits' meanings have changed over time. Reynolds has been interpreted differently by each generation due to shifting critical perspectives, artistic preferences, and social values. Examining these changes provides insight into how artistic legacies are created and transformed, as well as how artworks acquire new significance as societal circumstances change.

In a world where images play a major role in shaping identity and public perception, Reynolds's portraits offer an important opportunity to consider how art constructs social ideals and preserves or transforms the memory of individuals. This study therefore contributes not only to eighteenth-century art history but also to contemporary discussions about gender, representation, and



the lasting power of visual culture. The paintings were created at a time when identity, representation, and cultural meaning are constantly changing due to rapid technological advancement, global visual culture, and shifting social values. In this context, it has become essential to comprehend how images generate and communicate identity. Thus, the goal of this study is to examine how Sir Joshua Reynolds's portraits of Mrs. Siddons as the Tragic Muse, Lady Sarah Bunbury Sacrificing to the Graces, and The Age of Innocence still speak to contemporary issues despite being from the eighteenth century. By tracking the changing perspectives of identity, art, and legacy within these paintings, the study seeks to demonstrate how historical artworks continue to be important in discussions about gender roles, spectatorship, performance, and the social power of images. The study examines how Reynolds's visual techniques, composition, classical symbolism, gesture, costume, and setting create an understanding of femininity, virtue, public identity, and childhood that resonates beyond their original period in order to analyze and defend this approach. This investigation is based on the idea that portraiture provides insights into universal aspects of human identity and social expectation, despite being rooted in particular historical circumstances.

Drawing primarily on the frameworks provided by E.H. Gombrich and John Berger, the research employs an interpretive methodology to place each portrait in conversation with modern theoretical viewpoints on representation and the gaze. The study uses comparative analysis to look at how Reynolds's images fit into larger cultural, social, and artistic discourses and how they still shed light on the connection between visual art and the development of individual and societal identities. Thus, the attempt is to demonstrate Reynolds's portraits' lasting significance and their potential to add to current discussions about identity, art, and cultural legacy. The research demonstrates that rather than just capturing likeness, Joshua Reynolds's portraits actively create meaning. Reynolds transforms individual sitters into cultural ideals through the use of classical symbolism, gesture, and sentiment in his works. His depictions of female and the feminine meticulously negotiate visibility, virtue, and social hierarchy, demonstrating portraiture as a potent visual language that generates social and moral meaning. When considered collectively, these pieces show how Reynolds both upholds and delicately modifies inherited artistic conventions, ensuring his legacy by redefining the roles of idealization and identity in eighteenth-century portraiture.



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