



Gainsborough's Blue Boy: A Monograph

William H. Fuller

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An excerpt from the book:

...Of all Gainsborough's pictures the "Blue Boy " is probably the most celebrated, and one can readily understand Miss Moser's enthusiasm, if the "Blue Boy" was the object of her admiration, when she exclaims, "Gainsborough [was] beyond himself in a portrait of a gentleman in a Vandyke habit." It is not likely that there was more than one portrait, by Gainsborough, "in a Vandyke habit" in that exhibition, and if there were two, still there was only one in which Gainsborough was "beyond himself." Now, the picture that Miss Moser wrote about could not have been No. 83, for that was a portrait of a lady and child; it must, therefore, have been 84 or 85. All three of these portraits were full length; so that the picture Miss Moser was describing was a full-length portrait of a gentleman in a Vandyke habit. If she had said "young" gentleman the identification of the "Blue Boy" would have been complete. It must be remembered, however, that Miss Moser was not intent upon a minute description of the picture, but merely wanted to indicate, in a manner exact enough for the occasion, the picture in which Gainsborough was "beyond himself." Now, the first printed description of the "Blue Boy " known to the writer is found in a book by Edward Edwards, an Associate of the Royal Academy, published twenty years after Gainsborough's death. It is as follows: "A whole length Portrait of a young Gentleman, in a Vandyck dress, which picture obtained the title of the Blue Boy from the colour of the satin in which the figure is dressed."—" Anecdotes of Painters " (London, 1808), p. 140.

If we compare this description with that given by Miss Moser, bearing in mind that the official catalogue shows the 1770 portrait was "whole length," we find that, with the exceptions of the word "young" omitted by Miss Moser, and her saying "habit" instead of "dress," the two descriptions are precisely alike. Compare, now, Edwards' description of the "Blue Boy" with Gainsborough's memorandum of No. 85 in the catalogue of the 1770 Exhibition. The latter is, "Portrait of a young gentleman, whole length." If we add, "in a Vandyck dress," we have Edwards' description of the "Blue Boy" almost exactly word for word. In Gainsborough's memorandum, the words, "in a Vandyck dress," were not necessary. The dress spoke for itself. Inasmuch as Gainsborough painted no other portrait in a Vandyke habit that has become eminently famous, and since, in the Exhibition of 1770, there was a portrait in a Vandyke habit by him in which he was "beyond himself," the conclusion seems reasonable that the "Blue Boy" was one of the wonders of that exhibition about which the "million of letters"—so to speak—were sent to Italy....

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