

JOHN MITCHELL

FINE PAINTINGS



Ramsay Richard Reinagle

Portrait of a boy

oil on canvas

13 x 11 1/2 in (33 x 28 cm)

c.1810

This charming portrait gained admittance to our gallery not for the éclat of the artist's name (which was in fact not known) but for its quality and undisturbed state of preservation - often the best reasons. Over a year it has been shown to several friends and specialists in British art, and the consensus now that it is the work of Ramsay Richard Reinagle is a rather neat conclusion to the attribution process. A distinguished colleague had originally proposed the name of John Constable, and this has proved to be not quite as unbridled as it first seemed. At this point I should acknowledge the gracious help of Ann Lyles, the Constable scholar, who studied the picture for a whole afternoon, and patiently explained why, on balance, it is not by him, one of the principal arguments being that it is almost too good for Constable (his portraits sometimes being rather weak.)

In common with many other engaging artists of the period, Reinagle has become a rather obscure figure, but in fact he was something of a child prodigy, with some pedigree as an academician*. Out of hundreds of recorded, exhibiting artists in his milieu, only a few names stand out today, and Reinagle provides an interesting link between two of them, Allan Ramsay and John Constable. The former had taught Philip Reinagle, the father, and was godfather to Ramsay Richard, while Constable, only a year his junior, became his firm friend in 1799. Reinagle had returned from a perilous tour of the Continent, and Constable had arrived in London in April that year to enrol at the Royal Academy Schools. They

shared lodgings together off Great Portland Street, and that summer Constable took him back to East Bergholt to meet his family and friends. Perhaps in gratitude for his stay, Reinagle produced the portrait of Ann Constable, the artist's mother, now at Tate Britain. From the same time dates Reinagle's wellknown likeness of Constable in the National Portrait Gallery. It is difficult to believe, therefore, that there was not at least some sharing of ideas, style and influence between the two young, aspiring artists. The fact that Reinagle's tender portrait of Ann Constable was for a long time attributed to her son seems to endorse this theory, and to explain why the present picture might superficially be associated with John Constable. There were other influences on Reinagle's work too. Later, in about 1810, he would become a studio assistant to John Hoppner, and to understand further the genesis of Reinagle's own portrait style, one need look no further than in Ellis Waterhouse's *Dictionary of 18th c. British Artists*: in his words, 'His best portraits, between Hoppner and Lawrence in style, are very competent...'

As it is, in palette, style, handling and with the subject set against a low, distant horizon, our portrait compares very closely with a number of known Reinagles. We can only hazard a guess at the identity of this wholesome lad in his distinctive lambskin cap with its glossy black peak, but might not Reinagle have met him during that stay in Suffolk?

* see F.G.Notehelfer, The Strange Case of Ramsay Richard Reinagle (1775- 1862), *British Art Journal*, Vol. XXI, no. 1