

Sarah Siddons as The Tragic Muse by Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Thomas Baxter Plate William Gibbs

An important 2019 addition to the Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery was a 25 cm diameter plate of Worcester china, showing Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse. It was painted by Thomas Baxter in 1814 after a 1794 oil painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Here is the story behind the plate and its acquisition.

The Reynolds Portrait

In 1783 Sarah Siddons was 28. After an early failure in London under Garrick she had established her reputation at the Theatre Royal, Bath. On the 10th of October 1782 she had made a triumphant return to Drury Lane, now under the management of Richard Brinsley Sheridan, as the tragic *Isabella*. She had not yet appeared in her most famous role as Lady Macbeth but had already been painted by many of the most fashionable artists of the time: Thomas Lawrence, William Hamilton, George Romney and Thomas Beach.



Sarah Siddons as Isabella

by William Hamilton



Self Portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds, Oil 1773

In May 1783 she visited the studio of Sir Joshua Reynolds in his Leicester Square house for the first sitting for a portrait. They were already acquainted: she had dined with Reynolds and he had been to see her perform. There is a suggestion that this portrait was commissioned by Sheridan but it is more likely that it was by agreement between Siddons and Reynolds. She was aware that being painted by the President of the Royal Academy would help to establish her position as the leading tragic actress of her day, while he, after a falling off in popularity in the previous year, hoped to re-establish his pre-eminence with an outstanding portrait in the next Royal Academy Exhibition.



Sarah Siddons as *The Tragic Muse*
by Sir Joshua Reynolds , oil, 1783

An eye witness reported “Mrs Siddons came in, having walked rapidly to be in time for her appointment. She threw herself, out of breath, into an armchair...having taken off her bonnet and dropped her head upon her left hand – the other hand dropping over the arm of the chair. Suddenly lifting her head she said “How shall I sit”? “Just as you are” said Sir Joshua and so she is painted.

Mrs Siddons’ own recollection in later years is rather more grandiloquent: she wrote;

When I attended him for the first sitting, after more gratifying encomiums than I can now repeat, he took me by the hand saying “Ascend your undisputed throne and graciously bestow upon me some good idea of the Tragic Muse”. I walked up the steps and instantly seated myself in the attitude in which the Tragic Muse now appears. This idea satisfied him so well that without one moment's hesitation he determined not to alter it.

For an actor in the 18 Century, gestures were an essential means of conveying emotions. In his 1806 treatise on the art of acting, George Austin used Mrs Siddons to exemplify this language: each gesture having a specific connotation for the audience. As the Tragic Muse Melpomene, the daughter of Zeus, Siddons is in a moment of reverie, her raised left hand asking for our attention, her gaze unfocused.

Reynolds signed the portrait across the bottom of Mrs Siddons's dress saying, "I have resolved to go down to posterity on the hem of your garment". The picture was hailed as a triumph at the Royal Academy Exhibition in 1784: a price tag of 1000 guineas helping its notoriety. It was eventually sold for 800 guineas. A stipple engraving by Francis Havard hugely increased the fame of its subject and its creator.

ATTITUDES OF MRS. SIDDONS.



Fig. 185. This arm shall vindicate a father's cause. *G. Dau'r., A.1, S. last.*

Fig. 186. Wert thou the son of Jupiter. *Imogen, Act 2, S. 3.*



Fig. 187. A widow cries, Be husband to me, heaven. *K. John, A. 3, S. 2*

Fig. 188. Pity and forgiveness. *Venice Preserved, Act 5, S. 1*

Thomas Baxter and the Worcester Plate.

In 1814 Thomas Baxter created a version of the celebrated portrait in a different medium. At the time Baxter, the greatest ceramic artist of his time, was working for Flight Barr and Barr in Worcester (Later he moved to Swansea and worked at Cambrian Pottery). He was very knowledgeable about colour transformation in the kiln and the colours on the plate are probably a more accurate representation of the artist's intention than the now somewhat discoloured original. The transformation of a rectangular painting nearly 8 feet by 5 feet into a circular image of 10 inches in diameter is masterly.



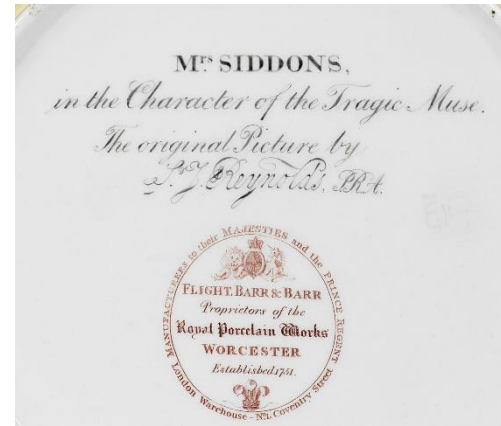
The plate affords excellent views of two additional figures, Pity and Terror; these having become difficult to see on the original painting with the darkening of the pigments. The figure of Terror, on the right, is based on a self-portrait by Reynolds, now in the Tate.

(For a very high resolution image of the plate search Bonhams Tragic Muse.)

Just two Baxter plates were made. One is in the Museum of Royal Worcester. The other, having been originally sold to the Marquess of Stafford for 50 guineas is now in y Gaer, Brecknock Museum and Art Gallery in Brecon, the town where Sarah Siddons was born in 1755.

How the Plate came into the Collection of The Brecknock Museum & Art Gallery

As a regular customer of the auction house, Bonhams, Gwyneth Evans, Council Secretary to the Brecknock Society & Museum Friends, and her husband Ieuan receive a catalogue of every sale of English and Welsh porcelain and pottery. When the catalogue for the sale of June 5th 2019 arrived, Elizabeth Siberry was at the Evans's house for Welsh conversation and Ieuan showed her lot 225 - the Worcester plate of The Tragic Muse.



Knowing that Gwyneth was due to attend an Art Fund event in the House of Lords, on Monday 13th May, Elizabeth suggested that she might be able to speak to the host of the event – Chairman of the Art Fund, Lord Chris Smith of Finsbury. After his address of welcome, Gwyneth spotted Lord Smith on his own and told him about the plate that was up for sale and of its relevance to Brecon.

At this point someone else came up wishing to speak to Lord Smith but he later sought Gwyneth out and asked where and when the auction would be held and the estimated price for the plate. Then, to her great surprise, he said "put in an application"!

In a matter of days, curator Nigel Blackmore had co-ordinated applications to the Art Fund and the Victoria & Albert Museum Purchase Fund, with the Brecknock Art Trust pledging £1000. An expert valuation from Errol Manners of E & H Manners of £25,000 - £30,000 set the target to be raised. Drawing on detailed information from Oliver Fairclough (ceramics expert and former Keeper of Art at NMW) and myself, the applications were completed and approved the day before the auction. Mr Manners, bidding on our behalf, secured the plate for the museum for just over £20,000!

A Coda The application for funding included reference to the aim of using the plate as an iconic object to stimulate further investigations into Brecon's theatrical history. Important research in this field was carried out by Sister Bonaventure Kelleher of the Ursuline order who died in 2019, in her nineties. She was a stalwart of the Brecknock Society and, in her honour, the BS&MF has established a Ph D studentship with Bristol University to take forward research on the theme 'Brecon as a theatrical centre: 1650-1850'.