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THE "SELF-PORTRAIT" OF GEORGE DANCE THE YOUNGER

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In the collection of the National Portrait Gallery is a spirited drawing in pencil heightened with red chalk of the architect George Dance the Younger (1741–1825), signed and dated at the bottom of the sheet: "Geo Dance RA. Oct 1814" (Fig. 1). Since at least 1898 (when it was reproduced in *The Magazine of Art*) this has been considered a self-portrait, and as such it was the frontispiece to Dorothy Stroud's *George Dance* (1971); it was exhibited as a self-portrait in the Dance exhibition at the Geffrye Museum in 1978, and, most recently, was accepted by Richard Walker in his National Portrait Gallery catalogue *Regency Portraits* (1985).

His work as an architect aside, Dance is perhaps best known for the series of more than 200 drawings of his friends and contemporaries which he made between 1793 and 1810, and which were his main leisure activity on Saturdays and Sundays during those years. Thirty-eight now belong to the Gallery, and 53 are owned by the Royal Academy. Many of them were reproduced as soft-ground etchings by Dance's friend and fellow Academician William Daniell; in 1814 these were gathered in two volumes as *A Collection of Portraits Sketched from the Life since the Year 1793*, with a dedication to Dance's patron Sir George Beaumont. The drawings are executed with painful consistency according to a formula: all show the sitter at half-length, seated, in profile to left (the profile presents less of a challenge to an amateur artist than a frontal portrait), and are made in pencil, occasionally touched with red chalk, on white paper, most often measuring about 10 x 7½ins, though sometimes larger or smaller. All are signed and dated, generally in the bottom left or right hand corner. Dance's style, like his method, is painstaking, an accumulation of short strokes and hatchings, and characterised by a certain placidity not to say rigidity of mind. Not surprisingly it became clear, when the "self-portrait" was exhibited with a group of his profiles at the Gallery in 1991 to commemorate the 250th anniversary of his birth, that it was unlikely to be by him, for it was possessed of an elegance and verve quite alien to Dance's more pedestrian approach.

A solution to the problem was not hard to find. The "self-portrait" was purchased by the Gallery in 1936, along with several other drawings, from the collection of the writer, art historian and historian of *Punch*, Marion Harry Spielmann, who had owned the drawing since at least 1898, when it was reproduced as his in *The Magazine of Art*. Its earlier provenance is not known, and it does not appear in the sale of the large group of Dance drawings sold by his grandson the Reverend George Dance at Christie's on July 1, 1898. However, also in the group of drawings purchased from Spielmann was a portrait of the great draughtsman Thomas Rowlandson, autographed and dated by the sitter – "Tho^s Rowlandson Aged 58. 1814 – and initialed by the artist "G.H.H.", George Henry Harlow (1787–1819) (Fig. 2). It is identical in size to the Dance drawing (9¼ x 7¾in; 23.5 x 19.7cm), and, like it, executed in pencil heightened with red chalk. The *Dance* is a little firmer in touch, and this is emphasised by the paper which is buff in colour, whereas that of the *Rowlandson* is white. Nevertheless, stylistic mannerisms, notably in the structure of the faces, make it clear that they are likely to be by the same hand. Both were drawn in 1814, and, we may suggest, both autographed by the distinguished sitters. The inscription on the *Rowlandson* is the prime document for establishing his birthdate as 1757 (rather than 1756, as often said), and makes it clear that the drawing

was made after his birthday in July 1814, close in time to the *Dance*, which is dated October. That is, just a few weeks before the architect suffered the slight stroke (November 30) which may have led to his decision to retire from the post of Clerk of the Works to the City of London in the following year.

Like Dance and Rowlandson, Harlow, portraitist and history-painter, was a Londoner born and bred. The posthumous son of a China merchant, he was, like Rowlandson, a pupil in Dr Barwis's academy in Soho, and early on showed an aptitude for painting. When only 15 he paid to work in the studio of Sir Thomas Lawrence, the most fashionable portraitist of the day (though they soon fell out), and these elegant sheets, with their carefully placed sanguine accents, refined yet informal, are very much in the manner of the master. They were drawn, like the closely comparable drawing of James Northcote (British Museum), when Harlow was anxious to shine in artistic circles, and it may be that, in about 1814, he planned a series of drawings of notable contemporaries, just as had Lawrence and Dance before him in the 1790s. Only Dance, the amateur among them, realised this ambition.

In the following year Harlow was canvassing support for his election to the Royal Academy, but evidently fell foul of the artistic establishment, alienating many by his contempt for academic training, aristocratic pretensions, and perhaps his effeminacy – he was known among his friends as “Clarissa” Harlowe, in ironic allusion to Samuel Richardson's pretty and excessively virtuous heroine. In 1818 he travelled to Italy in order to complete his artistic education, and there he achieved in a short while the recognition which he felt had eluded him in London. He was taken up by Canova, received an audience with the Pope, was elected to the Academy of St Luke, and invited to paint his self-portrait for the Uffizi Gallery. He died shortly after his return to London in 1819.



Fig. 1. George Henry Harlow, George Dance, 1814 (National Portrait Gallery).



Fig. 2. George Henry Harlow, Thomas Rowlandson, 1814 (National Portrait Gallery).