

Ideal Urban Space in Gainsborough's *Charity Relieving Distress*, 1784

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Abstract

Out of patience with portraits, Thomas Gainsborough turned in the 1780s to a new kind of morally serious painting directed at a polite and mercantile audience. Exhibited publicly in his painting room in 1784, Charity Relieving Distress provided an edifying spectacle of charity to a family in need. Its setting was the edge of an imagined town, an ambitious architectural space for an artist better known for his richly painted landscapes. The urban scene, however, is neither incidental nor haphazard, rather an elaborate construction of classical, medieval and Georgian building types. Gainsborough liberally quotes buildings pictured in paintings and engravings, incorporating knowing references to architectural, pictorial and theatrical traditions. This heterogeneous mix, ornamented with trees and vines, is a picturesque backdrop to the staging of the act of charity; indeed, the stairs below provide a seat for a rapt audience member. Furthermore, its multiple openings create points of access between private property and public space that suggest a metaphorical affinity with the social virtues of amiability, generosity and liberality recommended in eighteenth-century moral philosophy and religious sermons. This paper links the representation of urban space to what John Barrell has described as the "privatisation of virtue" in eighteenth-century life. It develops the author's published research on Charity Relieving Distress to argue that Gainsborough used architecture to create a built environment for virtuous sociability.

Writing to his friend William Jackson, Thomas Gainsborough declared, "I am sick of portraits and wish very much to take my Viol da Gam and walk off to some sweet Village where I can paint Landskips and enjoy the fag End of life in quietness and ease".¹ Exhausted by the endless parade of sitters through his London painting room, he damned gentlemen as "a set of enemies to the real artist"² and threatened to give up the whole portrait business, "sneak into a cot[tage] & turn a serious fellow".³ Gainsborough's bluster made light of a deeper desire for independence from his clients to pursue his own artistic ambitions. *Charity Relieving Distress* (Figure 1), painted for his own gratification in 1784, explores the possibilities of a new kind of moral painting that combines the naturalism and incident of William Hogarth with the ideal and historical approach of Royal Academy of Arts president, Sir Joshua Reynolds.⁴ It was displayed in the artist's painting room at Schomberg House, along with the other portraits and landscapes he had withdrawn from the Royal Academy exhibition that year on account of their being hung too high.⁵ Exhibited in this independent location, *Charity Relieving Distress* presented a composite formulation of observation and allegory that commented upon, and attempted to reconcile, the opposed traditions of naturalism and academic idealism.⁶ Moreover, Gainsborough composed the action of his painting in an architectural setting that established the seriousness of this new departure and its moral concerns. Architecture is here used as a civic stage for ideal social relationships.



Figure 1. Thomas Gainsborough, *Charity Relieving Distress*, 1784, oil on canvas, 98 x 76.2 cm, private collection. Image courtesy of Gainsborough's House, Sudbury

Charity Relieving Distress is unusual among Gainsborough's paintings for its elaborate architectural composition. He favoured landscape backgrounds or non-descript interiors for his portraits, and parks or woodland for his fancy pictures, or scenes of everyday life. In the late 1770s and 80s, however, a growing interest in the relationship of nature to built form can be observed in his paintings of cottages at the edges of wooded commons (Figure 2). As Ann Bermingham has argued, the "Cottage Door" paintings offer a spectacle of rustic domesticity that speaks to eighteenth-century fantasies of rural retirement, virtues of simplicity and naturalness.⁷ Bermingham has connected the Cottage Doors to contemporary discussions of the origins of architecture in nature, a claim made by the Abbé Laugier in the 1750s and derived from the Vitruvian primitive hut.⁸ Interpretations of the Cottage Doors by Bermingham, Michael Rosenthal and John Barrell have emphasised relationships between the cottagers and their dwellings, and revealed the influence of the enclosure of commons on Gainsborough's work, reading it in relation to the social history of the rural poor.⁹ However, the urban architectural setting of *Charity Relieving Distress*, with its self-conscious juxtapositions of various building types, gates and doorways, has not yet been fully examined.



Figure 2. Thomas Gainsborough, *The Cottage Door*, 1780, oil on canvas, 147.3 x 119.4 cm, The Huntington Library, Art Collections and Botanical Gardens, San Marino. Author's photo.

This paper suggests that the architecture of *Charity Relieving Distress* has both moral and aesthetic meanings. Firstly, the open doors and gates signify the ideal relationship of compassion and gratitude between rich and poor, and the mingling of public and private virtues in eighteenth-century culture. Secondly, the arrangement of diverse building types creates a theatrical stage that elevates the scene of everyday benevolence to the level of historical art. Far from an incidental backdrop to a sentimental fancy, architecture in Gainsborough's painting constructs virtuous civic relationships and raises the lowly particularity of genre painting to the universality of high art.



Figure 3. Gainsborough Dupont, *Charity Relieving Distress*, ca. 1784, oil on canvas, 127.6 x 102.2 cm. Indianapolis Museum of Art
Digital image courtesy of Indianapolis Museum of Art

The painting depicts a young woman sharing food and drink with a ragged beggar family at the entrance to a townhouse. The mother, carrying two infants, is brightly lit and positioned in the centre, against its pale stone façade. Below, a set of steps provides a seat for an entranced spectator and to the left, a woman sits at the foot of an arched gateway, through which more buildings are visible. Though the scene is clearly framed within the civic space of a town, the full extent of Gainsborough's architectural setting has to be reconstructed, as the work was later cut down, eliminating key

elements and destroying the balance of motifs. A studio copy by his nephew, Gainsborough Dupont (Figure 3), and a mezzotint by Richard Banks Harraden reveal the scope of the original composition, which included the façade and open door of a townhouse on the right, with two young women at the balustrade; a mounted traveller passing through the gate; and in the background, the square tower of a medieval church.¹⁰

Some of these elements appear in Gainsborough's landscape drawings of the 1780s, which experiment with architecture to create shapes and volumes that harmonise with nature. In a grey wash drawing from the early 1780s, the gate of a country mansion dramatizes the motion of a peasant carrying a stick and basket along the curving path in the foreground. The imagination is piqued by the relationship between what look to be impoverished figures and the compact elegance of the estate. In a chalk and wash drawing from the same period (Figure 4), buildings perch atop a sloping site, the blocky volumes progressing down to a courtyard and a stone stair. Bathed in light, they are admired by three figures in the wide forecourt, while the stairs to the right provide a stage for the descent of a stylish group. In each drawing, buildings are naturally back-dropped by trees and encircled by water. Architecture is embraced by the natural world; nature and culture are ideally balanced in their picturesque appeal and claim on the land.

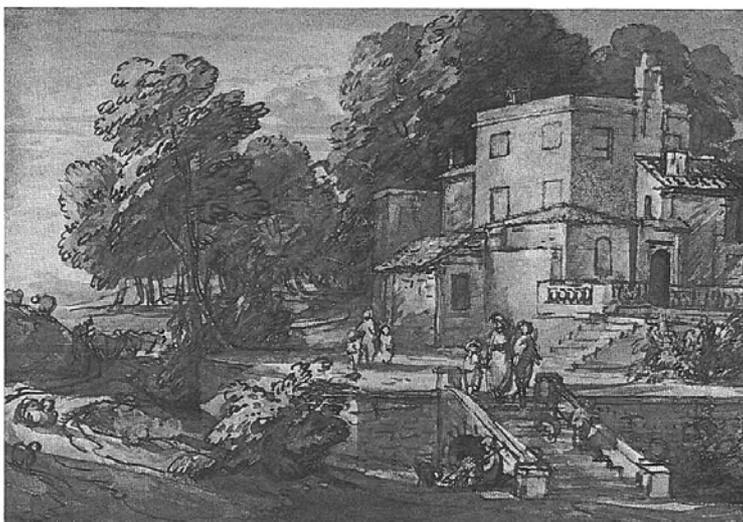


Figure 4. Thomas Gainsborough, *A wooded landscape with a country mansion, elegant figures and peasants*, 1780-81, grey and grey-black washes and black and white chinks, 26 x 37 cm, Whitworth Art Gallery, Manchester, author's photo

Gainsborough's ideas about buildings most likely come from personal and pictorial sources. The arched gateway in *Charity Relieving Distress*, with its keystone and cornice, recalls the triumphal arch in Van Dyck's equestrian portrait of Charles I. This portrait was engraved by Bernard Baron in 1741 and reissued in 1770. It would have been of special interest to Gainsborough as a passionate admirer of Van Dyck and himself a royal portraitist. The square-towered church in the background with its lancet windows and pointed finials is similar to the tenth-century tower of the church of St Gregory in Gainsborough's home town of Sudbury. The medieval church is probably painted from memory and invokes the general idea of a Christian Britain as well as Gainsborough's enthusiasm for Gothic architecture, which he described as "a cake all plumbs".¹¹ It is safe to assume that the façade of the townhouse on the right with its attached outbuildings is derived from neoclassical urban architecture in Bath and London, where Gainsborough lived and worked for significant periods. The architectural references thus combine past and present and constitute a mixed artistic inheritance.

The effect of this scenic variety is one of eclectic historicism. While such diversity may be observed in any number of towns in England, it also has a symbolic meaning that relates to the painting's moral message. The buildings are of different heights and shapes, the blocky volumes of the townhouse contrasting with the arched stone gate and the tapering tower in the background. A cushion of green softens relationships between the various components – vines trail over the house and the bushy crown of a tree screens the arch from the church. Rather than a stylistically unified civic space that might pacify with its balanced proportions, the scene for charity is composed from harmoniously arranged variety, which allegorically reinforces its location as a meeting point between rich and poor.¹²

Symmetrically paired architectural apertures on either side of the painting establish contrasting social spaces. Wide enough to admit a mounted figure, the arch on the left hand side may be defined as a gate, which, according to William Chambers, serves as an “inlet to cities, fortresses, parks, gardens, palaces, and all places to which there is a frequent resort of carriages”.¹³ Framing the bowed traveller on the mule and the woman seated on the ground, the gate is an entrance suggestive of the increased movement of the poor into cities as a result of the enclosure of commons and development of agrarian capitalism.¹⁴ By contrast, the door of the townhouse, ornamented with a sectional pediment and a crest, is the decorated setting for two stylishly dressed women. These two entrances respectively convey the hardships and uncertainty of poverty and the comforts and stability of property.¹⁵

Crossing the line of the stoop, the young woman giving alms makes contact between rich and poor and momentarily connects the differentiated social spaces. The curve of her arm is repeated in the gestures of the children and the outstretched arm of the infant cradled by its mother, reinforcing the significance of this meeting point between privilege and need. Indeed, compassion, which motivates the act of charity, was conceived of in the eighteenth century as an ideal openness to another person that allows one to imaginatively enter their experience. Popular preacher Joseph Butler described it as a “door” by which “the indigent can have access to us”.¹⁶ The threshold crossed by the benevolent woman and the open front door behind her represent charity as the transcending of spatial and social boundaries.¹⁷

On an axis directly above the infant, a dove is caught in flight and symbolically transformed into an image of the Holy Spirit.¹⁸ The benevolent treatment of the poor by the rich has drawn down the blessing of God. Not confined to the consecrated interior of the church, the Holy Spirit, in the form of a common rock dove, sanctifies this threshold between private property and public space. Further religious symbolism can be detected in the vine that climbs up the façade of the house. Laden with grapes, it evokes the fruitfulness of charity as well as the metaphor of Christ as the True Vine. Its spilling tendrils reiterate the idea of the Christian spirit that binds individuals together in their emulation of Christ's teachings and fellowship. In the eighteenth century, charity was well understood as the ideal attitude between oneself and one's neighbour. As Presbyterian minister Hugh Blair put it, it is “faithfulness in the friend, public spirit in the magistrate, equity and patience in the judge, moderation in the sovereign, and loyalty in the subject”.¹⁹ More than the simple giving of food or money, charity was the foundation of social harmony.

It is apt, then, that Gainsborough situates the physical manifestation of Christian love in an extended threshold space flanked by open entrances. The arena for narrative action is the broad platform flanked by city gate and townhouse door, with a stair below. Bordered on all sides by apertures and steps, this space seems to belong neither to the house nor the town, and it works metaphorically to evoke the mingling of private interest and public spirit in the giving of charity.

This expanded and symbolic threshold constructed by Gainsborough might be compared with Hogarth's representation of charity in the doorway in the sixth plate of *Industry and Idleness* of 1747

David Solkin, confirmed this shift towards private virtues in the public sphere.²⁹ In Gainsborough's work the development of sentimental subject matter featuring the "deserving poor" (ragged children, beautiful young mothers and plump naked babies) excited a sympathetic response from viewers happy to feel the pangs of pity from a safe distance. Likewise, *Charity Relieving Distress* represents the amelioration of poverty without undermining the status quo; the elegant women continue their tête-à-tête uninterrupted, and the peasant rides his mule into the town empty handed. One can imagine a middle class person looking with satisfaction on the scene for its warm depiction of compassionate benevolence within a stable class structure.

The elevation of the social virtues traditionally associated with private life to the level of public significance has a symbolic affinity with the threshold space constructed in Gainsborough's urban scene. Private and civic spaces are not precisely delineated, but blurred into an intermediate area where the classes meet and polite virtues are drawn into the public realm. Moreover, the principal protagonists here are women, for whom the softer virtues were considered appropriate. This is a civic space that has been configured for the display of tender passions and indeed made philosophical (rather than exemplary) by its cast of women and children. It is also a space for interaction, rather than singular action. The nesting of buildings suggests a kind of polite interaction in architectural form. Contrasting structures are brought together harmoniously and their juxtapositions softened and smoothed by the organic forms of trees and vines. Knitting together an urban fabric inclusive of rich and poor overseen by the glowing edifice of the church, the architectural scene provides the ideal structure for the charitable interaction. We may imagine virtue flowing outward from the central group through the gate, the open door and down the steps to permeate public and private space.

A young man seated on the steps below observes this spectacle of social virtue in rapt admiration, chin in hand and mouth open. As a viewer within the scene, his presence is a surrogate for our own, and he demonstrates how we might respond to it with pleasure and approbation. He also reinforces the theatrical qualities of the stage-like architectural setting. Sitting in the darkened foreground, looking up at the brightly lit platform, this figure is like an audience member in the stalls. Reinforcing the theatrical metaphor, the gate on the left and door on the right might be exits into the wings that establish location and character. In fact the stairs that provide a seat for the spectator and bridge the mouth of a water outlet look to have been lifted directly from Sebastiano Serlio's perspectival stage design for tragedy (Figure 6). The arrangement of Gainsborough's architectural setting is comparable to an oblique view of Serlio's stage that offsets the central arch to the left hand side and brings the steps and entry of the townhouse into full view.

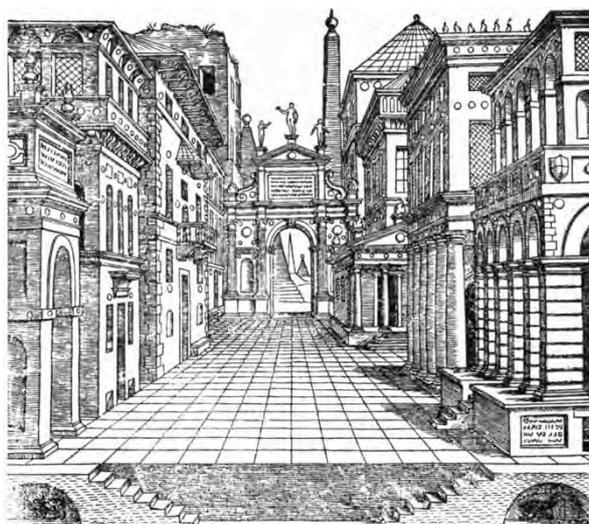


Figure 6. Sebastiano Serlio, folio 25, Book II, *The Five Books of Architecture* [1611], New York: Dover Publications, 1982

Tragedy was considered ennobling to the mind and spirit and appropriate, as Serlio put it, to the actions of “great Lords, Dukes, Princes, and Kings”.³⁰ Gainsborough places on this grand stage, however, a scene of charity modestly performed by women and children remarkable only for their grace and generosity. The adaption of a tragic setting normally associated with heroic deeds and deaths for an everyday giving of alms elevates, in the manner described by Barrell, the social virtue of benevolence to the level of courage and valour, the public virtues enshrined in tragic theatre. By extension, the solemnity of the architectural stage raises the lower style of naturalistic genre painting to the status of history painting, which was often compared with tragedy.

The harmonious variety of open apertures and religious and private buildings seem thus to argue for an art that combines public life and private virtues, benevolent sociability and the spaces of high tragedy. Built form likewise underscores the painting’s seriousness as the model for a new approach to art that revises academic hierarchies and modes of address. More than a setting for a scene of charity, architecture deepens the philosophical meanings of Gainsborough’s painting. It embeds into the structure of the picture the attenuation of civic humanism characteristic of eighteenth-century culture and reinforces the value of the private virtues of charity and humanity.

Endnotes

¹ To William Jackson, year unknown. In John Hayes (ed.), *The Letters of Thomas Gainsborough* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2001), 68.

² To William Jackson, 2 September 1767, Hayes (ed.), *Letters*, 42.

³ To William Chambers, 27 April 1783, Hayes (ed.), *Letters*, 152.

⁴ The painting was displayed in an exhibition at Gainsborough's studio in 1784 after his much-publicised secession from the official exhibitions of the Royal Academy. Henry Bate-Dudley, 'A View of Mr. Gainsborough's Gallery', *Morning Herald*, 26 July 1784, 4. The painting was sold in 1799 as *Italian Villa* in the Lord Robert Spencer sale, but whether or not he purchased it directly from Gainsborough's exhibition is unknown. See Ellis K. Waterhouse, *Gainsborough* (London: Spring Books, 1966), 120.

⁵ The dispute was mainly over the hanging of *The Three Eldest Princesses* according to "the line", which dictated full lengths be hung more than eight feet (2.4 metres) from the floor. See *The Morning Herald*, 22 April 1784, and Hayes, (ed.), *Letters*, 160.

⁶ See Georgina Cole, "'A Beautiful Assemblage of an Interesting Nature": Gainsborough's *Charity Relieving Distress* and the Reconciliation of High and Low Art', *British Art Studies*, 1 (2015), <http://www.britishartstudies.ac.uk/issues/issue-index/issue-1/gainsboroughs-charity>.

⁷ Marcia Pointon, 'Gainsborough and the Landscape of Retirement', *Art History*, 2, 4 (1979), 441-455.

⁸ Ann Bermingham, 'The Simple Life: Cottages and Gainsborough's Cottage Doors', in Peter de Bolla (ed.), *Land, Nation and Culture, 1740-1840: Thinking the Republic of Taste*, (Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 38-40. On the role of the open door in Gainsborough's Cottage Doors, see Georgina Cole, 'Painting the Threshold: Doors, Space and Representation in Eighteenth-Century Genre Painting', PhD thesis, University of Sydney, 2010, 212-62.

⁹ See Ann Bermingham, 'Gainsborough's *Cottage Door*: Sensation and Sensibility', in Bermingham (ed.), *Sensation and Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 1-34. Michael Rosenthal, 'Gainsborough's Cottage Doors: A Matter of Modernity', in Ann Bermingham (ed.), *Sensation and Sensibility*, 77-95. John Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730-1840* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980).

¹⁰ Waterhouse, *Gainsborough*, 120.

¹¹ William T. Whitley, *Thomas Gainsborough* (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1915), 281.

¹² On the principle of *varietas* in early Quattrocento civic design, see Christine Smith, *Architecture in the Early Culture of Humanism: Ethics, Aesthetics, and Eloquence 1400-1470*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 98-129.

¹³ William Chambers, *A Treatise on the Decorative Part of Civil Architecture* [1759], facsimile ed (London: Dover, 2003), 105.

¹⁴ See J. M. Neeson, *Commoners: Common Right, Enclosure and Social Change in England, 1700-1820* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993). On the relationship between Gainsborough's paintings and enclosure, see Ann Bermingham, *Landscape and Ideology: The English Rustic Tradition*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989), 33-54.

¹⁵ Both gate and door are suitable frames for different figural types and are examples of decorum as it is defined in Michael Hill and Peter Kohane, 'The Eclipse of a Commonplace Idea: Decorum in Architectural Theory', *Architectural Research Quarterly*, 5, 1 (2001), esp. 65 and 73.

¹⁶ T.A. Roberts (ed.), *Butler's Fifteen Sermons Preached at the Rolls Chapel and A Dissertation on the Nature of Virtue*, (London: S.P.C.K., 1970), 51.

¹⁷ Begging at doors was a common practice in the eighteenth century. See Tim Hitchcock, 'Begging on the Streets of Eighteenth-century London', *Journal of British Studies*, 44, 3 (2005), 486-87.

¹⁸ Michael Rosenthal, *Thomas Gainsborough: 'A Little Business for the Eye'* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 67.

¹⁹ Rev. Hugh Blair, *Sentimental Beauties from the Writings of Dr. Blair* (London: John Wallis, 1798), 185.

²⁰ On the open door as a site of charity in eighteenth-century British art, see Georgina Cole, "'A Beautiful Assemblage of an Interesting Nature": Gainsborough's *Charity Relieving Distress* and the Reconciliation of High and Low Art', *British Art Studies*, 1 (2015), <https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-01/gcole/p18>

²¹ On relationships between rich and poor, see E.P. Thompson, 'Patrician Society, Plebeian Culture', *Journal of Social History*, 7, 4 (1974), 382-405.

²² Lawrence Klein points out that there were few public spaces in eighteenth-century London and that the street abruptly met the private property of the house with little mediation. Klein, 'The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 18, 2 (1984-85), 211.

²³ J.G.A. Pocock, *The Machiavellian Moment: Florentine Political Thought and the Atlantic Republican Tradition* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975), 464-65.

²⁴ Klein, 'The Third Earl of Shaftesbury and the Progress of Politeness', 190-191.

²⁵ John Barrell, *The Political Theory of Painting from Reynolds to Hazlitt: 'The Body of the Public'* (London: Yale University Press, 1986), 56-58.

²⁶ Adam Smith, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments* (London, 1759), 1-48.

²⁷ According to Pocock, "a trading society possesses a psychology of its own, and...this complicates the pursuit and preservation of virtue", *The Machiavellian Moment*, 470.

²⁸ David Solkin, *Painting for Money* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), 199-213; and 'Great Portraits or Great Men? Reynolds, Portraiture, and the Power of Art', *Oxford Art Journal*, 9, 2 (1986), 42-49.

²⁹ Solkin, *Painting for Money*, ch 5. The same may be observed in France. See Emma Barker, *Greuze and the Painting of Sentiment* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 2005).

³⁰ Sebastiano Serlio, *The Five Books of Architecture* [1611] (New York: Dover Publications, 1982), Book II, folio 25.