TREASURE OF THE MONTH

Lord Byron by Richard Westall, c.1813. Oil on canvas.

More than any of his contemporaries, Byron’s image was captured by many different artists in varying media. He was far more famous during his lifetime than Keats and Shelley, notorious for his swaggering good looks, brilliant wit and his intriguing reputation as a man who was ‘mad, bad and dangerous to know’.[[1]](#footnote-1) He was arguably one of the first modern celebrities – his noble name and distinctive profile would have been recognised by people all over the country. His publisher, John Murray, wrote to him in 1819 saying ‘Believe me, your portrait is engraved & painted & sold in every town throughout the Kingdom’.[[2]](#footnote-2)

Byron’s name became widely known in 1812 after the publication of the first part of his long narrative poem about a young aristocrat’s travels, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*. In addition to his compelling poetry and scandalous behaviour, the poet’s striking face also demanded attention; fellow Romantic poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge commented in a letter on 10 April 1816 that Byron’s face was ‘so beautiful, a countenance I scarcely ever saw’. So, it is no surprise that John Murray, his publisher, took advantage of this and encouraged the proliferation of Byron’s image as well as his poetry.

The ‘celebrity’ phenomenon may be traced back to the industrialisation of print culture, which coincided with the Romantic period, because it facilitated the large scale reproduction and circulation of images of people, such as Byron, on an unprecedented scale.[[3]](#footnote-3) The visual representations of Byron were important for his career, as the portraits fostered the readers’ fascination with the man behind the poems. Countless pictures of Byron were produced during his lifetime, though only a precious few were painted from life. Most portraits of the poet were print reproductions or pictures drawn from already existent paintings of the poet, which gradually led to the alteration, distortion and idealisation of Byron’s image. An account supporting this is that of Captain Forrester, who expressed his ‘great . . .astonishment’ when he met Byron in 1824 and found himself facing ‘a being bearing as little resemblance to the pretended fac-simile, as I do to Apollo’.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Forrester’s mention of a ‘pretended fac-simile’ could be a reference to Thomas Phillips’ painting of Byron, ‘Portrait of a Nobleman in the dress of an Albanian’ (1813), in which the poet poses in exotic costume with a haughty expression, looking into the distance and presenting us with a ¾ profile of his face. The effect is consciously theatrical and iconic, portraying Byron as an adventurous and confident young aristocrat. Lord Byron was very pleased with the portrait, but allegedly the poet was notoriously protective of his image, and directed his publisher John Murray to destroy any engravings of himself that he disliked.

In contrast, the portrait of Lord Byron by Richard Westall which resides here in the Keats-Shelley House, commissioned by Byron in 1813 when he was 25 years old, is said to be the most realistic likeness of the poet. The painting was donated in 1914 by the Fourth Earl of Effingham (Henry Alexander Gordon Howard), who bought it for the museum from Messrs Shepherd art dealers in St James’, London. In a letter to Harry Nelson Gay – one of the founders of the Keats-Shelley Memorial Association and the first Curator of the Housee – in January 1914, the Earl said that Westall’s portrait ‘represents Lord Byron as less handsome than usually represented. Messrs Shepherd considered it an unidealised portrait and probably how he really was’. It is the artist’s honesty which makes the painting so fascinating, as it is a highly unusual representation of Lord Byron who is captured here so candidly. Byron himself also acknowledged and appreciated the realism of the portrait: ‘I happen to know this portrait was not a flatterer, but dark and stern,’ he wrote in his journal, ‘even as black as the mood in which my mind was scorching last July when I sat for it. All the others of me – like most portraits whatsoever – are, of course, more agreeable than nature’.

Interestingly, Westall painted another portrait of Lord Byron, also in 1813, which is one of the most famous likenesses of the poet and which hangs in the National Portrait Gallery in London. At first glance, the portraits look quite similar: they are both painted in profile, with the sitter’s chin rested on his hand, and he is dressed in a white shirt and a red jacket. However, on closer inspection, the painting in the NPG is considerably more idealised and feels less natural; his appearance is very composed, with his hair in silken curls and he is poised with a serene expression gazing into the distance at a dramatic landscape in the background. In the Keats-Shelley House Westall portrait, Byron appears more dishevelled and is seated in a regular room, and he appears genuinely pensive with his eyes unfocused, deep in thought. Though the portraits were painted in the same year, here the poet looks older because the artist has included the lines near his eyes, nose, and of his furrowed brow, and his hair seems more noticeably receded than in other pictures. He lacks the characteristic arrogant pout present in many of the other depictions, and his brooding attitude appears to be more than just an act for a picture in this strikingly candid portrait. This painting feels like we have been given a glimpse of the real Byron, more vulnerable,thoughtful, and human..

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1. His lover Lady Caroline Lamb famously used these words to describe Lord Byron. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Murray to Byron, March 19, 1819, in *The Works of Lord Byron: Letters and Journals,* ed. Rowland E. Prothero, 5 vols. (London: John Murray, 1898-1904), 4:282-83. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This compelling argument is explored by Tom Mole *in Byron's Romantic Celebrity: Industrial Culture and the Hermeneutic of Intimacy* (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007). [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Cited in Tom Mole, ‘Ways of Seeing Byron’ in *Byron: The Image of the Poet*, Ed. Christine Kenyon-Jones (University of Delaware, 2008), p.71. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)