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Wullschläger, Jackie. "Gainsborough's Blue Boy makes a glowing return to the UK after a century." *Financial Times*, January 19, 2022.

FINANCIAL TIMES



The Blue Boy' (c1770) was the most expensive painting ever sold in 1921... © Huntington Art Museum, San Marino, California



... before it took a long journey to California, where it arrived the following year © Manuel Flores/Huntington Library, San Marino, California

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A portent of hope, a tonic for uncertain times, a moment of uncomplicated joy: the launch of London's 2022 exhibitions with *Gainsborough's Blue Boy* at the National Gallery feels exactly right. Storms are coming — fierce expressionists Francis Bacon, Van Gogh, Louise Bourgeois are the major openings in the city in the next three weeks — but for now “The Blue Boy” serenely holds court, a high point of exquisite rococo fancy. His visit is a once-in-a-lifetime chance to see in the UK British art's most iconic painting of youth, and to unpack how such an image works across the centuries.

Gainsborough's adolescent in a sapphire satin Van Dyck suit with crisp lace collar, dangling a plumed hat, goes on free display here 100 years to the day since he left the UK for America on January 25 1922. He has been spruced up for the trip: he is more scintillatingly, astonishingly blue than he has been in a while, thanks to recent conservation at his home in the Huntington Library and Art Museum, San Marino, California. Feathery grace, effervescent brushstrokes, shimmer of light on flesh and fabric, are in full play. In a contrapposto pose, the boy holds his ground, confident, determined, one hand on his hips, elbow jutting. The eyes shine, the skin is soft and smooth, the cheeks aglow, the expression outward-bound, buoyant, serious, direct, just touched with uncertainty: a young man on the cusp of adulthood, full of beauty and promise.

Railroad tycoon Henry Huntington was over 70 when he acquired “The Blue Boy” from the Duke of Westminster for \$728,000 (equivalent to \$11.3m today) in 1921 — then the highest price ever fetched by a painting. The broker was dealer Joseph Duveen, who recognised in American new money and European Old Masters a marriage made in heaven, especially when the new-world economy boomed and British aristocrats buckled under death duties and higher taxes.



'George Villiers, 2nd Duke of Buckingham and Lord Francis Villiers' (1635) by Anthony van Dyck is an ancestor of 'The Blue Boy' © Royal Collection Trust/Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

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Huntington's cash bought more than the youth of old Europe — in the brash Californian wild west, "The Blue Boy" signified intellectual status, aristocratic provenance, the patrician veneer sought by the self-made in America's gilded age. The match was perfect because the Boy himself was an upstart, an advertisement for upward mobility. In 1770 Gainsborough, aspiring to move from a provincial presence to Georgian court painter, depicted an anonymous youth in the sumptuous garb and courtly bearing of Van Dyck's royal subjects from more than a century earlier. Painterly lineage connects Gainsborough's silken, fluid handling and spontaneity with Van Dyck's: the effect is of effortless elegance, but with Gainsborough it is also enigmatic, imbued with the mystery of nostalgia.

The National Gallery makes the point by placing "The Blue Boy" in company with his noble forebears: Van Dyck's poignant double portrait in red and gold satin of George and Francis Villiers, aged seven and six, orphaned sons of Charles I's favourite, the Duke of Buckingham, and teenage Scottish aristocrat brothers Lords John and Bernard Stuart, more aggressive and arrogant. Three of these four boys were killed in the English civil war of 1642-51. By the time Gainsborough encountered Van Dyck, their patriotic portraits were anthems for doomed youth.



Lord John Stuart and his brother Lord Bernard Stuart (c1638) by Anthony van Dyck © The National Gallery, London

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The Blue Boy's identity has never been confirmed; he might be Jonathan Buttall, a London ironmonger's son, or the artist's nephew Gainsborough Dupont, young men from the expanding 18th-century mercantile, entrepreneurial class. The glory of youth, not pedigree or rank, is Gainsborough's true subject — for the painting belongs to a historical moment, when childhood began to be of interest for itself. Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Emile*, inaugurating romanticism's halo around infancy, appeared in 1762; Wordsworth's "the child is father of the man" followed.

Such ideas were in the air when painted his daughters chasing a butterfly in 1756: the girls in translucent silver and gold, like butterflies. It's in room 34 at the National Gallery, and a prelude to the display around "The Blue Boy". Gainsborough's informal approach, free, loose facture, sense of fleetingness in the butterfly picture, embody in paint fresh ideas about childhood.



'The Artist's Daughters Chasing a Butterfly' (1756) by Thomas Gainsborough

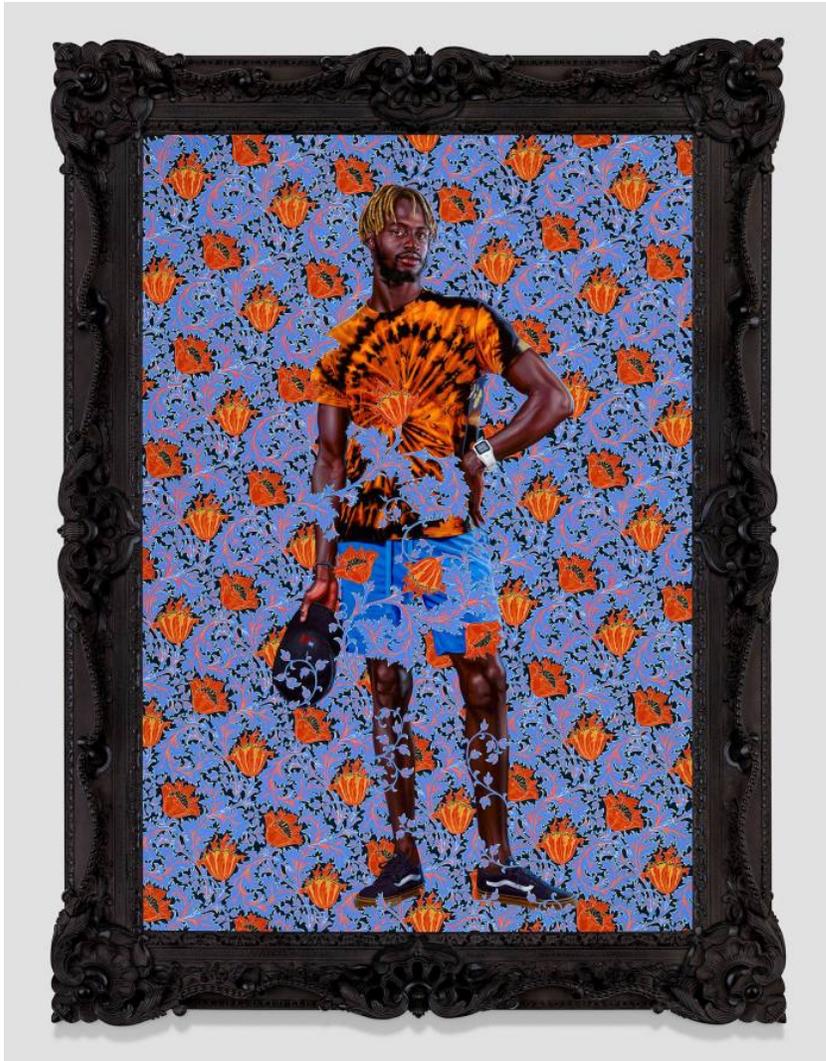
In "The Blue Boy" these elements combine with the masquerade artifice into a democratized rendering of Van Dyck's grand manner. It is painting as performance — of style, pose, setting, the forest slope and rushing sun-streaked skies an imaginary background adding theatricality.

These resonances came to bear when "The Blue Boy" prepared to leave Britain soon after the catastrophic losses of Britain's young men in the first world war. There were outpourings in the Times in 1922 — "some of the youth in our country seemed to be going with him, some of the grace of the old time"; "we asked him not to forget us, or cease to love us, but to love also the cousins overseas to whom he is bound, to speak to them of our common heritage." Cole Porter's popular 1922 song "The Blue Boy Blues" gave the boy a voice,

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lamenting how “a silver dollar took me and my collar/to show the slow cowboys” across the Atlantic.

For three weeks before his departure, “The Blue Boy” presided at the National Gallery: waiting in long queues, 90,000 people came to say goodbye. “Au revoir” scrawled Charles Holmes, the museum’s director, on one of the stretchers before the painting was crated to travel by steamship and rail to Huntington’s “ranch”. It has not left California since, and is unlikely to do so again after this outing.



'A Portrait of a Young Gentleman' (2021) by Kehinde Wiley © Joshua White

Still, Holmes’ hopes came true. “The Blue Boy” is back, more famous than ever. The Huntington’s proximity to Hollywood propelled him into movie stardom: Laurel and Hardy in 1929, the blue-clothed amphibian waving on Disneyland’s Toad-themed ride, Pierce Brosnan as James Bond damaging the canvas in a fencing match in *Die Another Day* in 2002. The 20th century also homed in on the figure’s androgyny — Marlene Dietrich in Blue Boy costume in 1927; the 1970s gay journal *Blueboy Magazine*. And pop painter Robert Rauschenberg said he decided to become an artist on sight of “The Blue Boy”.

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A generation later, a teenage Kehinde Wiley, growing up in Los Angeles, enjoyed looking at “The Blue Boy” — someone his own age. Now his response, commissioned and displayed in the autumn by the Huntington, makes a pair. Wiley’s Senegalese figure with blond-tipped dreadlocks in “A Portrait of a Young Gentleman” has the Blue Boy’s swagger pose, wears blue shorts, holds a baseball cap instead of the feathered hat. “A little bit hippie, a little bit hobo, a little bit surfer bum,” Wiley says, and against the Gainsborough, “squaring off. But nothing’s resolved.” So “The Blue Boy” lives on within the continuum of paint, the picture’s visual authority declaring how a single image can allow a culture to interpret itself, its history, its changing ideals for the future.

January 25-May 15, nationalgallery.org.uk