

# Joseph Highmore

British, 1692-1780

Worcester Boulevard, PO Box 2626, Christchurch, New Zealand  
[www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz](http://www.christchurchartgallery.org.nz) Phone (03) 941 7300

## Portrait of a Gentleman in a Blue Jacket and Embroidered Waistcoat

c. 1730, oil on canvas, 124x99 cm  
Purchased 1977



### About the work

The emphasis of this work is on the wealth and prestige of the sitter and, although the identity of this man is no longer known, his portrait was probably destined to join those of various ancestors hung in the grand halls and stairways of the family home.

*Portrait of a Gentleman in a Blue Jacket and Embroidered Waistcoat* is an important mid-career work and a good example of Joseph Highmore's elegant and sophisticated portrait style. The three quarter length pose was typical and this figure is given a commanding position from which he looks down at the viewer. He is placed within a grand architectural background complete with regal Baroque-inspired tumbling red drapery. This was a common background device and probably inspired by the portraits of King Charles I by Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641) in the 17th century.

The man's large white wig was the height of fashion for gentlemen of the age. This, and the realistic treatment of the rich blue velvet coat and richly embroidered gold brocade waistcoat, convey important messages about his wealth and

social standing. Highmore painted his subject in a highly realistic and refined manner, capturing the textures and colours of the clothing and the background drapery with precision. He is reputed to have always painted his faces at a single sitting without retouching them at a later date.

The work is typical of 18th century British portraiture. Highmore was amongst the most accomplished portrait artists of his age, with his development running parallel with that of his contemporary, William Hogarth (1692-1764). Another contemporary artist was the portrait painter Thomas Hudson (1701-1779). British portrait painters were following a well-established convention which had been strongly influenced by the works of Hans Holbein (1497-1543) Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640), and Sir Anthony van Dyck.

The influence of Rubens is visible in *Portrait of a Gentleman in a Blue Jacket and Embroidered Waistcoat*, with its use of drapery, depiction of lush texture and particular attention to detailed realism.

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## About the artist

Joseph Highmore was born in London in 1692, the son of Edward Highmore, a coal merchant in Thames Street. In 1707 Highmore began training as a lawyer but he eventually gave this up to pursue a career as an artist. In 1713 he attended the Academy of Painting which had been established by Sir Godfrey Kneller (c. 1649-1723).

By 1715 Highmore was established as a professional portrait painter in London. He married in 1716 and a measure of the success of his portrait practice was his move to a house in Lincoln's Inn Fields, a wealthy area on the outskirts of London. Highmore believed that being a connoisseur, and developing one's sense of good taste, should be regarded as an essential part of the education of a gentleman.

In 1732 he travelled to the Low Countries to study the works of Peter Paul Rubens (1577-1640) and Anthony van Dyck (1599-1641), and to France in 1743. By 1742, he had gained a large reputation both in England and the Continent. He was also commissioned to paint Royal portraits, which highlights his popularity and high standing among English portrait painters. Highmore retired as a painter in 1761 and moved to Canterbury to live with his family in 1762. He died in 1780.

Highmore was also known for his writing, and he published articles and essays on a variety of subjects, including religion, law and art. He was a friend of the English writer Samuel Richardson. In 1740/1741 Highmore began painting a series of 12 works illustrating Richardson's novel Pamela. Completed in 1745, these works are now housed at the Tate in London, the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge, and also in Melbourne.

In his writings Highmore was able to indulge his passion for both literature and painting. His works also indicate the influence of Hogarth's moralities *The Harlot's Progress* and *The Rake's Progress*, and the effect of his visit to France in 1743.

## Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection.

## Further reading

'Joseph Highmore, Painter and Author,' J.W. Scobell Armstrong, *The Connoisseur*, Vol. LXXXVI, No.350, October 1930. pp. 209-217.

