

William Etty: *Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball*

In eager anticipation of the long-awaited 2011 William Etty summer exhibition, York Art Gallery is giving us a taster of the 19th century York artist's oeuvre this week, showcasing one of his finest works, *Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball*

By [Charlotte McGuinness](#)

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In eager anticipation of the long-awaited 2011 William Etty summer exhibition, York Art Gallery is giving us a taster of the 19th century York artist's oeuvre this week, showcasing one of his finest works, *Preparing for a Fancy Dress Ball*. Etty may be best known for his mastery of the nude figure and grand history paintings; however this specific work is one of a rare handful of society paintings he produced on commission. Created for Hon. Charles Watkins Williams in 1833, the piece depicts an affectionate rendering of his daughters, Charlotte and Mary Williams Wynn, in oils. Thanks to the donations of Friends of York Art Gallery, the Art Fund, the MLA/V&A Purchase Grant Fund and the Tomasso Brothers, Etty's captivating portrait has been brought back to his home town where it is certain to be appreciated to its utmost.

Etty's climb to popularity was certainly not easy. Without the benefit of a formal education as well as taking into account the British artistic tradition at the time which was for the most part oriented away from artists painting on such a grand scale, really it is against the odds that Etty succeeded to the extent that he did. The seven years working at a printer's bench that would have been considered the essential formative years of a young painter's career evidently were not wasted as some have claimed, but only served to enthuse him more once he finally joined the Royal Academy schools in 1806.

Intriguing as an accurate reflection of Etty's values and experiences as an artist, the painting is prized as a prestigious addition to the gallery's collection, the most extensive public holding of his works in Britain. The artist joined ranks with the greats, like Constable and Turner in terms of what was a new "professional" ideal and outlook in art. Advocating Academy schooling as the most esteemed route to artistic success. Etty's reliance on Academic studio practice is self-evident, being especially identifiable in his classical stock poses, taken from life drawing sessions. Yet Etty managed to juggle both classical idealism and French romanticism, a romanticism inherited from Fuseli and Géricault creating works both idealised and reminiscent of the cameo, whilst simultaneously permeated with an underlying introspection.

York warmly welcomes this work home, an object of particular local interest and affection, while inspiring national pride on a much larger scale. Etty's uncanny ability to achieve unsurpassed expression has granted his oeuvre the status of some of the best figure paintings our united isle has produced. This, the latest addition to York's Etty collection, so highlights his essential contribution to the canon of British Art.



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