

Introduction

Sarah Siddons was the most successful actress of the late eighteenth century. She established her reputation at the Theatre Royal in Bath, and outstanding performances in Bath and at Bristol's Theatre Royal – now Bristol Old Vic – elevated her to iconic status. She excelled in roles of tragedy and her interpretations of characters including Lady Macbeth and Isabella from *The Fatal Marriage* were legendary. Siddons suffered greatly in her personal life through an unhappy marriage and the premature death of five of her seven children. Siddons channelled her sorrow into acting, resulting in performances of a unique emotional intensity. Audiences delighted in her power to move them. As Siddons reduced them to tears and induced fainting and hysteria, tickets to see her became increasingly desired.

The notion of celebrity was yet to develop during the eighteenth century, and Siddons set a precedent with the level of fame she achieved. Portraiture played an integral role in her rising status. Artworks immortalised the actress in her most popular roles at the dramatic climaxes of the plays. Siddons image therefore became more widely known and her reputation as the greatest tragic actress of the time was reinforced. She became the choice subject for portrait artists keen to raise their own profile through the association.

This exhibition is an opportunity to explore a selection of the Theatre Collection's diverse range of portraits of Sarah Siddons, on display together for the first time. The Theatre Collection holds more than 60 artworks relating to Sarah Siddons. Visitors can browse the collection catalogue at the Theatre Collection website, and are welcome to make an appointment to view the artworks. This exhibition was curated by volunteers Anna Fineman and Narell Thomas.

Throughout this exhibition we have chosen to refer to Sarah Siddons as an 'actress,' as this is the term she used to describe herself. Today, the term 'actor' is more generally used for both women and men.

Artworks in the Sarah Siddons exhibition

WALL

Sarah Siddons as Isabella from the *Tragedy of Isabella or The Fatal Marriage* by Thomas Southerne (adapted by David Garrick)

William Hamilton (1751-1801)

Oil on canvas, c.1785

Sarah Siddons marked a triumphant return to London with her performance as Isabella, having received critical acclaim performing in Bath and Bristol.

Sarah Siddons established her reputation as the greatest tragic actress of her time at theatres in Bath and Bristol. On her return to the London stage she appeared as Isabella in *The Tragedy of Isabella* or *The Fatal Marriage*. She gave a highly moving performance, made all the more poignant by appearing with her own son in the part of Isabella's little boy, confusing reality with fiction. William Hamilton's dramatic portrait served as a reminder of the powerful performance. The popularity of the portrait was such that Hamilton painted further versions of it, while James Caldwell made an engraving of it (a print of which is displayed nearby). It is currently unknown whether this painting was originally part of a double portrait.

Mrs Sarah Siddons and her son in the *Tragedy of Isabella*

Print of engraving by James Caldwell (1739-1789) after William Hamilton (1751-1801)
1784

Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse

Print of engraving by H. Dawe after Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)
Published 1827

Joshua Reynolds' painting of Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse is the best known image of Siddons. The portrait was instrumental in the careers of both the artist and the actress.

Joshua Reynolds was the leading portrait painter of the eighteenth century. A shrewd networker, he often made and used acquaintances to his own advantage. Following a poorly received exhibition of his work in 1782, Reynolds strategically decided to paint renowned actress Sarah Siddons, to elevate his status. The work was deemed to evoke the very essence of tragedy. It successfully secured both Reynolds' and Siddons' reputations. Reproductions through engravings such as this, have ensured it remains the best known image of Siddons.

Mrs Siddons, possibly as Mrs Haller in *The Stranger*

Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)
Oil on canvas, c. 1797

Thomas Lawrence was intimately acquainted with Sarah Siddons and her family. His portraits may therefore provide insight into the 'real' Siddons, rather than Siddons in character.

When Sarah Siddons first met Thomas Lawrence in Bath in 1777 she could not have anticipated the great effect the future painter was to have on her family's life. A decade later the charismatic Lawrence arrived in London and began consecutive relationships with two of Siddons' daughters. Meanwhile Siddons had feelings of her own for the alluring young man. Tragically, both

daughters died young. Siddons maintained an intimate friendship with Lawrence and he painted many portraits of her. This painting possibly depicts Siddons in the role of adulteress Mrs Haller in *The Stranger*. Although the sadness Lawrence has captured may reveal Siddons' own feelings.

5)

Mrs Siddons as Euphrasia in the *The Grecian Daughter*

Print of an engraving by James Caldwell (1739-floruit 1789) after William Hamilton (1751-1801)
c.1780

Sarah Siddons' dynamic debut performance as Euphrasia elicited "sobs and shrieks" from the audience. Conversely Hamilton's portrait depicts the actress posed and static.

This statuesque portrait of Siddons as Euphrasia in *The Grecian Daughter* portrays the actress in an idealised pose. Siddons' performances were rather more passionate than this depiction reveals.

Hamilton's decision to paint Siddons was based on his need to attract patronage. He anticipated that associating himself with the famous actress would draw custom. Hamilton's partnership with engraver John Caldwell allowed for a wider distribution of the image.

CASE

1)

Small etchings:

Mrs Siddons as Matilda in *The Carmelite*

Etching by Thornthwaite after William Hamilton (1751-1801)
Printed 1791

Mrs Siddons as Medea in *Medea*

Etching by Thornthwaite
Printed 1792

Mrs Siddons as Isabella in *The Tragedy of Isabella or The Fatal Marriage*

Etching by William S. Leney (1769 – 1831) after Samuel De Wilde (1748 – 1832)
Printed 1792

Mrs Siddons as Euphrasia in *The Grecian Daughter*

Etching by William S. Leney (1769 – 1831) after by Samuel De Wilde (1748 – 1832)
Printed 1792

Small portraits of Siddons such as these allowed more people to own prints of her image, increasing her publicity.

These etchings depict Siddons at moments of great drama within each play. During performance such poses would be fleeting, but portraits such as these reinforce and perpetuate stereotypical images of Siddons, through their focus on famous scenes.

During the eighteenth century actresses used manuals for instruction on how to convey specific emotions through their facial expressions and bodily postures. Audiences were well aware of the custom and came to recognise the meaning behind each hand gesture and head position. Siddons unique acting style was a move away from such a formulaic approach, however these etchings immortalise in static moments.

2)

Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth

Coloured print of engraving by Robert Cooper after George Henry Harlow (1787-1819)
Published 1822

“Siddons’ Lady Macbeth continues to be regarded as the one against which all later interpretations have been judged.” Robert Shaughnessy

Lady Macbeth is a role synonymous with Sarah Siddons. The actress’s empathetic portrayal of the tragic character astounded audiences. It was as Lady Macbeth that Siddons gave the final performance of her career, at Covent Garden in 1812. Her original interpretation of the part included the unusual act of setting down her candle during the sleepwalking scene, in order to focus on the washing of her hands. It is this moment that George Henry Harlow captured in his painting of Siddons, a print of which is displayed here from an engraving by Robert Cooper. Prints such as these increased exposure of Siddons’ image, contributing to her iconic status.

3)

Sarah Siddons in Pizarro

Robert Dighton (1752-1814)
Coloured etching, 1799

Siddons often played the parts of ‘broken women,’ but would instil them with a sense of dignity.

Sarah Siddons formed part of the original cast of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *Pizarro*, playing Pizarro’s mistress Elvira. By the opening night the playwright was still editing the script, and so the actors did not have their lines for the final act. Despite this disappointing premiere, popularity of the play grew and Siddons talent for tragedy was further consolidated. This etching of a watercolour, both by Robert Dighton, portrays Siddons in character as Elvira. Through her pose she appears dignified and authoritative, in spite of her character’s vulnerable position.

4)

'Theatrical Mendicants relieved - "have Pity upon all our Aches & Wants"'

Photograph of a print of caricature of Mrs Siddons and Mr Kemble after the Covent Garden Theatre fire

J. Guirray [?]

1808

Transcript of letter from Mrs Siddons to James Ballantyne after the Covent Garden Theatre fire

Notes by Herbert Farjeon (1887-1945)

1806

Print of engraving of 'The first alarm of fire at the conclusion of the Bal Masque, inside the auditorium of Covent Garden Theatre.'

Engraver unknown

Published 1856

As a famous figure, Siddons' image was used within a variety of art forms, including caricature.

Sarah Siddons' fame meant her image would often be used in satirical cartoons, as well as in more flattering portraits. This caricature of Siddons begging with her brother John Kemble, mocks the loss Siddons suffered with the fire of Covent Garden Theatre. As she exclaimed in a letter to a friend 'Of all the precious and curious dresses and lace and jewels which I have been collecting for these thirty years – not one, no, not one article has escap'd!'

5)

'Mrs Siddons, Old Kemble, and Henderson, rehearsing in the Green Room'

Thomas Rowlandson (1756 – 1827)

Coloured print, 1789

Siddons played tragic roles with such conviction that her audiences frequently became frenzied with emotion.

Siddons empathised with the tragic characters she played to the extreme that her acting became an outlet for her personal sorrows. Such charged and genuine performances were known to arouse an unprecedented level of emotional response in theatre audiences. Hysterical weeping and fainting fits were common occurrences.

Rowlandson has captured Siddons in a contrived dramatic stance. Although such an acting style was popular during the eighteenth century, Siddons was not disposed to holding such poses. Rather, she moved more fluidly with rapid changes in posture and facial expression.

6)

Playbill for *Douglas* at the Theatre Royal Bristol

25 February 1799

Playbill for the *Tragedy of Isabella or The Fatal Marriage* at the Theatre Royal [Edinburgh?]

15 June 1809

Performances at the Theatre Royal Bristol were instrumental in launching Siddons' career. She recognised that "If I had not made my reputation in a small theatre, I should never have done it."

This playbill from 1799 advertises 'Positively the Last Night of Mrs. Siddon's Performance' as Lady Randolph in *Douglas* at the Theatre Royal Bristol – now Bristol Old Vic. Siddons was very well-known for this part, playing it to popular acclaim for many years. But in 1783, envious actress Anne Crawford, feeling overshadowed by Siddons, attempted the role of Lady Randolph. Unfortunately for Crawford her performance was viewed as inferior to that of Siddons.