

Key Historical References to the Use of Sight-Size:

Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792) to John Singer Sargent (1856 – 1925)

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In his account of Sargent at work, Sir William Rothenstein (1872 - 1945) uses the term *sight-size* for the visual method of comparing the canvas and model to scale. To our knowledge, it is the first time the word appears formally in print. R. H. Ives Gammell (1893 - 1981) used the same term in Boston when he taught Charles H. Cecil to view the canvas alongside the subject from a distance. As Rothenstein points out, the visual method goes back long before the term *sight-size* was coined.

Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723 – 1792)

Reynolds advised his pupils to “... paint at the greatest possible distance from your sitter, and to place your picture near the sitter... so as to see both together.”

James Northcote, *Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds, Vol. II, Second Edition*, London, 1819, p. 58.

According to Lady Burlington, Reynolds “... took quite a quantity of exercise while he painted, for he continually walked backward and forward. His plan was to walk away several feet, then take a long look at me and the picture as we stood side by side, then rush up to the portrait and dash at it in a kind of fury. I sometimes thought he would make a mistake, and paint on me instead of the picture.”

W. P. Frith, *My Autobiography and Reminiscences, Vol. III, 1888*, p. 124.

Thomas Gainsborough (1727 – 1788)

“Like Reynolds he painted standing, in preference to sitting; and the pencils which he used had shafts, sometimes two yards long. He stood as far away from his sitter as he did from his picture, that the hues might be the same.”

Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Vol. I, Revised Edition*, George Bell and Sons, London, 1879, p. 274.

“Mr. Gainsborough... allowed me frequently to stand beside him to see him paint, even when he had sitters before him. I was much surprised to see him sometimes paint portraits with pencils on sticks full six feet in length, and his method of using them was this: he placed himself and his canvas at a right angle with the sitter, so that he stood still, and touched the features of his picture exactly at the same distance at which he viewed his sitter.” *

John T. Smith, *Nollekins and his Times, Vol. I*, Henry Colburn, London, 1828, p. 186.

Sir Henry Raeburn (1756 – 1823)

A sitter to Raeburn relates that "...having placed me in a chair on a platform at the end of his painting-room, in the posture required, he set up his easel beside me with a canvas ready to receive the colour. When he saw all was right, he took his palette and his brush, retreated back step by step, with his face toward me, till he was nigh the other end of the room; he stood and studied for a minute more, then came up to the canvas, and, without looking at me, wrought upon it with colour for some time. Having done this he retreated in the same manner, studied my looks at that distance for about another minute, then came hastily up to the canvas and painted a few minutes more."

Allan Cunningham, *Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters, Vol. II*, Revised Edition, George Bell and Sons, London, 1879, p. 269.

"His manner of taking his likenesses explains the simplicity and power of his heads. Placing his sitter on the pedestal, he looked at him from the other end of a long room, gazing at him intently with his great dark eyes. Having got the idea of the man, what to him carried farthest and 'told,' he walked hastily up to the canvas, never looking at the sitter, and put down what he had fixed in his inner eye; he then withdrew again, took another gaze and recorded its results, and so on, making no measurements."

Edward Pinnington, *Sir Henry Raeburn RA, The Makers of British Art*, London, 1904, p. 124.

Sir Thomas Lawrence (1769 – 1830)

"His picture and his sitter were placed at a distance from the point of view, where to see both at a time, he (Lawrence) had to traverse all across the room, before the conception which the view of his sitter suggested, could be proceeded with. In this incessant transit his feet had worn a path through the carpet to the floor, exercising freedom both of body and mind; each traverse allowing time for invention, while it required an effort of memory between the touch on the canvas and the observation from which it grew."

Allan Cunningham, *The Life of Sir David Wilkie, Vol. III*, J. Murray, London, 1843, pp. 172-3.

"He could see at a great distance, and also quite close; the first aided him in catching the general expression, and the other in communicating those finer touches, those almost half invisible lines to his finished drawings and paintings, which go in the gross to make up the excellence of the likeness."

Allan Cunningham, *The Lives of the Most Eminent British Painters and Sculptors, Vol. VI*, J. Murray, London, 1833, p. 268.

James A. McNeill Whistler (1834 – 1903)

"If it were a full-length portrait, he placed the canvas near his palette and his sitter in pose about four feet to the other side of the easel... He then selected two or three small brushes with handles about three feet in length, stood back around twelve feet, took a good look at both sitter and canvas, then stepping quickly forward, and, standing as far from the canvas as the long handles and his arms permitted, he began to rapidly sketch in the figure with long, firm strokes of the brush... The sketch finished, the long handled brushes were discarded and work began in earnest. With one or more, sometimes a handful of brushes, - for they would accumulate without his realising it, - he would again stand back and carefully scrutinise sitter and canvas until it seemed as if - and no doubt it was so - he transferred a visual impression of the subject to the canvas and fixed it there ready to be made permanent with line and colour; then quickly, often with a run and a slide, he rushed up to the canvas and, without glancing at his sitter, vigorously painted so long as his visual image lasted, then going back the full distance he took another look, and so on day after day until the end." *

A.J. Eddy, *Recollections and Impressions of James A. McNeill Whistler*, London, 1904, pp. 233-4.

John Singer Sargent (1856 – 1925)

"To watch the head develop from the start was like the sudden lifting of a blind in a dark room... Every stage was a revelation. For one thing he put his easel directly next to the sitter so that when he walked back from it he saw the canvas and the original in the same light, at the same distance, at the same angle of vision."

The Hon. Evan Charteris, K.C. *John Sargent*, Charles Scribner's Sons, New York, 1927, p. 182.

"Sargent, when he painted the size of life, placed his canvas on a level with the model, walked back until canvas and sitter were equal before the eye, and was able to estimate the construction and values of his representation...The placing of the canvas near to, or at a given distance from the subject, so that the sitter and image can be compared together, is an essential factor of representative painting. Painters often deplore the loss of tradition, and speak with regret of the days when artists ground their own colours; but knowledge of the visual methods of the older painters, rather than of their technical practices, seems to me of equal, if not greater importance. The methods of Velazquez and Hals were not unlike Sargent's."

Sir William Rothenstein, *Men and Memories*, Faber & Faber, London, 1932, pp. 192-3.

* It should be noted that Velázquez like Gainsborough and Whistler used long-handled brushes, as recorded by Palomino in his *El Parnaso español pintoresco laureado* (1724). Referring to the *Portrait of Admiral Pulido Pareja* (p. 52), the English translation of 1739 reads: "He did it with Pencils and Brushes, which had extreme long Handles which he sometimes made use of to paint at a greater Distance, and with more Boldness: so that near-hand, one does not know what to make of it; but afar off, it is a Master-piece." Citing other works by Velázquez (p. 54), Palomino once again reiterates: "all these Portraits he drew with long-handled Pencils and Brushes, and in the strong Manner of the great Titian."