

David Martin, 01.04.1737 – 30.12.1797



Self-portrait,  
David Martin, 1760  
National Galleries Scotland

David Martin, portrait painter and engraver, was born in Anstruther Easter, Fife, the first of the five children of John Martin, the parish schoolmaster of Anstruther Easter, and his second wife, Mary Boyack. He was a pupil of the portrait painter Allan Ramsay, whom he joined on a tour of Italy in 1756–7. On his return Martin became a student at the academy in St Martin's Lane, London. As the principal draughtsman in Ramsay's studio in the 1760s he helped produce many of the coronation portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte.

Martin was a well-respected engraver and produced both portrait and some landscape works. By 1770, he had his own studio and had painted his first self-portrait depicting himself with clear fair skin and wavy ginger hair. His aquiline nose and small red lips were characteristics that dominated his later self-portraits. On 20 July 1771 he married Ann Hill; they had three children, all of whom died in infancy. Martin contributed works to the exhibitions of the Incorporated Society of Artists from 1765 to 1777 and was elected to the positions of Treasurer, Vice-President, and President between 1772 and 1777. He also exhibited portraits at the Free Society of Artists in 1767 and at the Royal Academy in 1779 and 1790.

Martin produced more than 300 portraits, including the famous painting of Benjamin Franklin which hangs in the White House, Washington. His most influential works depict members of the Scottish Enlightenment, notably the philosopher David Hume and the chemist Joseph Black. He portrayed his sitters with integrity in an honest natural style, thereby consolidating a recognizably Scottish tradition of portraiture. His female studio style is epitomized in the portrait of the Hon. Barbara Gray.

In 1780, upon settling in Edinburgh, Martin was admitted to the Royal Company of Archers. In a rare full-length portrait, he painted the president of the company, Sir James Pringle of Stichill. In 1785, he was appointed principal painter to the prince of Wales in Scotland. Martin died at his home, 4 St James Square, Edinburgh, and was buried on 3 January 1798 in Leith South churchyard. The contents of his home and studio were sold by auction over twenty-one days in 1799.