

My Favourite Piece: The Portrait of Queen Charlotte

By Sadie Pitcher



Queen Charlotte (1744-1818), Studio of Johan Zoffany (1733-1810), Oil on canvas, about 1766

When wandering through the gallery during my volunteering hours, this portrait of Queen Charlotte always catches my eye. Perhaps it is the assured eye contact that Queen Charlotte commands or the elegant details of her flowing dress, but I am always captivated.

This painting is my favourite piece from the collection because of the elegant and detailed way the dress, with its lace and floral details, are painted.

I also love the painting for its contrasting colour pallet of bright blues and muted reds. These details are what drew me to the painting before I knew the interesting story of the sitter. Once I had researched a little about Queen Charlotte and her story it became a firm favourite.

This painting is a framed oil painting of Queen Charlotte from the studio of Johan Zoffany from around 1766. Sophia Charlotte was Queen of Great Britain and Ireland as the wife of King George III from 1761 until her death in 1818. When this portrait was painted, she was in her early twenties and already the mother of four children, going on to have fifteen children in total. This portrait was painted by Johan Zoffany, a German neoclassical painter. Zoffany held the patronage of Queen Charlotte, who was a keen patron of the arts. Neoclassicism drew inspiration from the art and culture of antiquity after the discovery of Roman ruins in Pompeii and the publication of an influential history of ancient art in 1764 by German scholar Winckelmann.

Specifically, neoclassical painting revived an interest in symmetry and simplicity. While Queen Charlotte's dress is anything but simple, the muted background contrasts to the blue elegance of the dress. The simple composition of the portrait, with Charlotte centrally placed, also adheres to this style of neoclassical painting. The precise definition of Charlotte's dress and the delicate rendering of her features and hands is also a feature of neoclassical painting. Charlotte is dressed in silk, silver and lace and her hair is dressed in the French style of the time, elegantly bound. One of her gloves is removed to reveal a miniature portrait of her husband. Portrait miniatures were often given as tokens of love and

sometimes exchanged during marriage negotiations. By the 18th century miniatures were often worn as jewellery, as seen here with the portrait set into a delicate pearl bracelet. Portrait miniatures were also worn as necklaces or rings. This show of intimacy and love towards her husband is a purposeful declaration with the decision to reveal it with the removal of the glove. This portrays Charlotte as a woman of elegance, taste and a devoted wife and Queen.

This taste extends to the Queen's love of music. Queen Charlotte and her husband were connoisseurs of music, loving the work of composers such as Handel and Mozart. Mozart's Opus 3 was dedicated to the Queen when it was published in 1765. The Queen was also an amateur botanist and founder of Kew Gardens.

With the recent releasing of *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* on Netflix on the 4th May, famously filmed at the Holburne, the discussion of whether Queen Charlotte was the first black Queen is of even more interest. In an article for *The Guardian*, Stuart Jeffries discusses different historical opinions on the subject. Historian Mario de Valdes y Cocom argues that her features were conspicuously African, and further claims that she was directly descended from a black branch of the Portuguese Royal Family. Many historians are sceptical about this theory, however, arguing that the ["generational distance between Charlotte and her presumed Africa forbear is so great as to make the suggestion ridiculous."](#) Nevertheless, the new series of *Bridgerton* centres on the story of Queen Charlotte who is based on the real-life wife of King George III and played by Golda Rosheuvel. The young Queen Charlotte is played by India Ria Amarteifio. As Meilan Solly writes the show ["takes substantial liberties with the historical record, portraying Charlotte as a black woman whose marriage opened doors for people of colour in 18th-century England."](#) *Bridgerton* is a Shondaland production, headed by Shonda Rhimes. Shondaland's shows frequently centre strong but complex black female characters including *Bridgerton*, *How to Get Away with Murder* and *Scandal*. *Queen Charlotte: A Bridgerton Story* chronicles how the young queen ascended the throne and married King George III. Showrunner Chris Van Dusen explains that the ["show is for a modern audience, featuring modern themes and characters, so we took liberties in our re-imagining. Our take on race in the series is an example of how we mixed history within a fictional world."](#)



The life of Queen Charlotte, the debates about her black ancestry and her connection with her husband through the arts and nature are deeply fascinating. Her captivating look within this portrait invites the viewer to speculate about her life, interests, and story. While we will never truly know her ancestry or feelings, this portrait affords us a glimpse into her position as a curious, artistic, and loving mother, wife, and Queen.

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