

**Newton's Iconic Portrait Commissioned by Newton  
Himself Two Years After the Publication of his  
*Principia*, 1687**

**"The most impressive of all the Newton portraits" -  
Gjertsen, *The Newton Handbook*, 1986**

**Sir Geoffrey Kneller, Portrait of Sir Isaac Newton  
at 47 years old, half length, wearing a brown  
cloak, leaning on a ledge, ca. 1689.**

*Medium:* Oil on canvas.

*Dimensions:* [89.5 x 68.5 cm/35 1/4 x 27 inches]

*Frame:* Original English giltwood, some chips and  
wear.

*Condition:* Excellent, skillfully lined in the back.

*Provenance:*

- (1) VISCOUNTS GALWAY, of Serlby Hall,  
Nottinghamshire, listed as purchased in 1725,  
described in article in 1867; Sold Christie's  
23 March 1979, lot 124;
- (2) CHRISTOPHER SELMES, capitalist, art-  
collector, of Cheyne Walk and Lyegrove House  
nr Badminton; his sale, Christies, 26  
September 1988, lot 332;
- (3) VERNE L. ROBERTS (1939-1007), engineer,  
inventor, book-collector (*Bibliotheca  
mechanica* 1991) of North California.
- (4) Private collector

*Exhibited:*

London, Chesterfield House, "Marlborough and the Reign of Queen Anne," March, 1934, no. 226, lent by Viscounts Galway

**THE FIRST AND MOST IMPORTANT PORTRAIT OF SIR ISAAC NEWTON.** This portrait is known as the "Portsmouth" type, depicting him at the peak of his fame two years after the publication of his monumental work *Principia Mathematica*, London, 1687. This portrait is chronologically the closest to the period of intense discovery that was to secure his fame. For a supposedly secretive and cautious man, it is surprising that Sir Isaac Newton had himself painted as often as he did. There exist at least seventeen different portrait types, of which only seven were painted for known purposes; two for book illustrations, two for the Royal Society and three commissioned by others.

According to Fara's article on this portrait, "Newton's biographers maintain that he shunned fame and was uninterested in art. This might be the appropriate behavior for a reticent genius, but the visual evidence suggests that Newton actively fashioned his public persona. The sheer number of images testifies to his concern - over 20 busts and portraits, several of them paid for by Newton himself. He put some of them on display in his London home, including an expensive ivory plaque in the dining room, where guests could admire the good taste that only comes with wealth. To impress the international community of natural philosophers, he donated a large portrait to the Royal Society, labeling it prominently in gold letters - "Sir Isaac Newton, President.""

"In 1689, when Newton visited Kneller's London studio, he was an obscure Cambridge scholar, author of an esoteric book incomprehensible to all but a

few learned mathematicians. Drawing on 17th-century artistic conventions for depicting religious anchorites, Kneller produced a picture of a melancholy recluse enclosed in a windowless cell-like study and driven to the verge of illness through obsessive reading. Promoters of science have always appreciated the power of pictures, and one of the most famous is Godfrey Kneller's *Newton*, 2 years after the *Principia* was first published. All the signs of a dedicated solitary scholar are there--the unkempt gray hair, the thin pale face, the delicate hands, and the dark robes. Modern viewers immediately recognize the world's greatest scientific genius, and some even liken this Newton to Christ Himself." - Fara

"Kneller's 1689 Newton became increasingly popular, initially in black and white and more recently in the full original colors. Gradually, it became the iconic image of a scientific genius." - Patricia Fara, "Perceptions of Science: Face values: How Portraits Win Friends and Influence People, Essays on Science and Society, *Science*, 7 February, 2003

Gale Christianson wrote of this portrait, "Two years after the publication of the *Principia* in 1687, Newton commissioned a portrait from the most fashionable painter of the day, Godfrey Kneller (1646-1723). After twenty years at Trinity College, Newton was emerging as both a Cambridge and a London celebrity, his status much enhanced by the *Principia* as well as by involvement with the Royal Society, [and] opposition to the interference of King James II (1633-1701) in Cambridge University affairs, followed by his election as MP for the university. It was Newton's desire to assert his consequence that led him to Kneller's studio. The portrait was, for 150 years, less well known than other works by Kneller, but it is now reproduced...

"The 1689 Kneller portrait gives us an apparently uncluttered Newton: plainly dressed, with a full head of his own hair, intense and abstracted, an uncompromising, rigorous and unworldly thinker - an appropriate household god for an academic community."

In sum, says Christianson, this is "the first and most appealing of the many likenesses we have of Newton, executed when the subject was at the height of his powers and poised on the threshold of international fame. The silver hair is thick and flowing, the myopic eyes somewhat protuberant but piercing, the angular chin deeply cleft, the mouth sensuous and delicately formed. The long thin fingers of the right hand, which extend from beneath an academic gown, are suggestive of a virtuoso of quite another kind, a performer of music rather than a revolutionary choreographer of matter's deterministic dance. In sum, Kneller's midlife portrait is a foreshadowing of that famous Jovian look borne by the aged Newton, who shared with Einstein **THE ASPECT OF ONE PRESENT AT THE CREATION.**"

There are two original variations of the 1689 Kneller "Portsmouth" portrait type that are known to exist, listed below. Each example is unique and are entirely by the hand of Kneller. Neither version utilizes the work of his studio.

1. The Portsmouth portrait, permanently housed in the collection of Lord Portsmouth, is smaller (30 x 35 inches) and is signed and dated 1689, and is housed in a later frame. It was considered a family portrait, as Newton kept it for the rest of his life, and upon his death, it passed to Catherine (Barton) Conduitt, his

favorite niece. She left it to her daughter Catherine, and it went into the Portsmouth collection when Catherine married the Hon. John Wallop, Viscount Lymington in 1749. It has remained as part of this collection since that time. This is now know as Portsmouth version A.

The Portsmouth portrait is somber and dark in mood, and shows the early Dutch influence on Kneller, who was part of the Dutch tradition in which he studied before coming to England.

The words "ISAACUS NEWTONUS" in bold letting on the bottom left side of the painting was added sometime in the 18<sup>th</sup> century by someone unknown. This painting cannot be sold.

2. Our portrait, now known as Portsmouth version B, is also entirely by Kneller. Version B was directly compared side-by-side with Version A, and according to Kneller experts, is a newly discovered, and thus historically important original portrait of Newton, utilizing the same motif as the Portmouth version, but incorporating a different, and less somber mood through his different use of color, shading, and light, as well as head position. It is difficult to determine when version B was painted, but it would have been done within a few years of the 1689 Portsmouth version A, and prior to 1702. It was Kneller's later use of color, light, and shading, which contributed to his renowned reputation as the leading English portrait artist of the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century. Portsmouth version A is an early example of his work in color, light, and shading.

Writing in 1867, Crompton says that this painting [Portsmouth version B] was mentioned "in an old catalogue of pictures" at Serlby Hall, was acquired by John Monckton, 1<sup>st</sup> Viscount Galway, in 1725. The first Viscount is known to have collected pictures, and his papers are preserved in the University of Nottingham; however the "old catalogue" that Crompton saw has not been found. Crompton wrote of this painting, "the only portrait of Newton worthy of notice."

3. There is also a later, and "poorly executed" studio copy of the above in the collection at The Vyne, Basingstoke, Hampshire, belonging to the National Trust. This is a copy of Portsmouth version A, and is **not** in the hand of Kneller. This copy belongs to the National Trust, and can never be sold.

Kneller would subsequently paint two other portraits of Newton. The one done in 1702, probably to commemorate his appointment to the Mastership of the Mint, is also in the Portsmouth collection. This second portrait is more formal in manner.

Sir Geoffrey Kneller was the greatest master of the English baroque portrait. As Court painter to four sovereigns, he dominated English art for more than thirty years.

There has not been a contemporary portrait of Newton offered in the market for over 30 years. Unless, there is a new discovery of an unknown work, this painting will be the only one that will ever be available as the other two versions are in public trust collections. This is an historical association of the highest significance as Newton directly had this painting commissioned by Kneller

and it was no doubt given to a person or society of only the greatest rank.

See the extensive article on this portrait in Patricia Fara, "Perceptions of Science: Face Values: How Portraits Win Friends and Influence People, *Essays on Science and Society*, *Science*, 7 February, 2003

For a hyperlink to this article:

<http://www.sciencemag.org/cgi/content/full/299/5608/831>

Samuel Crompton, "On the portraits of Sir Isaac Newton, and particularly on one of him by Kneller, painted about the time of the publication of the *Principia*, and representing him as he was in the prime of line," *Proceedings of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester*, vi, (1866) pp. 1-7

Samuel Crompton, "The *Chemical News and Journal of Physical Science*," xvi (1867), pp. 205-206

Gale Christianson, *In the Presence of the Creator: Isaac Newton and His Times*, 1984, p. 329 emphasis added.

W. Milo Keynes, *The Iconography of Sir Isaac Newton to 1800* (2005), no II-4 (this copy)

J. Douglas Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller and the English Baroque Portrait* (1983) 82-83 and no. 528

Richard Westfall, *Never at Rest: A Biography of Isaac Newton* (1980, 1993) p. 482