

A new portrait of Jane Austen

A new portrait of Jane Austen introduced by Melissa Dring



Melissa Dring was trained at the Royal Academy Schools, London as a portrait painter, and as a Police Forensic artist by the FBI in Washington, USA. She is a member of The Pastel Society UK, showing her work in the annual spring

exhibition at the Mall Galleries, London. She has a B.Sc. Hons. in the Psychology of Facial Identification and works freelance for police forces throughout Britain. She has also worked as a courtroom artist for TV news programmes.

She was commissioned by David Baldock, the Director of the Jane Austen Centre, Bath, to produce a new portrait of the author, as she might have appeared during her time in Bath, 1801-06.

Combining the insights of the professional portrait painter with those of the police forensic artist, Melissa was uniquely qualified to accept this challenge.

David Baldock had heard of her work on a speculative likeness of the Venetian composer Antonio Vivaldi. A film producer, wanting a likeness to use as a casting aid for a proposed film biography of the composer, and feeling it was a job for a forensic artist, had approached Scotland Yard, who recommended Melissa.

The difficulty with both commissions was their shared lack of reliable contemporary portraiture, although a wealth of written eye-witness accounts survive in both cases.

My new speculative likeness of Jane Austen fills the gap left by the paucity of authenticated representations of the author. As I hope it will come to be accepted as a good portrait of her, despite being made 185 years after her death, I will describe the research and working methods I used, so that it can be seen how it is based almost entirely on solid fact, and how little guesswork was needed.

There is a tiny pencil and watercolour sketch of her, in the National Portrait Gallery in London, by her amateur artist elder sister, Cassandra, and a steel engraving made from it years later, which attempts to soften Cassandra's dour account, but according to one observer, Jane's face was never so broad and plump. Cassandra, somewhat unhelpfully, also painted a back view of Jane, and there are two silhouettes, so popular in her day, one of which is said to be a self portrait. Tantalisingly, there are no other undisputed likenesses of Jane.



The most familiar image of Jane is that painted by Cassandra around 1810 when Jane would have been 34 or 35. It is a watercolour sketch and was thought by the family not to be a very accurate or flattering likeness. Jane's niece Anna called the portrait '...so hideously unlike...'

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The Austen family look: bright eyes, long nose, small narrow mouth. Top left: The Rev. George Austen Above left: Mrs. Austen silhouette Centre right: Francis Austen Below right: Henry Austen.

Above right: Blue spotted C19th muslin dress and (below) house cap, Courtesy of Althea MacKenzie the curator of Berrington Hall in Herfordshire NT

We have her parent's portraits and all but one of her siblings, including no less than three quite good portraits of her young brother, Francis, of whom an interesting daguerrotype also exists, showing him as an old man.

The natural starting point, then, had to be Cassandra's sketch, which I reversed, as I decided to have Jane looking the other way, and also I needed to make her look a few years younger. Cassandra drew Jane at 35, and I had to make her aged 26-31, during her years in Bath. Above all, though, I wanted to bring out something of Jane's lively and humorous character, so evident in her novels and all contemporary accounts of her.

Cassandra's drawing may have been quite like Jane physically, but has failed to catch her sparkle.

I have given Jane the Austen family look which all her siblings shared, the bright eyes, long nose, small, narrow mouth. She has the brown curly hair, so like her father's at her age, also his hazel eyes, small mouth, the family nose and healthy complexion. A nephew described her as a clear brunette with a



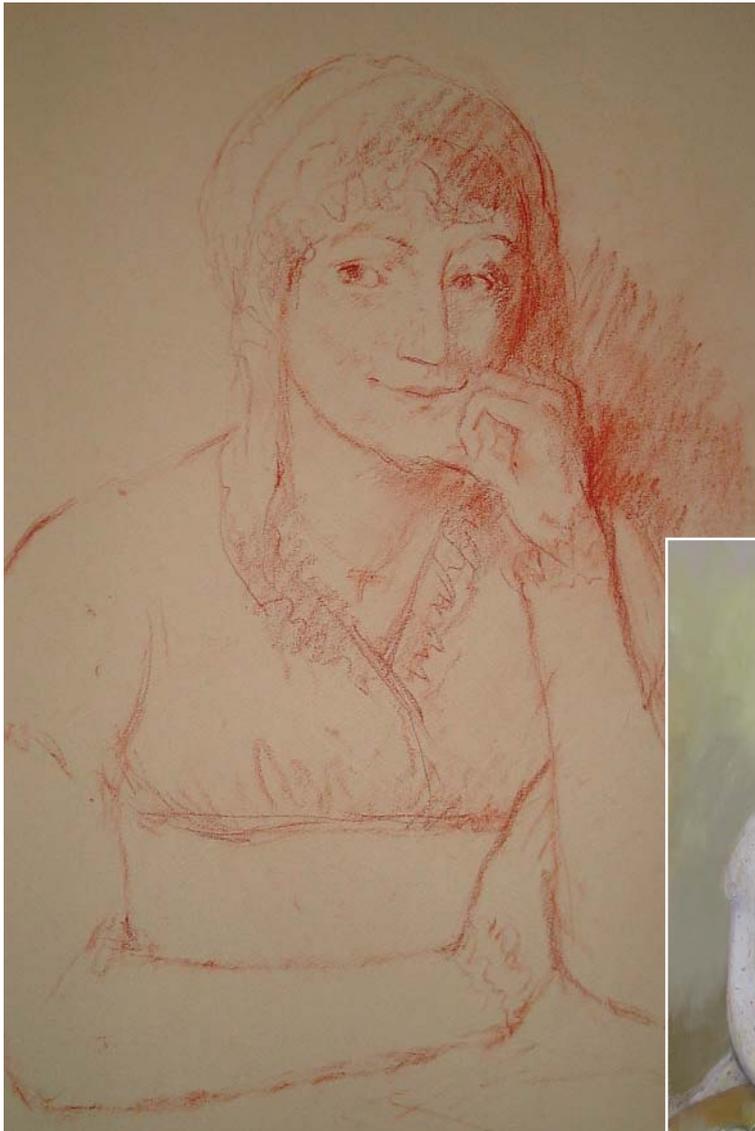
"In person she was very attractive; her figure was rather tall and slender, her step light and firm, and her whole appearance expressive of health and animation. In complexion she was a clear brunette with a rich colour; she had full round cheeks, with mouth and nose small and well-formed, bright hazel eyes, and brown hair forming natural curls close round her face."

James-Edward Austen Nephew.



rich colour, and another observed her doll-like rosy cheeks. Incidentally, at this point in Bath, Jane was still mercifully years away from the onset of the Addison's disease which eventually killed her. The skin discolouration which she suffered as one of its symptoms can be completely eliminated from the equation. Her brother Henry wrote that she had true elegance, so I am convinced she held herself well, with slim upright posture, though this was unkindly referred to as poker-like by one acquaintance.





Detail of Jane Austen's quill pen

Creating the likeness

Top left: Initial sketch

Top right: Adding the colouring

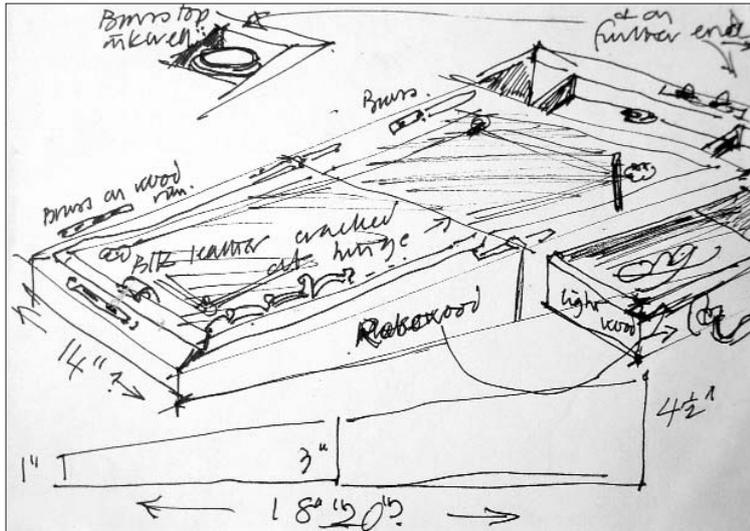
Centre right: The finished portrait

The verifiable elements of the portrait, the costume, desk and writing equipment are all authentic. The cap was, as Sue Ralph of Bath's own Museum of Costume told me, "essential undress wear" and it is known that Jane was rather old-fashioned in her ways. Austen Leigh recalls Jane at Chawton in 1808, saying that "she was never seen, either morning or afternoon, without a cap". He also thought that both Jane and Cassandra had "taken to the garb of middle age earlier than their years or looks required". This sounds a touch old-maidish, and yet Jane took a keen interest in fashion, writing to her sister for instance, whilst on a visit to their brother Henry in London that she had "watched for veils as they drove through the streets, and had the pleasure of seeing several upon vulgar heads!"

The precise type of cap and the pattern for the style of muslin dress, fashionable at the time, I found at Berrington Hall in Herefordshire with

the kind help of Althea MacKenzie, the curator of the National Trust's collection of costumes housed there. In a darkened room, she opened box after box of fragile C19th dresses for me to see, all of the right period for Jane's time in Bath. I chose a blue spotted muslin dress because I wanted one that I could adapt easily to Jane's own choice of fabric, detailed in another of her letters to Cassandra, "I was tempted by a pretty coloured muslin and bought ten yards of it, but at the same time, if it should not suit you, you must not think yourself at all obliged to take it, the pattern is a small red spot". Althea also advised me about the style of corsetry Jane would have worn to give her the right degree of, literally, straight-lacedness and ramped up bosom so typical of her times.

The topaz cross on the gold chain can be seen at Chawton, and was one of a pair that the youngest of the naval brothers, Charles, bought for his sis-



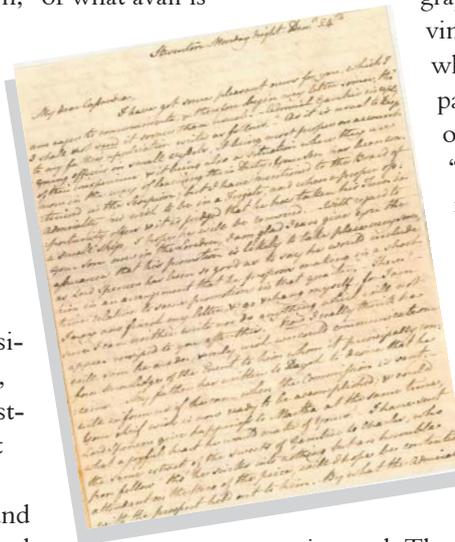
Research drawing of Jane Austen's writing slope from the British Library

Opposite: Letter to Cassandra: 'She was "an obsessive compulsive" from the "extreme connection of her writing", and had a "preoccupation to safeguard secrets" ... Graphologist Patricia Field on Jane's handwriting.

ters with his prize money after taking part as lieutenant on the 'Endymion' in a successful engagement with a privateer 'La Furie'. Jane wrote to thank and scold him, telling him, "of what avail is it to take prizes, if he lays out the produce in presents for his sisters?", adding that they would be now "unbearably fine!"

The portrait shows Jane at the time she lived and worked in Bath, suffused with a gentle ambient glow of pale golden Bath stone. The lighting is classical eighteenth century; indoors, mellow, lit from top left, suggesting a tall Georgian window just out of sight to her side.

Poised at her desk, her pen and spectacles to hand, this is Jane in her writing environment. The actual mahogany slope she always used is in the Treasures Gallery in the British Library, where I was able to make sketches and calculate measurements. It was fascinating to see, not only her spectacles in the half open draw-



er, but where she had evidently absent-mindedly stabbed her pen at the inkwell, and missed, leaving multiple tiny inky holes in the wood beside it.

The Victoria and Albert Museum helpfully supplied the information that steel pens were not invented until 1839, so of course Jane wrote with a quill. It would most probably have been a goose feather, with all unnecessary fletching stripped away. Jane wrote on small loose sheets of paper and would hastily hide them if anyone approached. Which brings us on to discussing her character,

an understanding of which is so vital for a lifelike portrait.

She was a very private, secretive person. The graphologist, Patricia Field, is convinced she had "a reclusive nature which she deduces from the tight page filling, and that she was "an obsessive compulsive" from the "extreme connection of her writing", and had a "preoccupation to safeguard secrets", using her "wit and wisdom" as weapons for her self-protection. Jane was also extremely practical, apparently giving instructions that the squeaky door beyond which she customarily sat writing, should never be oiled.

She was a romantic, but not at all sentimental. There was an earthy, unsqueamish realism about Georgian England, and the George on the throne was 'Farmer George', and Jane herself knew all about killing the family pig, brewing beer, and her nieces' fleas, all mentioned in her letters.

"..her's was the first face that I can remember thinking pretty..."

"Her hair, a darkish brown, curled naturally- it was in short curls round her face."

"Her face was rather round than long- she had a bright, but not a pink colour- a clear brown complexion and very good hazel eyes-"

" ...before she left Steventon (The family moved on to Bath) she was established as a very pretty girl, in the opinion of most of her neighbours."

Caroline Austen - Niece

Her nephews and nieces described what fun they had with Aunt Jane and she clearly adored all her family, being particularly close to her sister.

From the start, though it was a slow and difficult process, I have tried to take all this into consideration and to incorporate all the relevant threads of the story into one whole. Her expression is therefore a complex one, of delightful, private amusement. She is going to poke fun at some pomposity somewhere, or she's planning to send Marianne off with Willoughby or some other deliciously mischievous plot. She is still, but underneath that cap she is seething with ideas, although she has also a serene, dreamy, inward looking quality. Jane's was not a loud voice, and this is a quiet little picture, but it has strength, like hers, and is subtle and complex.

As to the authenticity of the detail, everything that could be verifiable, I have researched and used. It only seemed appropriate, for after all, Jane herself went to great lengths to ensure all her details were accurate, even asking, for instance, "if there were hedgerows in Northampton", when researching *Mansfield Park*. She was also a keen art gallery visitor, searching along Pall Mall and in

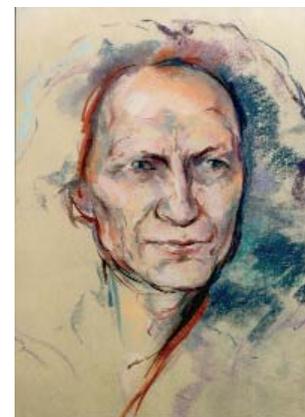
"..certainly pretty-bright & a good deal of colour in her face-like a doll-no that would not give at all the idea for she had so much expression- she was like a child - quite a child very lively & full of humour."

Mr. Fowle Family friend

Spring Gardens for portraits that could be models for her own characters, saying of one, triumphantly, "I was very well pleased, particularly, with a small portrait of Mrs Bingley," saying it was "excessively like her."

Well, let's hope that this portrait would meet with her approval too. I've done my best to please her.

We cannot ever know exactly what she looked like, and the likeness has to remain, in part speculative, but I feel that there's a distinctly sporting chance that I can't be too far wrong. 🍷



Melissa Dring's portrait of Vivaldi, commissioned as a casting aid for a proposed film biography of the composer.

The black and white portrait seen so often is actually an adaptation of Cassandra's 1810 portrait. It is a steel-engraved portrait by the famous engraver Lizars taken from a likeness drawn by a Mr Andrews of Maidenhead. It was originally used as a frontispiece to 'A Memoir of Jane Austen' by her nephew James Edward Austen-Leigh, published in 1870 by Richard Bentley.

The artist has evidently tried to enhance Jane's features, but the finished article bears little resemblance to Cassandra's sketch and does not give the impression of a 35 year old woman.