

Images of Sarah Siddons

Images of Sarah Siddons is a display of portraits of the greatest actress of the eighteenth century.

**It is showing
3 Dec 2007 – 29 Feb 2008 at:
Level 1 Foyer, Department of Drama,
21 Park Row, Bristol
10am - 3pm, Monday – Friday**

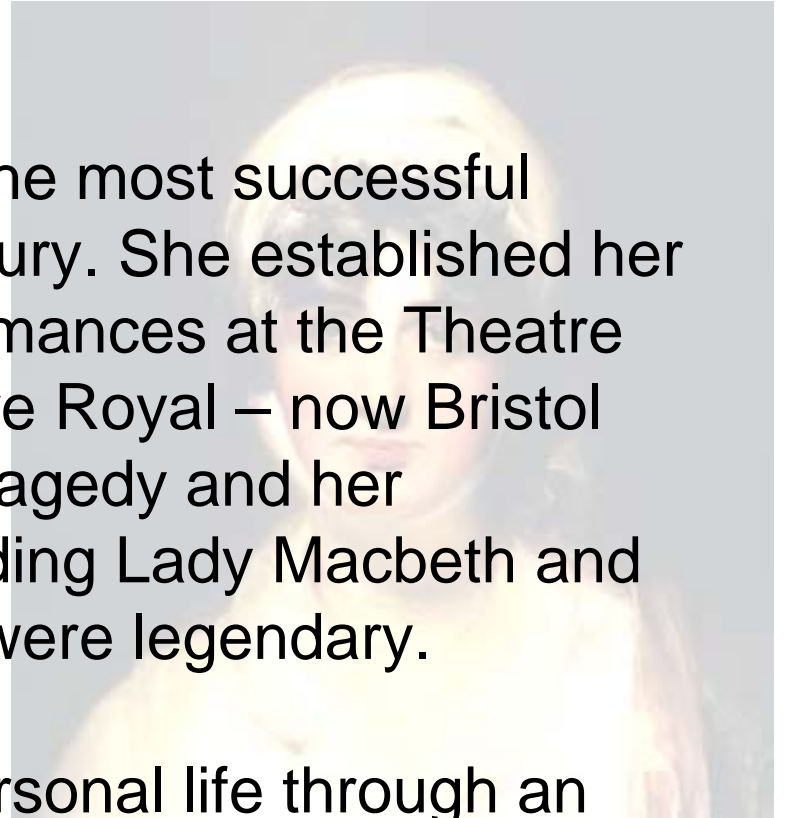
This online resource contains images of a selection of the artworks on display, with the captions that accompanied them.



The Life of a Legend

Sarah Siddons (1755-1831) was the most successful actress of the late eighteenth century. She established her reputation with outstanding performances at the Theatre Royal in Bath, and Bristol's Theatre Royal – now Bristol Old Vic. She excelled in roles of tragedy and her interpretations of characters including Lady Macbeth and Isabella from *The Fatal Marriage* were legendary.

Siddons suffered greatly in her personal life through an unhappy marriage and the premature death of five of her seven children. She channelled her sorrow into acting, resulting in performances of a unique emotional intensity. Audiences delighted in Siddons' power to move them. As she reduced them to tears and induced fainting and hysteria, tickets to see her became increasingly desired.



Portraiture and Celebrity

The notion of celebrity was yet to develop during the eighteenth century, and Siddons set a precedent with the level of fame she achieved. Portraiture played an integral role in elevating her to iconic status. Artworks immortalised the actress in her most popular roles at the dramatic climaxes of the plays. Siddons' image therefore became more widely known and her reputation as the greatest tragic actress of the time was reinforced. She became the choice subject for portrait artists keen to raise their own profile through the association.

Images of Sarah Siddons

This exhibition is an opportunity to explore a selection of the Theatre Collection's diverse range of portraits of Sarah Siddons, on display together for the first time. The Theatre Collection holds more than sixty items relating to Sarah Siddons. Visitors can browse the collection catalogue at the Theatre Collection website, and are welcome to make an appointment to view further artworks. This exhibition was curated by volunteers Anna Fineman and Narell Thomas.



Throughout this exhibition we have chosen to refer to Sarah Siddons as an 'actress,' as this is the term she used to describe herself. Today, the term 'actor' is more generally used for both women and men.

Sarah Siddons as Isabella from the *Tragedy of Isabella* or *The Fatal Marriage* by Thomas Southerne (adapted by David Garrick)

William Hamilton (1751-1801)

Oil on canvas, c.1785

Mrs Sarah Siddons and her son in the *Tragedy of Isabella*

Print of engraving by James Caldwell (1739-floruit 1789) after William Hamilton (1751-1801)

1784.

Sarah Siddons marked a triumphant return to London with her performance as Isabella, having received critical acclaim performing in Bath and Bristol.

Sarah Siddons established her reputation as the greatest tragic actress of her time at theatres in Bath and Bristol. On her return to the London stage she appeared as Isabella in *The Tragedy of Isabella* or *The Fatal Marriage*. She gave a highly moving performance, made all the more poignant by appearing with her own son in the part of Isabella's little boy, confusing reality with fiction. William Hamilton's dramatic portrait of the pair served as a reminder of the powerful performance. The popularity of the portrait was such that Hamilton painted further versions of it, while James Caldwell made an engraving of it (a print of which is displayed nearby). It is currently unknown whether this painting was originally part of a double portrait of Siddons and her son.



Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse

Print of engraving by H. Dawe after Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)

Published 1827

Joshua Reynolds' painting of Sarah Siddons as the Tragic Muse is the best known image of Siddons. The portrait was instrumental in the careers of both the artist and the actress.

Joshua Reynolds was the leading portrait painter of the eighteenth century. A shrewd networker, he often made and used acquaintances to his own advantage. Following a poorly received exhibition of his work in 1782, Reynolds strategically decided to paint renowned actress Sarah Siddons, to elevate his status. The work was deemed to evoke the very essence of tragedy. It successfully secured both Reynolds' and Siddons' reputations. Reproductions through engravings such as this have ensured it remains the best known image of Siddons.



Mrs Siddons, possibly as Mrs Haller in *The Stranger*

Thomas Lawrence (1769-1830)

Oil on canvas, c. 1797

Thomas Lawrence was intimately acquainted with Sarah Siddons and her family. His portraits may therefore provide insight into the 'real' Siddons, rather than Siddons in character.

When Sarah Siddons first met Thomas Lawrence in Bath in 1777 she could not have anticipated the great effect the future painter was to have on her family's life. A decade later the charismatic Lawrence arrived in London and began consecutive relationships with two of Siddons' daughters. Meanwhile Siddons had feelings of her own for the alluring young man. Tragically, both daughters died young. Siddons maintained an intimate friendship with Lawrence and he painted many portraits of her. Lawrence's painting possibly depicts Siddons in the role of adulteress Mrs Haller in *The Stranger*, and captures a sadness which may well reveal Siddons' personal feelings.



Mrs Siddons as Euphrasia in the *The Grecian Daughter*

Print of an engraving by James Caldwell (1739-floruit 1789) after William Hamilton (1751-1801)

c.1780

Sarah Siddons' dynamic debut performance as Euphrasia elicited "sobs and shrieks" from the audience. Conversely Hamilton's portrait depicts the actress posed and static.

This statuesque portrait of Siddons as Euphrasia in *The Grecian Daughter* portrays the actress in an idealised pose. Siddons' performances were rather more passionate than this depiction reveals.

Hamilton's decision to paint Siddons was based on his need to attract patronage. He anticipated that associating himself with the famous actress would draw custom. Hamilton's partnership with engraver John Caldwell allowed for a wider distribution of the image.



Mrs Siddons as Lady Macbeth

Coloured print of engraving by Robert Cooper after George Henry Harlow (1787-1819)

Published 1822

“Siddons’ Lady Macbeth continues to be regarded as the one against which all later interpretations have been judged.” Robert Shaughnessy (2006)

Lady Macbeth is a role synonymous with Sarah Siddons. The actress’s empathetic portrayal of the tragic character astounded audiences. Siddons gave the final performance of her career as Lady Macbeth at Covent Garden in 1812. Her original interpretation of the part included the unusual act of setting down her candle during the sleepwalking scene, in order to focus on the washing of her hands. It is this moment that George Henry Harlow captured in his painting of Siddons, a print of which is displayed here from an engraving by Robert Cooper. Prints such as these increased exposure of Siddons’ image, contributing to her iconic status.



'Mrs Siddons, Old Kemble, and Henderson, rehearsing in the Green Room'

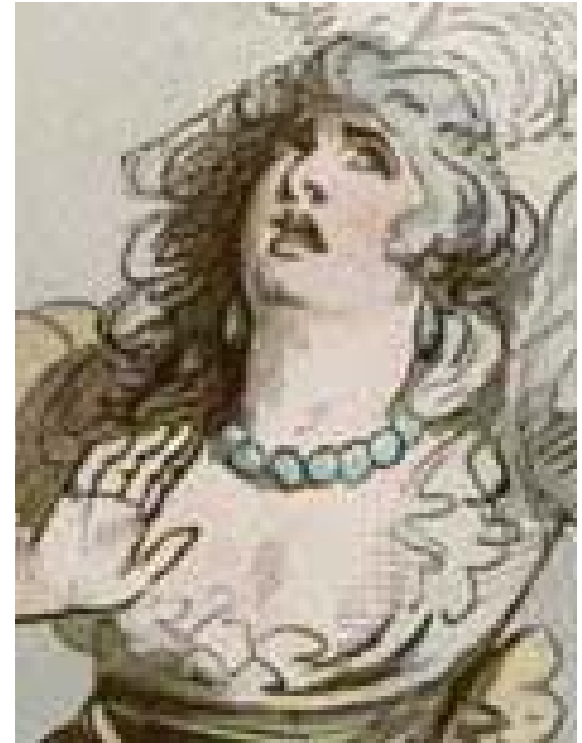
Thomas Rowlandson (1756 – 1827)

Coloured print, 1789

Siddons played tragic roles with such conviction that her audiences frequently became frenzied with emotion.

Siddons empathised with the tragic characters she played to the extreme that her acting became an outlet for her personal sorrows. Such charged and genuine performances were known to arouse an unprecedented level of emotional response in theatre audiences. Hysterical weeping and fainting fits were common occurrences.

Rowlandson has captured Siddons in a contrived dramatic stance. Although such an acting style was popular during the eighteenth century, Siddons was not disposed to holding such poses. Rather, she moved more fluidly with rapid changes in posture and facial expression.



Sarah Siddons in *Pizarro*

Robert Dighton (1752-1814)

Coloured etching, 1799

Siddons often played the parts of ‘broken women,’ but would instil them with a sense of dignity.

Sarah Siddons formed part of the original cast of Richard Brinsley Sheridan’s *Pizarro*, playing Pizarro’s mistress Elvira.

By the opening night the playwright was still editing the script, and so the actors did not have their lines for the final act. Despite this disappointing premiere, popularity of the play grew and Siddons talent for tragedy was further consolidated. This etching of a watercolour, both by Robert Dighton, portrays Siddons in character as Elvira. Through her pose she appears dignified and authoritative, in spite of her character’s vulnerable position.

