Birkbeck UNIVERSITY OF LONDON

BIROn - Birkbeck Institutional Research Online

Retford, Kate (2022) Des images parlantes: la sociabilité dans les conversation pieces du XVIIIe britannique [Talking pictures: sociability in the Eighteenth-Century British conversation piece]. In: Alayrac-Fielding, V. and Mesplède, S. (eds.) Les Réseaux de sociabilité dans la culture des Lumières : Circulations, échanges et transferts. Transversales VIII. Paris, France: Le Manuscrit. ISBN 9782304053531.

Downloaded from: https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/id/eprint/50353/

*Usage Guidelines:*
Please refer to usage guidelines at https://eprints.bbk.ac.uk/policies.html or alternatively contact lib-eprints@bbk.ac.uk.

# Talking Pictures: Sociability in the Eighteenth-Century British Conversation Piece

Kate Retford, Birkbeck, University of London

# I

The 'conversation piece' is a fraught artistic category. Not only is this a term which has evolved considerably over the centuries, but, furthermore, modern scholars have produced rival checklists, in which criteria are disputed.[1] While it can embrace works of genre, my concern here is with the particular tradition of small group portraiture which rose to fashionable prominence in England in the 1730s, exemplified by Charles Philips's *A Tea Party at Lord Harrington's* (fig. 1). Of immediate note is the modest scale of this portrait. Philips's *Tea Party* is only around a metre high, but the amount of space traditionally employed for a half-length single portrait has been used to cram in a total of eighteen figures. Furthermore, similarly characteristic of these images, there is a compelling tension here between an apparent sense of posing, of staging, and the conceit that these figures have been caught engaged in their typical genteel pastimes. Two

[1] This essay comes from material in RETFORD, Kate, 2017. *The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press. For these issues of definition, see my introduction, pp. 7-8, 12-26. For an example of an attempt to pin down and define the genre, see PRAZ, Mario, 1971. *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America*, London, Methuen, pp. 34-7.

of the tables facilitate card games, while Mary Chamber presides over a tea table at the left. However, these figures are set a little way back into the picture, and are confined within a narrow band of the composition. In fact, they occupy around only a third of the pictorial space. The rest of the painting is devoted to the kind of meticulously rendered interior which has most commonly lain at the heart of the conversation piece's appeal.[2]

There has been a substantial tradition of thinking about such conversation pieces as, to quote one recent exhibition catalogue, 'peculiarly English'.[3] This can be traced back to a flurry of renewed interest in this mode of portraiture in England in the early twentieth century.[4] In the interwar period, these pictures attracted favourable attention for their perceived 'homely', 'domestic', and 'informal' qualities, understood as expressive of 'English reserve and subordination'.[5] In a period in which the avant-garde was the abstract, some critics bucked against the innovations of artists such as Ben Nicholson by arguing that English artists

---

[2] See texts such as THORNTON, Peter, 1984. *Authentic Décor: The Domestic Interior 1620-1920*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson; SAUMAREZ SMITH, Charles, 1993. *Eighteenth-Century Decoration: Design and the Domestic Interior in England*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson. For a discussion of such literature, see AYNSLEY, Jeremy and GRANT, Charlotte, eds, 2006. *Imagined Interiors: Representing the Domestic Interior since the Renaissance*, London, V&A Publications, pp. 11-12.

[3] SHAWE-TAYLOR, Desmond, 2009. *The Conversation Piece: Scenes from Fashionable Life*, London, Royal Collection, p. 7.

[4] The key moment was Sir Philip Sassoon's 1930 exhibition: SASSOON, Sir Philip, 1930. *Loan Exhibition of English Conversation Pieces in aid of the Royal Northern Hospital at 25 Park Lane, March 4th to 30th (inclusive) 1930*, London, s.n.. For an example of the substantial critical response, see WILLIAMSON, George C., 1930. « Conversation Pieces now at Sir Philip Sassoon's House in aid of the Royal Northern Hospital », *Apollo*, vol. 11, pp. 163-70.

[5] *The Times*, 12 March 1930; GRUNDY, C. Reginald, 1930. « 'Conversation Pieces' in Park Lane », *Connoisseur*, vol 85, p. 193; SITWELL, Sacheverell, 1936. *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of English Domestic Portraits and their Painters*, London, B. T. Batsford, pp. 36, 37.

had always been at their best when thus engaged with realism, and the anecdotal.[6] But, above all, this identification of the conversation piece as expressive of the English national character was embedded in these portraits' content: in the typically meticulous depiction of embroidered Georgian waistcoats and silk dresses with lace aprons; in the elaborate recreation of the forms, colours and textures of eighteenth-century luxury goods; in the union of sitters through modish pastimes such as card playing and tea drinking. This is George Williamson, for example, writing on the conversation piece in 1931: 'We can almost hear the tinkling notes of the harpsichord and watch the graceful steps of the minuet and pavane, see the Easter bird fluttering in its curious cage and the children in their long dresses at play.'[7]

But this tradition of small group portraiture was *not*, of course, 'peculiarly English' - or even peculiarly British. This is richly evident in the most important textual source for the process by which it became suddenly and extensively popular in early eighteenth-century England: the notebooks of George Vertue, artist, antiquarian, and prolific commentator on the art world of the day.[8] Vertue starts writing about 'conversations' in the early 1720s, when he uses the term to describe low genre paintings by immigrant Netherlandish artists: Marcellus Laroon and Egbert van Heemskerk.[9] He mentions 'small figures in Oyl of Conversations' by Pieter Angellis, another émigré artist, from Flanders, who

---

[6] *The Times,* 4 March 1930.

[7] WILLIAMSON, George C., 1931. *English Conversation Pictures of the Eighteenth and early Nineteenth Centuries*, London, B. T. Batsford, p. 2.

[8] A selection of these were published by the *Walpole Society* in the first half of the twentieth century: « Vertue I » (vol. 18, 1929-30); « Vertue II » (vol. 20, 1931-2); « Vertue III » (vol. 22, 1933-4); « Vertue IV » (vol. 24, 1935-6); « Vertue V » (vol. 26, 1937-8); « Vertue VI » (vol. 30, 1948-50). For Vertue, see BIGNAMINI, Ilaria, 1988. « George Vertue, Art Historian, and Art Institutions in London, 1689-1768 », *Walpole Society*, vol. 54, pp. 2-18.

[9] « Vertue I », pp. 105, 147; « Vertue II », pp. 128-9.

specialised in 'merry companies', and he records the presence of 'two … Conversations' 'by … Watteaux' in the collection of Dr Richard Mead in London.[10] The key moment, however, comes at the very end of the 1720s, when the occasional use of the term 'conversation' in Vertue's notebooks becomes a profusion and, alongside continuing use of the label to describe high and low genre groups by the likes of Angellis and Laroon, he also starts to use it for a new kind of small group portrait – the art form with which it is now most commonly associated.

Vertue comments on the work of Charles Philips, for example, noting his 'small figures portraits & conversations has met with great encouragement amongst People of fashion'.[11] He writes about Gawen Hamilton, and how his 'paintings of Conversations small figures are agreeable & much variety & correctnes of mode & manner of the time & habits'.[12] Above all, however, Vertue describes the work of William Hogarth: 'The daily success of Mr Hogarth in painting small family peices & Conversations with so much Air & agreeableness Causes him to be much followd, & esteemed. whereby he has much imployment & like to be a master of great reputation in that way.'[13]

However, crucially, Vertue still places this new English production of small group portraiture in a broader, European artistic tradition. Most notably, in his obituary of Gawen Hamilton, penned in 1737, he questions whether these modish little portraits will seem outdated to the eyes of future viewers. He leaves the question open – 'time will discover' the answer – but he does note: 'we still like many of those conversations done above a hundred years ago – by Teniers Brower Breugil Watteau and some of those flemish Masters

[10] « Vertue III », pp. 16, 23.
[11] « Vertue III », p. 54.
[12] « Vertue III », p. 71.
[13] « Vertue III », p. 40.

of the Schoolars of Rubens [and] Vandyke.'[14] We have, here, a notably wide range of European models for this new sub-genre of British portraiture, from low-life tavern scenes through to elegant *tableaux de mode*, those Flemish scenes of elegant companies which were so vital for Antoine Watteau's art.[15]

By 1730, these European artistic models had been available in England for some time, their circulation facilitated by the travel and migration of artists and the expansion of the print trade. Artists such as Gonzales Coques and Gabriel Metsu had already produced small-scale portraits, featuring narrative and meticulously detailed settings, in the Low Countries in the mid seventeenth century. So why did the conversation piece suddenly became *the* fashionable mode of portraiture in England at the end of the 1720s ? Why did these portraits strike a chord with the foremost elite art patrons of the day: Sir Andrew Fountaine, for example, or, most significantly, Frederick, Prince of Wales?[16] What circumstances facilitated such a successful rise in popularity that a number of portraitists previously working on the scale of life shifted to the production of these paintings? Charles Philips, for example, first appears in Vertue's notebooks in 1721, but the writer later added a comment that he '*since* paints conversations'.[17] In his obituary of Gawen Hamilton, Vertue opines that the artist had been

---

[14] « Vertue III », p. 81.

[15] See the work of Elise Goodman, on Rubens and the *tableaux de mode*, including GOODMAN, Elise, 1981. *Rubens' 'Conversatie à la Mode' and the Tradition of the Love Garden*, Ann Arbor MI, University Microfilms International. See also BANKS, Oliver T., 1977. *Watteau and the North: Studies in the Dutch and Flemish Baroque influence on French Rococo Painting*, New York and London, Garland.

[16] For Fountaine, see FORD, Brinsley, 1985. «Sir Andrew Fountaine: One of the Keenest Virtuosi of his Age», *Apollo*, vol. 122, pp. 352–63. For Frederick, Prince of Wales, see the work of Kimerly Rorschach, especially RORSCHACH, Kimerly, 1989-90. «Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707-51) as Collector and Patron», *Walpole Society*, vol. 55, pp. 5-15.

[17] « Vertue I », p. 74. My italics.

'in the right *to leave* portrait painting as big as the life', in order to specialise in the conversation piece.[18]

The rise of conversation portraiture in England in the late 1720s is a complex matter, with no single, simple cause, although scholars are often still keen to make William Hogarth the hero of the hour.[19] While it certainly does seem to have been the case that his work in this branch of artistic practice were especially popular and lauded, the conditions must have been right for his particularly innovative exercises in small group portraiture to have hit the mark, and to have encouraged emulation. At the heart of those conditions lay the vitally important social practices of sociability.

This essay will articulate various ways in which newly critical practices of sociability fed into, but were also assisted by the development of the eighteenth-century conversation piece in, first England, and then Britain more generally. The first two sections will consider the conversation piece as a representation of sociable practice, considering how it engaged with both the ideals of politeness and those networks of 'friendship' which were so vital for personal, social, financial and professional interests in the period. The discussion will then turn from iconography to considering these portraits as transferred objects, circulating within those networks, sitting alongside practices such as letter writing and gift giving as a material means by which relationships could be both commemorated and stimulated. Through the conversation piece, sociable exchange could be prolonged through its embodiment in art.

### *The 'Genteel' and 'Agreeable' Art of Conversation*

---

[18] « Vertue III », p. 81. My italics.

[19] See SOLKIN, David, 1993. *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, chps 2 and 3; OGEE, Frédéric and MESLAY, Olivier, 2006. « William Hogarth and Modernity », *Hogarth*, eds Mark Hallett and Christine Riding, London, Tate, p. 26.

The first conversation portrait to receive a full commentary in Vertue's notes is Hogarth's *Wollaston Family* of 1730 (fig. 2):

> by M$^{r}$. Hogarth a large Conversation painted of Men & Women of the familyes of Woolastons & …. containing at least 18 or 20 persons. setting at Cards & Tea. &. some standing. about 3 foot hi 4 foot 1/2 long this is really a most excellent work containing the true likeness of the persons, shape aire & dress – well disposd. genteel, agreable. - & freely painted & the composition great variety & Nature…[20]

In this important passage, Vertue stresses the characteristic emphasis of the conversation piece on sociable narrative in his description of the figures '[sitting] at Cards & Tea'. He is clearly struck by the substantial number of likenesses included, facilitated by the small scale of the canvas: '*at least* 18 or 20' (actually seventeen: the host, fourteen guests and relatives, and two servants).[21] And, most importantly here, Vertue praises Hogarth's success in arranging his sitters in significant terms: 'well disposd. genteel, agreable'.

Words such as 'genteel' and 'agreeable' pepper Vertue's descriptions of conversation pieces more broadly: William Hogarth paints 'small family peices & Conversations with so much Air & agreeableness'; Gawen Hamilton's 'agreeable' figures are characterised by 'well disposd gracefull and natural easy actions…'.[22] Such descriptors resonate deeply with the language of the literature on polite conversation which flourished in England at this date. Peter Burke has sketched out three key periods for writings on 'the art of

---

[20] « Vertue III », p. 46. For this picture and Vertue's discussion of it, see Solkin, *Painting for Money*, pp. 84-95.

[21] That noted, traces of another male figure originally posed near the mantelpiece indicate that, at some point, the portrait did depict eighteen sitters.

[22] « Vertue III », pp. 40, 81.

conversation': sixteenth-century Italy; seventeenth-century France; and eighteenth-century England.[23] At the same moment as the conversation piece sprang to fashionable status in England, there was, significantly, a flurry of new publications on the hows and whys of polite conversation, joining with a plethora of reprints and translations of texts from those earlier periods. Together, they combined to create a notably repetitive set of edicts on virtues such as accommodation and *complaisance*; on the genteel 'art of pleasing' in society. And these texts are full of the same words as those used by Vertue to describe conversation portraits like *The Wollaston Family*. Pierre d'Ortigue de Vaumorierre's *Art of Pleasing in Conversation*, translated from the French in 1708, for example, notes: 'It is variety which makes any thing agreeable, an Air easie and remote from affectation'; ''tis impossible to please in Conversation, unless what is there spoken is attended with an Action free and easy, a natural Air, and I know not what Agreeableness that cant be attain'd, but in the Company of those that have it…'.[24] John Constable's *Conversation of Gentlemen*, published in 1738, deploys such language in particular abundance. In one passage, the main protagonists discuss an absent character, Timander, as the embodiment of good practice. Timander is 'extremely natural and easy in all his Actions', able to adjust

---

[23] BURKE, Peter, 1993. *The Art of Conversation*, Cambridge, Polity Press, chp. 4. See also HALSEY, Katie and SLINN, Jane, eds., 2008. *The Concept and Practice of Conversation in the Long Eighteenth Century, 1688-1748*, Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing; MEE, Jon, 2011. *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830*, Oxford, Oxford University Press; COHEN, Michèle, 1996. *Fashioning Masculinity: National Identity and Language in the Eighteenth Century*, London and New York, Routledge. I am grateful to Michèle Cohen for invaluable conversation on the art of conversation.

[24] DE VAUMORIERRE, Pierre d'Ortigue, 1708. *The Art of Pleasing in Conversation. Written by the famous Cardinal Richelieu*, London, printed for Richard Wellington, pp. 9, 15. First published as *L'Art de Plaire dans la Conversation* in France in 1688. De Vaumorierre includes a whole section, 'Entertainment XIV', on 'the Air it is fit we should have in Conversation'.

to the different requirements of society in town and country with 'Ease', and, remarkably, able to engage in the tricky practice of raillery 'in so genteel a manner' as never to offend.[25]

One issue which has often reared its head in discussions of the conversation piece is that - despite these portraits' concern with sociability, and the emphasis on narrative which at least posits some glimpse into daily life – despite the views of contemporaries like Vertue that these pictures show 'natural easy actions' – they can seem so stiff and lifeless.[26] However, this derives from a longstanding urge to view these paintings as proto-photographic, as somehow presenting a literal snapshot of sociable practice. Taken in this way, we certainly struggle to see them as showing 'natural easy' actions. However, these conversation pieces are better viewed as near *diagrammatic* visions of sociability, as 'dumb shews' displaying, above all, the forms of polite conversation, abstracted from its words and subject matter.[27] They present schematic displays of sociability, separating out the poses and gestures intended to convey appropriate sentiments from the specifics of conversational exchange which those poses and gestures were intended to frame. They image the kind of physical behaviour recommended by Constable; 'a Countenance that shews your own Satisfaction with the Company, is highly insinuating, and inclines the Persons to

---

[25] CONSTABLE, John, 1738, *The Conversation of Gentlemen considered in most of the ways that make their mutual company agreeable, or disagreeable*, London, J. Hoyles, pp. 22, 24, 29.

[26] See, for example, HAYES, John, 1983-4. « Introduction », *Polite Society by Arthur Devis, 1712-1787*, ed. Stephen Sartin, Preston, Harris Museum and Art Gallery, p. 9 and, more recently, DE BOLLA, Peter, 2003. *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape, and Architecture in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, Stanford CA, Stanford University Press, pp. 52-6.

[27] The phrase 'dumb shew' here is taken from HOGARTH, William, 1955. « The Autobiographical Notes », *The Analysis of Beauty with the Rejected Passages from the Manuscript Drafts and Autobiographical Notes*, ed. Joseph Burke, Oxford, Clarendon Press, pp. 201-31, at p. 209.

be mutually pleased with you, and themselves…'.[28] This is, to echo Mary Vidal on Watteau, conversation as 'a highly ritualized social act', as 'an aesthetic system'.[29]

This aesthetics of sociability is also to be found in contemporary etiquette manuals such as François Nivelon's *Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour* of 1737 (fig. 3).[30] The illustrations to Nivelon's text have sometimes been viewed as a source book for conversation piece artists, particularly Arthur Devis, but it is more accurate to understand both the portraits and Nivelon's engravings as underpinned by the same bodily lexicon: the physical code taught to children, disseminated by dancing masters, conveyed through various types of publication, and reinforced in the unfolding of sociable exchanges in polite gatherings.[31] The full title of Nivelon's opening discussion incorporates familiar vocabulary: 'An Introduction to the Method of attaining a graceful Attitude, an agreeable Motion, an easy Air, and a genteel Behaviour.'[32] He goes on to detail motions such as walking, standing, giving, receiving, retiring and so on at length, providing separate instructions for men and women. Crucially, Nivelon presents polite interaction, without its content, its words and its specificities. At one point in his treatise, for example, Nivelon tells his female reader that the act of 'giving' requires that she draw near enough to the recipient so as not to oblige them to move closer, but not so close as to force them to retreat. He describes the curtsies which should bracket this proffering, and he details the hand

---

[28] Constable, *Conversation of Gentlemen*, pp. 193-4.

[29] VIDAL, Mary, 1992. *Watteau's Painted Conversations: Art, Literature, and Talk in Seventeenth- and Eighteenth-Century France*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 99-100.

[30] NIVELON, François, 1737. *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour*, London, s.n..

[31] D'OENCH, Ellen G., 1980. *The Conversation Piece: Arthur Devis and his Contemporaries*, New Haven, Yale Center for British Art, pp. 16-7.

[32] Nivelon, *Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour*, introduction [unpaginated text].

movements which should be utilised. But this act is isolated from its conversational context: the giving is of an indeterminate 'Thing'.[33] Nivelon describes the physical 'shell' within which the particularities of polite conversation are to be housed, and it is this same 'shell' which we see in conversation pieces of the period.

The endlessly proffered tea cups which show hospitality and sociability, the directive gestures which guide attention, the tilted heads which reveal proper attention to interlocutors, and the restrained smiles which convey pleasure: this is a defined, repetitive, clearly signifying set of actions which emphasise the principles of accommodation and *complaisance* so vital to the 'art of pleasing', rather than suggesting anyone having an actual conversation *per se*. Furthermore, the overriding atmosphere of these groups is always one of *inclusive* sociability, as all sitters participate in the activities which have brought them together. It was a fundamental edict in texts on conversation that no-one in a company should be left out.[34] We thus typically find sitters' heads turned in a range of directions; varied profiles, carefully intermingled. These keep our gaze moving around the space and across the company, directing it one way and then another, encompassing the whole group. The visual effect has something of the sense of the ball game of familiar conversational analogy: 'We should try to keep up conversation like a ball bandied to and fro from one to the other', opined *The Connoisseur* in 1756, for example, 'rather than seize it all to ourselves, and drive it before us like a foot-ball.'[35]

---

[33] Nivelon, *Rudiments*, 'To Give or Receive'.

[34] See for example, DELLA CASA, Giovanni, 1703. *Galateo of Manners, or, Instructions to a Young Gentleman how to Behave himself in Conversation &c*, London, printed for Bernard Lintott, p. 35, but especially FIELDING, Henry, 1743. « Essay on Conversation », *Miscellanies,* 3 vols, London, A. Millar, I, p. 125ff.

[35] *The Connoisseur*, vol. 138 (16 September 1756), p. 225. See Burke, *Art of Conversation*, p. 91.

If the conversation piece was concerned with codified displays of sociable exchange – providing dumb shows expressive of the principles of eighteenth-century polite conversation, rather than the imaging of conversation itself - this still leaves the question of how Vertue could call such displays 'agreeable', 'easy' and 'natural'. The root cause is surely the crucial strain in the perennially tense concept of *sprezzatura*, the idea that one should work hard at learning the mechanisms of pleasing, and practice them, but mask all evidence of such labour: in Castiglione's words, to 'conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it'.[36] But concealing effort to create an impression of ease, achieving grace while hiding the study behind it, is far from simple. The conversation piece will always seem far from 'easy' and 'natural' to modern eyes because it presents learned codes: prescribed tilts of the head; recommended hand gestures; rules on how one should pass a cup of tea. The free flow and spontaneity of the conversational ideal pulled against the repetitiveness and regularity of prescribed conduct, and that tension was inevitably embedded in portraiture. Presumably, an individual would, ideally, become so habituated to the performance of politeness that it would become second nature. But conversation pieces feature the set, recommended poses and gestures taught by the dancing masters. They show the formula, pure and simple; the lexicon of politeness. Poses and gestures are abstracted from movement, from the progression of actual sociability, unmodified by personal proclivities and abilities.

*Networking Opportunities*

---

[36] CASTIGLIONE, Baldassare, 2002. *The Book of the Courtier* (1528), ed. Daniel Javitch, New York, Norton, p. 32. On this, see Mee, *Conversable Worlds*, pp. 2-3 and Burke, *Art of Conversation*, p. 92.

The rise of the conversation piece in late 1720s England was thus intimately linked with the culture of politeness which flourished in the period, and particularly with enhanced concern with the 'art of conversation'. The pictorial format of diminutive figures, usually around only a foot high, arrayed on small canvases, meant that large numbers of sitters could be brought together, in a way that would have been highly impractical if working on the scale of life. Elaborately described settings, and ample props provided the tools with which to demonstrate engagement with and adherence to the mechanisms of polite sociability in this era characterised by assemblies, tea parties, visiting and clubs. Furthermore, those artists at the heart of the vogue for the conversation piece were themselves rooted in this sociable world, as Gawen Hamilton's *Conversation of Virtousis* amply underscores (fig. 4).[37] This commemorates the intimate art world of early eighteenth-century London which was, as Ilaria Bignamini noted, vital both in stimulating innovation, as artists limped towards their goal of a British School of Art, and in ensuring that advances would be quickly shared and built upon.[38] Here, we see some of the foremost artists of the day engaged in the sociable practices of connoisseurship, gathered together to discuss works of art and their practice. The sitters are almost all identified by inscriptions, and we find 'Vertue G' on the far left, his liminal position a practical consequence of the fact that his figure

---

[37] For this picture, see FINBERG, Hilda F., 1917-18. « Gawen Hamilton: An Unknown Scottish Portrait Painter », *Walpole Society*, vol. 6, pp. 51-8; WHITLEY, William T., 1928. *Artists and their Friends in England 1700-1799*, 2 vols, London and Boston, The Medici Society, I, pp. 69-70; KERSLAKE, John, 1977. *National Portrait Gallery: Early Georgian Portraits*, 2 vols, London, H.M.S.O., I, pp. 340-2; Bignamini, « George Vertue, Art Historian », pp. 29-30.

[38] BIGNAMINI, Ilaria, 1988. « The Accompaniment to Patronage: A Study of the Origins, Rise and Development of an Institutional System for the Arts in Britain 1692-1768 », unpublished PhD thesis, Courtauld Institute of Art, pp. 194-6.

was added to the picture late in the day, but still evocative of his role as a witness to this art world. Almost at the opposite side of the canvas, we see the artist himself, Gawen Hamilton, looking out to meet our gaze, distinguishing himself as the creator of the work through his soft blue cap and the palette and brushes he clasps in one hand. Attempts have been made to link this gathering to one or other of the artistic clubs that gathered in London at this date - the Virtuosi of St Luke, perhaps, or the Rose and Crown - but it seems rather to cut across them.[39] Both of these associations provided fertile territory for developments, and the Rose and Crown in particular, of which both Hamilton and Hogarth were members, led easily to other convivial meetings, which spilled out into the local coffeehouse.[40]

This leads to another, closely related key context for the rapid, notable popularity of the conversation piece as established in 1720s England, which continued into the mid and later decades of the century: the importance of networks, familial as well as social. The gestures depicted on these canvases might show the 'shell' of polite sociability, adherence to conversational virtues empty of content, but the precise identities of the sitters were crucial, their juxtaposition on a single canvas at the heart of the matter. When engaging with these portraits, it is above all vital to work out who has been represented, who might have been included but is not present, and why the relationships traced through the assembled likenesses were deemed worthy of record. Many of the answers to these questions lie in the idea of 'friendship' in the eighteenth century, so richly explored by Naomi Tadmor.[41] As Tadmor has shown, this concept could span kinship, economic and occupational bonds,

---

[39] See Finberg, « Gawen Hamilton », p. 57; Whitley, *Artists and their Friends*, I, pp. 69-70; Kerslake, *Early Georgian Portraits*, I, p. 342.

[40] Bignamini, « George Vertue, Art Historian », pp. 57-8.

[41] TADMOR, Naomi, 2001. *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, chp. 5.

intellectual and spiritual attachments, sociable networks and political alliances: any of which could overlap in significant ties of obligation.[42] And these were connections which fluidly moved between the familial and the non-familial: a fluidity we see in many of these portraits.

Take *The Wollaston Family*, again, for example. When Vertue describes this as 'a large Conversation … of Men & Women of the familyes of Woolastons & …', his use of the plural and subsequent ellipsis draws attention to the fact that this is not just 'The Wollaston Family'. It is actually an extended group of kin and 'friends'. The relatives of William Wollaston's wife, the Fauqiers, feature significantly, the portrait testifying to his alliance with a family important in the expanding financial markets of early eighteenth-century London: Elizabeth Wollaston's father, John Francis Fauqier, was a Director of the Bank of England. Other valuable ties in this world are also commemorated in this sociable gathering. Sir Robert Godschall, a Portugal merchant and a Director of the Royal Exchange Assurance, is also present.[43]

Philips's *Tea Party at Lord Harrington's* provides another good example. This certainly encompasses a number of familial relationships. It includes both Lady Betty Germain and her niece, Mary Chamber. James, 3rd Earl of Berkeley, is shown, together with his siblings, George and Lady Betty. However, these ties of kinship are embedded in a gathering which is, as Julius Bryant demonstrated, primarily concerned

---

[42] Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, p. 167.

[43] « Vertue III », p. 46. Godschall was William Wollaston's cousin. Information regarding the Wollaston family from the file at New Walk Museum, Leicester, including a « Copy of Statement in Early Eighteenth-Century Handwriting », recently reproduced by EINBERG, Elizabeth, 2016. *William Hogarth: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, p. 66, cat. 30. I am grateful to Simon Lake for his help with this picture. Also see CRASKE, Matthew, 2007. *The Silent Rhetoric of the Body: A History of Monumental Sculpture and Commemorative Art in England, 1720-1770*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 348-50.

with social relations rooted in political affiliation. These people were all dissident Whigs, opposed to Robert Walpole's regime.[44]

Such portraits anticipate a definition of a conversation piece provided by one of its later exponents, David Allan: 'the means of *everlastingly joining frends* together on the canvace'.[45] Friendship oiled society, it provided emotional succour and the pleasures of sociability, but it also underpinned patronage, the flow of finance, business arrangements and political strategising. And, in order to fulfil those functions, friendship needed to be identified and named. The acknowledgement and recognition of a 'friend' activated an obligation to help and support. Historians have explored some of the ways in which this process took place, especially within extended kinship groups. David Cressy, for example, has discussed how individuals could make claims on relatives in petitions for help, activating connections, appealing to ideas of mutual obligation which might previously have been dormant.[46] Tadmor, likewise, has shown how the flexibility of terms of familial relationship, notably 'cousin', could assist when calling on someone for support: 'The claiming of kinship was a speech act with which individuals proposed their relationships with one another and announced it by naming. It was an effective statement of both private and public recognition.'[47]

Many of these well-populated conversation pieces, moving fluidly from nuclear through extended family

---

[44] BRYANT, Julius, 1988. *Mrs Howard, A Woman of Reason (1688-1767)*, London, English Heritage, pp. 20-1, cat. 3.

[45] University of Edinburgh Library, La.IV.26, ff.1-2, David Allan to Lord Buchan, 3 December 1780. For David Allan, see RETFORD, Kate, 2014. « 'The small Domestic & conversation style': David Allan and Scottish Portraiture in the Late Eighteenth Century », *Visual Culture in Britain*, vol. 15, nº 1, pp. 1-27.

[46] CRESSY, David, 1986. «  Kinship and Kin Interaction in early modern England », *Past and Present*, vol. 113, pp. 47-9.

[47] Tadmor, *Family and Friends*, p. 144. See also pp. 127, 163.

relations to connections based in non-familial ties, fulfilled a cognate role to such 'speech acts'. These were artefacts through which people could position themselves. They both commemorated and enhanced relationships. They recorded obligations and duties, as well as consolidating ties so as to encourage their continuation.

*Exchanging Conversations*

So far, this essay has outlined two key reasons for the rapid success of the conversation piece in early eighteenth-century England. One was its depiction of the forms of polite conversation, not only newly fashionable, but also vital in a commercialised society based on credit, and an urbanised world characterised by frequently anonymous spaces like the coffee house. Judgements about the person with whom one was dealing often had to be made on external indicators of social status and 'character': the kinds of clothing and behaviour depicted in the conversation piece.[48] These portraits also provided a means of documenting and thereby sustaining and encouraging ties of friendship within and beyond kinship groups, creating routes through which money and patronage could flow. This second factor evokes more fully the conversation piece as an object: a concrete artefact, which made relationships material. These portraits were things to be hung on walls, where they could proclaim and sustain social ties. The essay will now turn to this issue: the degree to which the physical object of the conversation piece was embedded in and bolstered sociable practice. The discussion here will here move further into the eighteenth century, beyond that first heyday of the conversation piece in

---

[48] See, for example, AGNEW, Jean-Christophe, 1986. *Worlds Apart: The Market and the Theatre in Anglo-American Thought, 1550-1750*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, chp. 4, and FREEMAN, Lisa A., 2002. *Character's Theater: Genre and Identity on the Eighteenth-Century English Stage*, Philadelphia PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, chp. 1.

the 1730s, through its continued production in the mid decades of the century, and into its later 'renaissance' at the hands of Johan Zoffany from the 1760s onwards.[49] Looking at the object of the portrait as a means of maintaining sociable bonds requires situating it alongside other cognate technologies, such as letter writing and gift giving. An episode in the career of the portraitist Joseph Highmore brings all these evocatively together, and is worth outlining in some detail.

The extensive correspondence between the novelist Samuel Richardson, and his great admirer Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh is well known, starting up in 1748 with her famous first letter, prompted by concern for what might be the ultimate fate of Clarissa. A couple of years later, on 31 March 1750, Richardson asked if he might get Highmore to 'take a copy' of a conversation piece of the Bradshaighs, painted by Edward Haytley, showing the couple in van Dyckian dress in the grounds of their seat, Haigh Hall in Lancashire (fig. 5). Richardson was very familiar with this image, then on display in the Bradshaighs' London town house, hung 'over [the] chimney in New Bond-street'. The writer pleaded: 'You know not the pleasure I shall have in looking upon it, when you are at that seat, which is there drawn in so lively a manner, and is so very delightful.'[50]

Lady Bradshaigh aceded to the request, insisting that the copy of the Haytley should be a present from her. Highmore quickly set to work, finishing the picture by the end of that year.[51] In January 1751, Richardson was able to write and tell Lady Bradshaigh that the picture had given him some comfort during a period of feeling unwell and neglected.

---

[49] For an overview of the trajectory of the conversation piece in eighteenth-century Britain, see Retford, *Conversation Piece*, *passim.*

[50] RICHARDSON, Samuel, 1804. *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, London, printed for Richard Phillips, pp.13-14, Samuel Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, 31 March 1750.

[51] *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, pp.18-19, Lady Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson, 3 April 1750.

Clearly very sorry for himself, he had made an imaginary trip to have breakfast with Lord and Lady Bradshaigh at Haigh Hall, but had then found himself in actuality alone in his own home: 'Oh how I missed you…!' However, sitting there, 'I the sooner recovered myself when I looked up to you and to your dear Sir Roger in the picture. - Yet the piercing cold … reminded me, that the piece before me was but a picture. In summer, if it please God to spare me till then, it will be more than a picture.'[52]

As well as insisting that the copy be a present, Lady Bradshaigh also asked that Highmore should paint Richardson, so that she might have the writer's portrait in return. She requested: 'If you think proper, Sir, I would chuse to have you drawn in your study, a table or desk by you, with pen, ink, and paper; one letter just sealed, which I shall fancy is to me.'[53] Richardson obliged, but Highmore went wittily further in the conceit of this portrait (fig. 6). As well as including the requested table and writing materials, he also included his own copy of Haytley's conversation piece of the Bradshaighs behind the writer. He shows it hanging over Richardson's hearth, mimicking the display of the original in the Bradshaighs' town house in New Bond Street. Lady Bradshaigh was delighted with the portrait, noting in a letter penned at Haigh Hall at Christmas that year: 'As I sit at my writing-desk, I cannot look up without viewing your picture'.[54]

This is a fascinating episode, which brings the degree to which such portraits were embedded in and helped to maintain social relationships to the fore. There are a series of

---

[52] *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, p.61, Samuel Richardson to Lady Bradshaigh, [January 1751].

[53] *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, p.23, Lady Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson, 3 June 1750.

[54] *Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, p.50, Lady Bradshaigh to Samuel Richardson [December 1750]. For this portrait, see also BAKER, C.H. Collins, 1944. « Joseph Highmore, Samuel Richardson and Lady Bradshaigh », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 7, nº 3, pp. 316-319.

processes of exchange here. There is the familiar gifting of the likeness as a means of testifying to a bond, and also of sustaining that bond during periods of absence. The equally familiar business of portrait copies is, however, taken to a new level, as the Haytley conversation piece of the Bradshaighs is copied for Richardson, that copy then replicated again in reduced form in the back of Highmore's single portrait of the author. Both Bradshaigh and Richardson are thus able to gaze upon the same painting, their bond strengthened by common visual experience. Furthermore, that process of shared viewing is explicitly evoked in Highmore's portrait of the author, standing proudly with the likeness of the Bradshaighs displayed behind him, inviting scrutiny and contemplation. And there is much here in the sending and resending of the image which runs parallel to the correspondence; a parallel underscored both by the letters and writing equipment that Highmore, as requested, put into the portrait of Richardson, and the fact that these interlocutors used their likenesses of one another as stimuli to their epistolary exchanges.

The conversation imaged in the conversation piece, and the networking embedded in the joining together of likenesses, thus extended to the physical use and exchange of these portraits. Hamilton's *Conversation of Virtuosis* not only depicted the sociable communion of London artists in the 1730s: its very production was embedded in that communion. Vertue relates the circumstances in detail in his notebook: 'the proposition of this peice was to promote the Interest of M^r.Hamilton. and to be done by Subscription 4 guinease each person to pay him. and when the picture is quite done to be raffeld for. twas raffled for on 15 April. 1735. and won by M^r. Joseph Goupee.'[55] This act of solidarity - underpinned by professional, associational and social ties, in which the artists each paid Hamilton four guineas to paint their group portrait, and then raffled the outcome - has a

[55] « Vertue III », pp. 71-2.

clear reciprocal relationship with the sociable exchange depicted on the canvas. Artistic conversation is not only visually present in the painting; it is embedded in both the act of its creation and in its afterlife.

Other examples of such lotteries exist, but the richest material here is to be found in the processes of replication introduced by the Richardson case. Production of copies of portraits was absolutely commonplace. It was standard for a replica, or two, or more, to be ordered at the time of a commission. However, this practice is distinctive when dealing with conversation pieces concerned with bonds of friendship. In many cases, copies were executed for some or all of the sitters depicted on the canvas, so that mutual ownership could combine with mutual representation to serve as a doubled recognition of relationships. The display of the same picture in different houses could function as a testament to and a means of maintaining their owners' affective associations.[56]

Incidents of such replication and exchange become commonplace when one turns to the substantial body of conversation pieces produced for British Grand Tourists. This was a strikingly popular portrait format for the young *milordi* who made their way to Italy, brought to its most characteristic form by Nathaniel Dance.[57] Dance's conversation pieces took the visual language so firmly associated with Pompeo Batoni – the slickly painted costumes, the elegant yet swaggering poses, the detritus of the classical past filling the background – and added the social aspect of the Tour experience. This was vital. The Tour was not only typically undertaken in the company of compatriots (friends and tutors), but one would also socialise with other British travellers while abroad. In July 1768, for

---

[56] For the case of Philip Reinagle's *Members of the Carrow Abbey Hunt*, 1780, Tate Britain, see Retford, *Conversation Piece*, p. 252.

[57] For Dance, see GOODREAU, David, 1977. *Nathaniel Dance 1735-1811*, London, Greater London Council.

example, William, Marquess of Kildare wrote to tell his mother that he had met over forty old Etonian acquaintances since arriving in Italy less than two years previously. Such men would then return home to continue their 'conversation' within elite circles, as in the social events organised by the Society of Dilettanti (membership of which was dependent on having been in Italy). The Grand Tour was a major networking opportunity; the relationships between the incoming generation of Baronets, Viscounts, Earls and Dukes commonly formed in Rome, Florence, Venice and Naples. But the insular nature of the British community abroad was also, as scholars such as Bruce Redford have noted, seen as providing an important bulwark against the potentially pernicious effects of spending so much time in a foreign, catholic country.[58]

Once again, Dance's conversation pieces did not merely represent and commemorate the sociability of the Grand Tourists: they were also a means of enacting that sociability. A case in point is his 1760 portrait of James Grant, John Mytton, Thomas Robinson and Thomas Wynne (fig. 7).[59] Grant and Mytton are on the left of the canvas, accompanied by a dog, their contrasting suits of red and blue offset by the shared rythmn of gentlemanly hands: resting on the hilt of a

---

[58] REDFORD, Bruce, 1996. *Venice and the Grand Tour*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 16-25. See also KELLY, Jason, 2010. *The Society of Dilettanti: Archaelogy and Identity in the British Enlightenment*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 13-18. For more on British Grand Tourists, see BLACK, Jeremy, 2003. *Italy and the Grand Tour*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

[59] See WILTON, Andrew and BIGNAMINI, Ilaria, 1997. *Grand Tour: The Lure of Italy in the Eighteenth Century*, London, Tate Gallery, pp. 55-6, cat. 14, for the YCBA version illustrated here. For an invaluable, full account of the Philadelphia version, to which my discussion is indebted, see DORMENT, Richard, 1986. *British Painting in the Philadelphia Museum of Art from the Seventeenth through the Nineteenth Century*, London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, pp. 90-7, cat. 22. Also see Goodreau, *Nathaniel Dance*, cat. 5, and SELLIN, David, 1961. « Nathaniel Dance: A Conversation Piece », *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin*, vol. 56, nº 268, pp. 61-2.

sword; gesturing with a hat; placed on one hip. The Colosseum, that familiar sign of having been to Rome and seen the things which 'it is expected a man should see', embraces them.[60] We then move across the sloping trunk of the tree which serves to break and structure the group to the seated figure of Thomas Robinson, a vision of gentlemanly ease on his conveniently positioned stone perch, lightly clasping the drawing of an elevation of the Temple of Jupiter in Rome (at that date being restored and studied). Finally, Thomas Wynne, leaning behind to view this paper, leads our eye up to the large urn ornamented with figures from the relief of *The Borghese Dancers*. There is a clear echo between the four sculpted women and the young Grand Tourists, underscoring the gentle circularity of the pictured conversation. As we imagine the dancers joining hands around the back of the vase, so our eye is taken around this group of milordi, emphasising their social exchange.

This portrait is, above all, concerned with commemorating and confirming the elite social networks of The Tour. The friendship recorded here was rooted in these men's privileged education. Robinson, Grant and Mytton had all studied together at Westminster School, and then moved on to Cambridge University. Robinson and Mytton had both been at Clare Hall there.[61] Having set out on their respective travels, they had met up in Geneva in the summer of 1759, and again in Turin later that same year. Grant and Wynne had then headed off together to Naples, while Robinson and Mytton had travelled to Rome, arriving there in the November. They had set about finding an antiquarian for the group, 'ye best … in Rome, the Abbate Venuti, who as soon as Mr. Grant & Mr. Wynn arrive will begin to go about with us…'. The friends were not reunited in the city, however, until February 1760, at which point they sat to

[60] BOSWELL, James, 1850. *The Life of Samuel Johnson*, 2 vols, ed. John Wilson Croker, New York, Harper and Brothers, II, p. 62, 11 April 1776.

[61] Dorment, *British Painting*, p. 92.

Dance for this portrait.[62] The wealth of correspondence connected with such tours shows that this kind of travelling – individuals teaming up, going their separate ways, heading off to another city before returning - departures noted, arrivals and returns anticipated – was the norm. The period in which these men were all together in Rome was short, as Robinson and Mytton had left to make their own trip to Naples by April 1760. Dance's friendship portrait thus captured one of the occasions on which the four came together. And the predictable epilogue to the association which had begun within the educational establishments of England, and then continued on the Grand Tour, was subsequent shared membership of the Dilettanti. Robinson was elected in 1763; Wynne and Mytton joined the following year.[63]

But Dance's portrait also contributed to the sitters' friendship through, again, replication and shared ownership. The artist was required to produce four versions of the painting, one for each of the sitters. That now in the Yale Center for British Art seems to have been produced for Wynne.[64] The time which Grant, Mytton, Robinson and Wynne spent together in Geneva, Turin and Rome was brief, but their subsequent and enduring mutual possession of Dance's image sustained their allegiances. Copies of portraits sprawl through the houses of interconnected, related families, but such copies of friendship groups are a distinct phenomenon. These are snapshots of an affiliation then incorporated into each family narrative, as the paintings descend through the dynastic lines. The copy executed for

---

[62] See Dorment's account of Thomas Robinson's letters in *British Painting*, pp. 91-3. I am quoting here p. 92. See also INGAMELLS, John, 1997. *A Dictionary of British and Irish Travellers in Italy, 1701-1800*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 419-20, 696-7, 816-7.

[63] Dorment, *British Painting*, p. 91.

[64] The Philadelphia version, commissioned by Robinson, was originally attributed to Batoni, underscoring the similarity of the two artists' styles and idioms. See Sellin, « Nathaniel Dance », pp. 61-2.

James Grant of Grant, for example, was displayed above the fireplace in the hall at Castle Grant in Scotland, where it stayed for many generations.[65]

There are a significant number of cases in which a Grand Tour conversation was replicated in this way.[66] The problem, however, was that it could be a far from satisfying process for the artist. In December 1760, Nathaniel Dance informed his father: 'I have not yet quite freed myself from the disagreeable task of copying the Conversation Picture … It has taken me up a good deal of time, as I was obliged to make 4 copys…'. He commented that the portrait had been neither greatly to his financial advantage, nor much to his 'improvement' as an artist. However, he was aware of the useful contacts he had made through the work: 'I cou'd not refuse doing it, as it was the means of making me acquainted with my Lord Grey and the other Gentlemen who have given me Commissions for Pictures …'.[67] Progress on those subsequent commissions, however, was still being 'interrupted by those four Copies of the Conversation Piece' the following October.[68] This kind of employment was, frankly, tedious, but, as the imaging of social connections and the duplication of those images to reinforce those connections worked to draw together the Grand Tourists, so they also created crucial networks for the artist, bringing in further commissions and income.

---

[65] National Archives of Scotland, GD248/520/14, f. 15.

[66] See the example of Richard Brompton's *Edward, Duke of York with His Friends in Venice*, 1764, Royal Collection, discussed in Retford, *Conversation Piece*, pp. 269-72. For another, see LAING, Alistair, 2009. « John Brown as a Painter? », *The National Trust Historic Houses and Collections Annual*, pp. 12–17.

[67] Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), DaFAM/1/2, f.4, Nathaniel Dance to George Dance the elder, 17 December 1760.

[68] RIBA DaFAM/1/2, f.17, Nathaniel Dance to George Dance the elder, 14 October 1761.

*Taking the Conversation Piece to India*

The Grand Tour conversation piece provides a resonant microcosm of the ways in which this sub-genre of portraiture could represent and strengthen social bonds, both through iconography and the physical canvas. It was an ideal art form for men like James Grant and Thomas Robinson to commission on their travels, alongside the full-scale, full-length individual swagger portraits by artists such as Batoni, and the witty, frequently bawdy caricatures provided by the likes of Thomas Patch. Dance's portrait depicts sociability: the poses indicative of the values of accommodation and *complaisance* at the heart of polite conversation; the appropriate activities, here, the viewing of Roman architecture and connoisseurial discussion of a drawing. The union of these sitters on a single canvas embodies this friendship group in material form: commemorating it in a painting which can then sustain and encourage the continuation of these relationships. But the replication of that painting, and its mutual ownership by all four of these men, deepens and extends its ability to enact and nourish sociable exchange. Such a conversation piece thus – as both representation and object; in the process of its creation and in its afterlife - deserves a place alongside the letters these men wrote to one another and their families back at home, and alongside their shared membership of the Society of Dilettanti once returned to Britain, as all vital means of sociable exchange.

But one other reason for the conversation piece's success in the context of the Grand Tour is worth drawing out a little further before this essay concludes. At the heart of the eighteenth-century British conversation piece is the polite body: the elegantly besuited man, his shapely leg encased in a fine stocking, his feet in glossy, buckled shoes, turned out precisely in the manner prescribed by François Nivelon; the lady in a silk dress, her genteel gestures around the tea-table enabling the display of her perfectly disposed white fingers,

the lace falling from her cuffs to emphasise her narrow wrists and the delicate skin of her forearms. But the spaces and artefacts surrounding these figures provided key details of the social, cultural and historical context in which such emphatically British politeness was being enacted. Key to the conversation piece is, as noted at the start of this essay, the proportion of the canvas turned over to the setting, in notable contrast to traditional life-scale portraiture, in which one typically finds at most an archetypal column and drape, showing a glimpse of a landscape beyond. In most of the cases explored here that setting is British: the Palladian saloon; the Rococo drawing room; the sweep of a Capability Brown lawn, leading to the façade of a country house. These are the kinds of pictures which prompt the persistent characterisation of the conversation piece as 'peculiarly English'. In examples from the Grand Tour, however, such spaces are replaced by those of the Colosseum, the Forum Romanum, St Peter's and its environs; by classical urns, pedestals and inscribed tablets. The Grand Tour portrait, after all, was a certificate of having 'done' Italy; of knowing and having mastered the classical heritage deemed essential for the elite gentleman.[69]

Another destination to which the conversation piece travelled was India, and its most notable proponent there was Johan Zoffany. Zoffany had revitalised this mode of portraiture in England in the 1760s, so successfully that he had attracted the patronage of George III and Queen Charlotte. When he made the extraordinary decision to go out to India in 1783, aged 50, it is not surprising that the ex-pat population there – the East India Company officers, their families, their hangers-on – leapt to commission conversation pieces from him.[70] A few, such as *The Morse and*

[69] Redford, *Venice and the Grand Tour*, p. 90.

[70] For Zoffany's time in India, see WEBSTER, Mary, 2011. *Johan Zoffany: 1733-1810*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, part 5; JASANOFF, Maya, 2011. « A Passage through India: Zoffany in

*Cator family*, show absolutely no sign of the location. There is not one clue in this canvas – in the pillared classical hall, the urn, the cello, the harpsichord – to indicate that it was executed in Calcutta.[71] However, more commonly, Zoffany's Indian conversation pieces offered such sitters a means of showing their familiar skill with the physical manifestations of polite exchange and their elegant British costumes and poses, while also commemorating their sojourn in another country, and their experience of other cultures.

Perhaps the best example is *The Auriol and Dashwood Families*, a large canvas, incorporating a dozen figures (fig. 8).[72] If one imaginatively isolates most of the British figures here from the setting, then they could be from any one of the conversation pieces which Zoffany had produced while in London.[73] Thomas Dashwood sits at the chess table, but his opponent, John Auriol, diverts his attention from the pawn he is currently moving to take a letter from a servant. On the other side of the canvas, Captain Auriol, smart in his uniform, is welcomed to the gathering by John Prinsep and James Auriol. These two male groups flank the central vignette of Charlotte Prinsep and Sophia Dashwood, splendidly attired in satin: Charlotte sporting on her arms one of those bracelet sets with miniatures made so fashionable by her royal namesake; Sophia with her hair well powdered. These two ladies, predictably, take tea. We have, on the table,

---

Calcutta and Lucknow », in *Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed*, ed. Martin Postle, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 124-39; ARCHER, Mildred, 1979. *India and British Portraiture, 1770-1825*, London, Sotheby Parke Bernet, pp. 130-77.

[71] Painted in c.1784, now in the Aberdeen Art Gallery and Museums: http://www.aagm.co.uk/theCollections/objects/object/The-Morse-and-Cator-Family, accessed 31 July 2019.

[72] See Postle, *Johan Zoffany*, p. 265, cat. 81; Webster, *Johan Zoffany*, pp. 461-3; Archer, *India and British Portraiture,* pp. 134-6.

[73] For these, see RETFORD, Kate, 2011. « 'Peculiarly happy at taking Likenesses': Zoffany and British Portraiture », in *Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed*, ed. Martin Postle, New Haven and London, Yale University Press, pp. 100-123.

beautiful and valuable silver tea caddies, and two porcelain cups and saucers.

This portrait commemorates the intermarriage of three families: the Auriols, Dashwoods and Prinseps. Its commission was prompted by the departure of two of their members, Charles and James Auriol, back to England. It acknowledges these valuable connections of kinship, commemorating them, setting them in paint as a lasting reminder of ties of friendship, loyalty and obligation, and a prompt to their continuation. It shows the polite art of conversation: the social ritual of tea taking ; the welcoming of a newcomer to a social gathering; the enjoyment of pastimes such as chess. It is all very British.

Yet, these figures have been introduced into an Indian landscape, framed by Indian peoples. The water is poured, as ever, from a silver tea kettle into a teapot on a stand – but here by an Indian servant, assisted by an Indian page boy, rather than a British butler. As John Prinsep twists round on his chair, he clasps the pipe of a hookah being prepared by an Indian *hookah-burdar* behind him. John Auriol's correspondence involves yet two more Indian servants, his letter proffered by a figure likely to be his *banian*, the steward of his household. And, behind all these figures, is an emphatically Indian landscape, stretching away on the left to a muslim tomb and, on the right, to a tall palm tree stretching up above distant hills. The whole is dominated by the distinctive, bulbous forms of a large jack-fruit tree.

This is British politeness and sociability dropped into a foreign context. The conversation piece is used here to do two distinct jobs, creating an incongruous juxtaposition. We see British gentility and networking, showing politeness and significant relationships. However, it is framed by the context of India in a way that only a conversation portrait, with its emphasis on narrative, props and setting, could fully make possible. That context commemorates these peoples' time spent in another country ; socially and financially advantageous time, thanks to the rewards of, variously,

service for the East India Company, the trading of cloth, and ownership of an indigo plantation. It records a memorable phase in the biographies of these sitters, and in the biographies of their families more broadly. It also engages with a proto-anthropological interest in and engagement with the natural environment, peoples and costumes of India, extending, in the case of the hookah, to enjoyment of some of its pleasures. Yet the juxtaposition supports a vital distinction. British polite customs and the latest fashions are maintained, even in foreign climes. The Indian figures facilitate those customs, and are emphatically subordinate. As Richard Leppert has noted, the abundance of Indian servants in such pictures indicates the vast population and plenitude of India being enlisted for the welfare and prosperity of the British. Their numerousness demonstrates the ability of the British to employ native peoples to undertake the most minor and minutely stratified of tasks, ultimately underscoring narratives of power and dominance.[74]

*Conclusion*

The conversation piece as a genre of art has a long and complex history: it certainly was not invented in England in the 1720s. However, the rapid taking up, in only a few years, of this mode of portraiture, with its modestly proportioned canvases, various narrative devices linking the figures, and amplified settings in which décor and goods are articulated in detail, begs explanation. Many factors must come together to stimulate a fashion, but early eighteenth-century practices of sociability were surely vital in creating a

---

[74] LEPPERT, Richard, 1987. « Music, Domestic Life and Cultural Chauvinism: Images of British Subjects at Home in India », in *Music and Society: The Politics of Composition, Performance and Reception*, eds Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, p. 97. See also TOBIN, Beth Fowkes, 2005. *Colonizing Nature: The Tropics in British Arts and Letters, 1760-1820*, Philadelphia PA, University of Pennsylvania Press, pp. 103-4.

vogue for the conversation piece. In its representation of the principles, the formula of politeness, capturing the aesthetics of sociability in those variously turned heads and proffered cards and tea cups, the conversation piece expressed adherence to the values of elegant, 'easy' and 'agreeable' conversation. Furthermore, in its unifying of often numerous sitters on a single canvas, it both 'recognised' and helped to consolidate important networks, both familial and non-familial, affective and pragmatic. And, finally, in concentrating on the elaborate stories played out across the surfaces of these little portraits, it is important not to forget the role those canvases played themselves, as objects, in the conduct of sociability. Bestowed, exchanged and even duplicated, so that a number of sitters could continue to look upon the same visual testament to their friendship, the conversation piece was - like the letter, or the gift more broadly – an important physical prop for the practices of sociability.

## Select Bibliography

### Primary


CONSTABLE, John, 1738. *The Conversation of Gentlemen considered in most of the ways that make their mutual company agreeable, or disagreeable*, London, J. Hoyles.

NIVELON, François, 1737. *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour*, London, s.n..

RICHARDSON, Samuel, 1804. *The Correspondence of Samuel Richardson*, London, printed for Richard Phillips.

DE VAUMORIERRE, Pierre d'Ortigue, 1708. *The Art of Pleasing in Conversation. Written by the famous Cardinal Richelieu*, London, printed for Richard Wellington.

VERTUE, George, 1929-50. « Vertue I », *Walpole Society*, vol. 18 (1929-30); « Vertue II », *Walpole Society*, vol. 20 (1931-2); « Vertue III » , *Walpole Society*, vol. 22 (1933-4); « Vertue IV » , *Walpole Society*, vol. 24 (1935-6); « Vertue V », *Walpole Society*, vol. 26 (1937-8); « Vertue VI » , *Walpole Society*, vol. 30 (1948-50).

**Secondary**

BAKER, C.H. Collins, 1944. « Joseph Highmore, Samuel Richardson and Lady Bradshaigh », *Huntington Library Quarterly*, vol. 7, nº 3, pp. 316-319.

BIGNAMINI, Ilaria, 1988. « George Vertue, Art Historian, and Art Institutions in London, 1689-1768 », *Walpole Society*, vol. 54.

BURKE, Peter, 1993. *The Art of Conversation*, Cambridge, Polity Press.

GOODREAU, David, 1977. *Nathaniel Dance 1735-1811*, London, Greater London Council.

MEE, Jon, 2011. *Conversable Worlds: Literature, Contention, and Community 1762 to 1830*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

D'OENCH, Ellen G., 1980. *The Conversation Piece: Arthur Devis and his Contemporaries*, New Haven, Yale Center for British Art.

POSTLE, Martin, 2011. *Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

PRAZ, Mario, 1971. *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America*, London, Methuen.

REDFORD, Bruce, 1996. *Venice and the Grand Tour*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

RETFORD, Kate, 2017. *The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

SHAWE-TAYLOR, Desmond, 2009. *The Conversation Piece: Scenes from Fashionable Life*, London, Royal Collection.

SITWELL, Sacheverell, 1936. *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of English Domestic Portraits and their Painters*, London, B. T. Batsford.

SOLKIN, David, 1993. *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

TADMOR, Naomi, 2001. *Family and Friends in Eighteenth-Century England: Household, Kinship and Patronage*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.

WEBSTER, Mary, 2011. *Johan Zoffany: 1733-1810*, New Haven and London, Yale University Press.

**Illustrations**

1. Charles Philips, *Tea Party at Lord Harrington's House*, 1730. Oil on canvas, 102.2 x 126.4 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

2. William Hogarth, *The Wollaston Family*, 1730. Oil on canvas, 102.5 x 126.4 cm. New Walk Museum and Art Gallery, Leicester.

3. Louis Philippe Boitard after Bartholomew Dandridge, 'To Give or Receive', from: NIVELON, François, 1737. *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour*, London, s.n.. British Library, London.

4. Gawen Hamilton, *A Conversation of Virtuosis…at the Kings Arms,* 1735. Oil on canvas, 87.6 x 111.5 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London.

5. Edward Haytley, *Sir Roger and Lady Dorothy Bradshaigh*. 1746. Oil on canvas, 68 x 90 cm. Museum of Wigan Life, Wigan.

6. Joseph Highmore, *Samuel Richardson*, 1750. Oil on canvas, 52.7 x 36.8 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London.

7. Nathaniel Dance, *James Grant of Grant, John Mytton, the Hon. Thomas Robinson, and Thomas Wynne*, c.1760. Oil on canvas, 98.1 x 123.8 cm. Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

8. Johan Zoffany, *The Auriol and Dashwood Families*, c.1783-7. Oil on canvas, 142 x 198 cm. Private collection, on loan to the Holburne Museum, Bath.