

The Conversation Piece

- In the eighteenth century aristocratic society dedicated itself to pleasure. It was permissive and gossiped about all forms of love and hardly anything shocked them except, perhaps, for a wealthy woman to marry a lower-class man. **The conversation piece** became popular between about 1720 and 1780 as a symbol of the aristocratic life. It shows a group in conversation often in the open. The group is formally dressed yet relaxed and the environment they are in is a natural setting but rigidly presented.
- The essential requirement of an eighteenth century conversation piece is that '**it should be the representation of two or more persons in a state of dramatic or psychological relation to each other**'.
- Where did the idea of the conversation piece first arise?

Notes

The Conversation Piece

- Wikipedia (modified): The conversation piece was influenced by 17th century portraiture in the Low Countries including merrymaking companies and garden parties painted by artists such as Dirck Hals and David Vinckbooms. In addition, representations of elegant companies and balls by Hieronymus Janssens and the works of Peter Paul Rubens, in particular his **Garden of Love** (Prado Museum), gave an impetus and direction to the development of the genre. In this last work, Rubens showed how a garden could be used as a setting for amorous dalliance and courtship.
- In the Low Countries many group portraits were painted, both of family groups and groups such as Governors or Regents of institutions, or militia officers. **Frans Hals, Rembrandt** and other artists had adopted a variety of poses to liven up the group portrait, for example the famous **Night Watch**. The name derives from the Italian term, also used in English, **sacra conversazione** for a similarly informal painting of

the Virgin and Child with saints, a genre developed in the Renaissance.

- There are many varieties of conversation piece. People may be portrayed sharing common activities such as hunts, meals, or musical parties. Dogs and/or horses are also frequently featured.
 - **Arthur Devis** was a regional painter famous for his small conversation pieces, popular with the gentry of Cheshire.
 - **William Hogarth** also worked in the genre, and parodied it in his print *A Midnight Modern Conversation*, which depicted a group of men whose conversation has degenerated into drunken incoherence.
 - **Johann Zoffany**, a German artist who settled in England, specialized in complicated conversation pieces,
 - **George Stubbs** portraits mostly take this form, with horses and carriages in the composition.
 - **Thomas Gainsborough**
 - **Joshua Reynolds** would on request produce conversation pieces in the Grand Manner, and at his usual near-life scale.
- Sacheverell Sitwell in *Conversation Pieces*, (1936) wrote that a conversation piece must not be a sporting picture, or a genre scene, or a history painting, or very large as a sense of intimacy was considered essential.
- The conversation piece was a celebration not just of the individuals but the families displayed and the ruling class itself. The genre became an attribute of every ruling class family.
- The phrase "conversation piece" later acquired a **different meaning**. It came to refer to objects that were perceived to be **interesting enough to spark conversation** about them. They provide a stimulus for prop-based conversation openers. The original conversation pieces sometimes depicted a group united in conversation about an object, which would typically be an item linked to science or scholarship.

References

Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life*, 2009, Royal Collection Publications



Palma Vecchio (c. 1480–1528), *The Virgin and Child with Saints and a Donor*, c.1518–1520, 105 x 136 cm, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum, Madrid

- The ***Sacra conversazione*** is a composition in which the **Virgin and Child are surrounded by saints** of different historical eras, and on occasions, by **donors** (as in the present example). The kneeling figure leaning towards the Virgin, who draws the Christ Child's attention to him, has been tentatively identified as **Francesco Priuli**. Priuli was one of Palma Vecchio's patrons in Venice and was Procurator of the Republic of Venice in 1522, one of nine who were second only to the Doge.
- Mary Magdalene is holding her pot of balm and Saint John the Baptist is identified by the lamb, cross and hair shirt. Mary Magdalene is identified as a **repentant prostitute** or loose woman, however, these claims are **not supported by the canonical gospels**. The identity of Mary Magdalene is believed to have been merged with the identity of the unnamed sinner who anoints Jesus' feet in Luke 7:36-50. On the **right is St Catherine of Alexandria**, Christian saint and virgin, who was martyred in the early 4th century at the hands of the pagan emperor Maxentius. According to her hagiography, she was both a princess and a noted scholar, who became a Christian around the age of fourteen, and converted hundreds of people to Christianity. She is holding the wheel on which she was to be killed but at her touch it shattered and so she was beheaded. She is also holding the palm branch that was awarded to victorious athletes in ancient Greece and signifies in Christian iconography the victory of martyrs.

Notes

- **Palma Vecchio** (c. 1480-1528, Jacopo Palma il Vecchio, real name Jacomo Nigretti de Lavallo) was an Italian painter of the **Venetian school** and was reputedly a companion and competitor of **Lorenzo Lotto** (c. 1480-1556/57) and so some extent a pupil of Titian (1488/90-1576).
- This painting has been identified as the one mentioned by Francesco Sansovino in

his guide to Venice published in 1581, entitled *Venezia Città Nobilissima*, in the section on the palazzo Priuli. In the 17th century it would appear that Marina Priuli gave the painting to the Venetian Senate. The painting was hung over one of the doors in the Hall of the Council of Ten. The painting passed through various owners until it was acquired for the Thyssen-Bornemisza collection.

- This *Sacra conversazione* has been dated to around 1518–20, partly on the basis that it must have been painted before Francesco Priuli was appointed Procurator of the Republic. Had he already been Procurator, he would have been painted in the red robe of office, rather than the black that he wears here. The work falls within Palma's mature period, although we can still detect features that recall his earliest works, such as the hands and sleeves of Saint Catherine, which resemble those of Mary Magdalen in *The Flight into Egypt* in the Uffizi. Palma organised the present composition around his monumental presentation of the Virgin and Child, who are surrounded by four judiciously placed figures set on slightly different planes around the central group. Rylands drew attention to the two figures on the left. He noted that the poses of Mary Magdalen, identifiable by her pot of balm, and Saint John the Baptist with the lamb, cross and hair shirt are inspired by those of Averroës and Pythagoras in Raphael's *School of Athens*.
- Within Palma's oeuvre, the ***Sacra conversazione* was one of the most frequent subjects**. This fact, combined with the evident stylistic evolution within these works, has made it possible to establish a relatively exact chronology for this part of his oeuvre, starting from around 1510 with the examples now in the Gemäldegalerie, Dresden, and concluding in 1528, the date of the artist's death and of the composition in the Accademia, Venice.

References

Mar Borobia, Thyssen-Bornemisza Museum website



Peter Paul Rubens (1577–1640), *The Garden of Love*, 1630-35, Prado Museum, Madrid, Spain

- Peter Paul Rubens, in particular his ***Garden of Love*** (1633, Prado Museum), gave an impetus and direction to the development of the genre.
- In the **17th century Flanders** there was a **fashion for French style and etiquette** which 'created a distinct and glamorous life-style for the privileged classes and for those who sought to imitate them'. (Elise Goodman)
- In a letter Rubens explained how he decided to marry Helena Fourment (1614-1673), a young woman from an 'honest but middle-class family' even though he was recommended to marry a woman from court society, because a society woman would 'blush to see me take my brushes in hand'. Rubens was a widower of 53 and she was a girl of 16.
- In the *Garden of Love* Rubens **celebrated his marriage to Helena Fourment**, his second wife. Helena, the woman deemed 'the most beautiful in Antwerp', is seen in the painting. They had five children and when Rubens died she married a Count and had five more children. His first wife, Isabella Brandt (1591-1626), daughter of a leading Antwerp citizen, died when she was 34 of the plague. Rubens had three children by Isabella.
- This scene from a court feast takes place in a relaxed atmosphere in which a group of persons flirt in an idyllic garden. The cupids around the group carry symbols of conjugal love, including a pair of doves and the yolk carried by the cupid in the upper left part of the composition. The fountains or sculptures of the three Graces and of Venus nursing signify fecundity and marital happiness, while the peacock symbolizes the goddess, Juno, who protects matrimony. The cupid at top left has two doves on a leash and carries a yoke, both symbols of married love. The peacock on the far right symbolizes the goddess Juno who protects marriage. The Mannerist portico is similar to the style of the buildings in Rubens's garden in

Antwerp. In the portico we see the couples are hiding from jets of water, a common amusement in gardens of the 16th century.

- Rubens uses motives from Renaissance sculptures, but sets the scene in the mannerist portico of his own house in Antwerp, which led to the idea that it was a self-portrait with friends. In the early inventories **it was called Rubens' Family**, but in any case, **it is an allegory and exaltation of conjugal love** and happiness.
- The subject is a traditional medieval one, in which lovers were shown conventionally in a garden, sometimes with moral messages or symbols accompanying them. In the Italian Renaissance the theme had been represented in 'fête champêtres' such as the one attributed to **Giorgione or Titian** in the Louvre. This picture by Rubens is an important link in the tradition running from those works to the scenes of **Watteau** and Pater in the eighteenth century.

- **Delphi Complete Works of Peter Paul Rubens**

- “Completed in 1632 and housed in Madrid's Museo del Prado, *The Garden of Love* was painted immediately following Rubens marriage to Helena Fourment to celebrate their union. The painting presents a **complex allegory of the theme of love**, evoking numerous interpretations from art scholars since its first unveiling. On a surface level, it depicts a lavish garden party, with Rubens and his **sixteen-year-old bride** on the left, accompanied by her sisters and brothers-in-law. However, other commentators have identified a Neoplatonic allegory of love, charting a woman's initiation into the **three stages of love**, as portrayed by the three seated women. The stages of love include **sensual, earthly and celestial love**, as various aspects of love are presented in the composition. Other critics judge *The Garden of Love* as a visual display of the mores of **social gallantry and aristocratic courtship**. The theme of love, of course, dominates the canvas, with the iconography of apposite sculptures placed throughout the scene. On the right a sculpture of the goddess Venus, sitting on a dolphin, watches the new union, with an almost demonic expression on her face, while her breasts serve as watering fountains. Standing at the opposite end of the composition, Venus' son Cupid, the god of love, urges the newly-wed couple forward. In the obscured grotto, unexpected splashes of water surprise the embracing couples. A group statue of the Three Graces adds a sense of culture to an otherwise risqué scene.”



Antoine Watteau (1684–1721), *Les Plaisirs du bal*, c. 1715-17, 52.5 × 65.2 cm, Dulwich Picture Gallery

- **The conversation piece may also owe something to Watteau** in terms of its atmosphere and combination of the formal and the informal in a natural setting.
- **Watteau was not well known in his lifetime** but has influenced artists ever since. He is an artist that borrowed from previous artists but who brought a new way of seeing the world. He is best known as the creator of a genre called *fête galante* ('merry party') which can be traced back to 17th-century Dutch merry-making scenes. Watteau's scenes are more subtle and show the delicate world of gesture representing emotion. In the centre a couple is **dancing a minuet** and either side the numerous groups engage in their own forms of **gentile flirtation** and **love making**. The numerous scenes of couples are harmoniously united by Watteau's ability to weave together their complex psychological interactions.
- The airy woodland setting and the sheen of fabrics are derived from **Watteau's open brushwork and broken colours** which are typical of **Rubens** and 16th-century Venetian painting. The figure of the black boy wearing a turban gazing down from the balcony and the figure of the servant boy pouring wine are based on Veronese's *Christ and the Centurion*.
- On the left are figures of Harlequin, the light-hearted servant who is always thwarting his master, Pierrot, the sad clown who pins for Columbine who usually leaves him for Harlequin and Mezzetin, a schemer and trouble-maker who often resorts to violence, all stock figures from the *Comedia dell'arte*, illustrating the delicate balance between theatre and reality. *Comedia dell'arte* began in 16th century Italy and it consisted originally of improvised sketches.
- The whole scene is enveloped in a light ochre, which inspired John Constable to say that Watteau's painting seems '...[to be] painted in honey: so mellow, so tender, so soft and so delicious.'

Paulo Veronese (1528-1588), *Christ and the Centurion*, c. 1571, 192 x 297 cm, Prado

- With a halo of sainthood over his head, Jesus extends his arm to the centurion who, having converted to the Christian faith, kneels at his feet, as told in the New Testament (*Matthew* 8, 5-13). The scene takes place in front of an architectural backdrop inspired by the work of the architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). The work gains dramatic intensity, as both the grandiloquent postures of its characters and their sumptuous clothing recall the theatre of that period. This painting belonged to Thomas Howard, 21st Earl of Arundel and following his death in 1646 it was acquired by Philip IV (1605-1665), who sent it to El Escorial, where it remained until it entered the Prado Museum in 1839.

References

- Dulwich Picture Gallery



William Hogarth (1697-1764), *The Popple and Ashley Families*, 1730, 63.1 x 75.1 cm, Royal Collection

- The sitters in *The Popple Family* are four siblings from this prosperous mercantile and colonial family. **Three Popple brothers** are arranged in discreet **order of seniority**: in the middle and standing highest is **Henry** (date of birth unknown but probably the eldest), who was **Clerk at the Board of Trade** and Plantations in 1727 and published a map of the British North American Colonies in 1733; to the left stands **Alured** (1699-1744), appointed **Secretary to the Board of Trade** and Plantations in 1730 and Governor of Bermuda in 1737-44; sitting on a bank on the right is their younger brother **William** (1701-64), who was a **playwright and poet** as well as **Solicitor to the Board of Trade** and Plantations and Governor of Bermuda (1747-63). William is **baiting a fishing line** with the help of his **wife, Mary** (1704-73), and **daughter, Marianne** (1724-99) and as a little joke Marianne is using father's hat to hold the bait. At the **extreme left** sits their **sister, Sophia** (1704-78), with an **owl perched** in a tree above her head. Einberg suggests that she may have commissioned this family group prior to one or more of the brothers' departure for colonial service.
- Marianne's grand-daughter Marianne Skerrett (1793-1887) was dresser and **secretary to Queen Victoria** to whom she bequeathed this painting, along with the identification of her grand-mother but unfortunately none of the other sitters.
- One of the **earliest** of Hogarth's conversations this work betrays the **awkwardness of a self-taught painter**: the **figures are isolated** and the **composition rambling**. The brothers seem to be engaged in some sort of debate, with William pointing to what appears to be an illustration in his book. However, the only **really successful element** of narrative is in the **family group fishing**, with a patient mother consoled by her affectionate sister-in-law, and an excited daughter, who has presumably had the idea of storing the **bait in her father's hat**, a piece of **comic seasoning** typical of Hogarth's later conversation pieces. The landscape is wilder than the man-made

parklands of the day and suggests the remote wildernesses which the brothers were already involved in mapping and administering. The **temple** may be **dedicated to Minerva**, goddess of **wisdom**, whose **attribute is the owl** and who seems an appropriate deity for a family of merchants and colonial governors.

References

Text adapted from *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of fashionable life*, London, 2009



William Hogarth 1697–1764, *A Scene from 'The Beggar's Opera' VI*, 1731, 57.2 x 76.2 cm, Tate Britain

- Conversation pieces came into fashion during the 1720s, largely due to the influence of William Hogarth, Britain's first native-born painter of international stature. Significantly, they arose at the same time as a new literary development, the **novel**. Not until the later 1700s did the British innovations of conversation pictures and fictional novels become common in other Western nations.
- A large new middle class emerged as Britain's colonial empire expanded and its Industrial Revolution began. Socially spurned by the aristocracy, these wealthy merchants, industrialists, and colonial landowners developed their own more natural and casual manners that made perfect themes to enliven both novels and group portraits.
- Conversation pieces and novels, by fictionally portraying situations from real life, differ from the allegorical portraits and epic poetry preferred by the nobility. Prosperous middle-class people who normally commissioned conversation pieces are similar to the characters who populate such novels as Daniel Defoe's *Moll Flanders*, Henry Fielding's *Tom Jones, A Foundling*, or Jane Austen's *Pride and Prejudice*.
- This is among the **first paintings ever** made of an **English stage performance**. It depicts a climactic scene from John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera*, first performed at the Lincoln's Inn Theatre in **1728**. Here the opera's central character, a highwayman named Macheath, stands chained, under sentence of death, between his two lovers, the jailer's daughter, Lucy Lockit, and, to the right, the lawyer's daughter, **Polly Peachum**. They in turn plead for his life. At either side of the stage Hogarth has included members of the audience, notably at the far right the **Duke of Bolton**, real-life lover of the actress, **Lavinia Fenton**, who played the part of Polly Peachum.



After William Hogarth, *A Midnight Modern Conversation*, after a lost original, engraved in 1733, 132 x 145.5 cm, National Trust, Petworth House

- Many of Hogarth's paintings and engravings are **conversation pieces, often with a satirical twist.**
- This the **most popular of Hogarth's engravings.** The original painting has been lost but there is a copy produced by an unknown artist at Petworth House. Copies of the engraving were sold all over Europe, including Russia. There are **11 people and 23 empty bottles.** They are mostly still actively drinking although the clock shows it is **4:00 in the morning.** The hypothetical conversation was turned into a play that was performed at Covent Garden and the following was taken from the play.
- The scene is St John's Coffee House in Shire Lane and some of the figures can be identified. In the centre, seated are a lawyer and a priest. The lawyer could be Lord Northington or Kettleby, a barrister who was well-known for his oratory, his full-bottomed wig and a squint. The priest is Parson Ford or orator Henley. The figure toasting over the Parson is linked with John Harrison, a tobacconist in Bell Yard and a friend of Hogarth.
- The person addressing the lawyer is shown as vacant or an imbecile and may be telling some common legal tale such as how he lost his case because of his idiot lawyer. The Barrister is saying that he deserved the treatment he had received, for not employing a gentleman in the business. Had you, says he, 'given me the management of your cause, right or wrong I should have brought you through the piece.'
- The figure on the left, smoking, with a night-cap on is a Justice of the Peace or a portrait of Chandler, a book-binder in Shire Lane. His cloak, hat, and wig, are hung up near him. His left elbow is supported by the table, and his right by the back of a chair, each hand busily employed with the implements of smoking.
- The politician in the opposite corner is also probably a portrait and he is so far gone that he is setting fire to his sleeve with the candle he is using to try to light

his pipe. Another candle is about to set fire to the parson's wig.

- The person on the floor is a soldier, his forehead marked with scars over which the helpful apothecary is pouring drink.



Arthur Devis (1711–1787), *Mr and Mrs Atherton*, c. 1743, 92 x 127 cm, Walker Art Gallery

Also known as *William Atherton, formerly Mayor of Preston, and his Wife Lucy*. William Atherton was Mayor in 1732 and 1738.

- We will next see four different artists who painted conversation pieces. This is *Mr and Mrs Atherton* by Arthur Devis (19 February 1712 – 25 July 1787) was an English portrait painter based in Cheshire who was particularly known for his conversation pieces. Arthur Devis first trained as a sporting and topographical artist, which explains the prominence given to animals and landscapes in his portraits. The exteriors and interiors were mostly invented by Devis.
- A conversation piece could also be an interior group.
- Devis was a popular artist among leading middle-class families and these doll-like figures set in what we consider a bare living room is what his patrons required. The Atherton's were an important family in Preston, a thriving port on the river Ribble. William Atherton was a **wealthy wool trader** and was at one time **Mayor of Preston**. Devis shows what was a **modern and fashionable interior** in which he has **highlighted the expensive consumer goods** and omitted less desirable objects.
- Until the mid-18th century carpets were mostly used on walls and tables. Carpets (fixed) and rugs (movable) were not commonly used on the floor in European interiors until later in the 18th century, with the opening of trade routes between Persia and Western Europe. Carpet weaving started in Wilton, Wiltshire in the 18th century.

Arthur Devis

- Devis was most **successful between 1748 and 1758**. During the 1760s, Devis's success as a portrait painter diminished sharply and although he exhibited works at the new Free Society of Artists between 1761 and 1775 and in 1780, becoming its president in 1768, his style seemed old-fashioned compared to portraits by

important contemporary artists such as Joshua Reynolds and Johann Zoffany. Art reviewers and observers like Horace Walpole were very critical of Devis's pictures.

- During the 1770s and 1780s, he seems to have made his living by restoring pictures. His most prominent job, done between 1777 and 1778, was restoring Sir James Thornhill's paintings in the Painted Hall in the old Royal Hospital for Seamen, Greenwich (now the Old Royal Naval College). Devis retired to Brighton in 1783 and died there in 1787 and is buried in the churchyard of St. Mary Paddington, London. Devis married Elizabeth Faulkner (1719–1788) at St Katharine's by the Tower, London in 1742 and they had **twenty-two children**, only six of whom survived past infancy. Two, Thomas Anthony Devis (1757–1810) and Arthur William Devis (1762–1822), became painters.

References

Desmond Shawe-Taylor, *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life*, 2009, Royal Collection Publications

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Philip Mercier, *'The Music Party', Frederick, Prince of Wales with his three Eldest Sisters, Anne, Caroline and Amelia, 1733*, Royal Collection, Windsor Castle

- **Philip (or Philippe) Mercier** served as **Painter and Librarian to Frederick, Prince of Wales**, from **1728 until 1738**. There are **three versions** of this celebrated image; the other two (Cliveden, National Trust and National Portrait Gallery) are set **out of doors** with the so-called '**Dutch House**' at **Kew** where the princesses lived, in the background. Since the events depicted here make more sense indoors it is usually assumed that this is the first treatment of the theme, however the date of 1733 inscribed on the National Portrait Gallery version provides an acceptable dating for all three.
- The **Prince of Wales** is shown **playing the cello**, accompanied by his sister Princess **Anne** (1709-59) at the **harpsichord**; Princess **Caroline** (1713-57) plays the **mandora** (a type of lute) and **Amelia** (1711-86) **reads a volume of Milton's poems**. The setting seems to be specific - the red brick back of a building in the background is certainly not an artist's impression of an ideal palace — but it is impossible to identify with certainty. The sconce to the right (one of a group supplied in 1733 by Benjamin Goodison, c.1700-67) and the painting of the sleeping Endymion on the wall (by Giovanni Antonio Pellegrini) are both accurately recorded and still in the Royal Collection.
- The **Princesses** are dressed 'with an **almost bourgeois sobriety**', with '**closed gowns**' fastened across the bodice, covering a **white linen kerchief** round the neck and **wearing plain caps** with lappets, one pinned up, one hanging down and the last fastened under the chin. The more formally dressed Frederick is given centre stage and yet the effect of the scene is one of informality, ensemble music-making and sibling harmony (something which in reality was starting to evaporate at this time).

- **English noblemen** would have been **unlikely to play the cello as well as Frederick** or to **be depicted** engaged in the activity with **such eagerness**. **Lord Hervey** clearly found Frederick's playing **undignified**, likening it to **Nero's public performances** on the lyre and recalling this royal 'fiddler once or twice a week during this whole summer at Kensington seated close to an open window of his apartment, with his violoncello between his legs, singing French and Italian songs to his own playing for an hour or two together, whilst his audience was composed of all the underling servants and rabble of the palace.' Hervey concludes by asking '**how much does such a buffoon fiddler debase the title of a Prince of Wales**' (*Memoirs*, 1737). Princess **Anne** had been **taught by George Frederic Handel** (1685-1759); her harpsichord playing was by all accounts worthy of her master and nobody at this date would have thought that playing or singing debased the title of Princess Royal.
- If the musical application seems rather Germanic, there is a **tribute here to English culture** typical of Frederick, Prince of Wales: **Amelia reads from Milton**, adopting a listening pose which recalls that of the **inspired Endymion** on the wall behind; she is like a personification of the pleasure of the scene as she smile gently at the viewer.

The Eccentric #1

- The eccentricity of playing the cello was nothing compared with some other English aristocratic eccentrics.
- Background: many different social ranks commissioned conversation pieces. Some were middle class professionals who were wealthy through their business dealing and lived in towns. The gentry owned land and were typically the squire of a rural area. At the top were a small number of peers headed up by royalty. The peers typically had vast estates and were few in number. In 1707 there were only 168 English peers and 16 Scottish peers in the House of Lords. In descending order, the peer's titles are Duke, Marquess, Earl, Viscount and Baron. They often had the wealth and the time to pursue their desires however ludicrous they might be and however time-consuming; many were what could politely be called eccentric.
- For example, Francis Henry Egerton, **8th Earl of Bridgewater preferred dogs** to people. He had no time for women, and he declared that dogs were better behaved than gentlemen. The dogs ate with him every day. The **dining table** would be laid for twelve and the dogs led in, each with a clean, white napkin around their necks. Servants would serve them off silver dishes, one servant to each dog. Boots were his other obsession. He wore a new pair every day and at night he ranged them round his walls and used them as a calendar.

References

Text adapted from *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of fashionable life*, London, 2009,
Royal Collection website



Charles Philips (1703-1747), *Frederick, Prince of Wales, with Members of 'La Table Ronde'*, 1732, Royal Collection, Kew Palace

- The painting above the fireplace of Princess Anne is by Philip Mercier but this painting is by Charles Philips.
- This is one of two paintings in the Royal Collection, both now ascribed to Philips and both acquired by George IV, which document the existence of clubs of which there is no other surviving record. This painting was described in a Carlton House inventory of 1816 as 'The late Prince of Wales, with the members of '**La Table Ronde**'. The other was the 'Henry Fifth Club'.
- In so far as it is possible to characterise a club from its name, both of those recorded in Philips's paintings appear to be versions of 'Liberty Hall'. In The Henry the Fifth Club or 'The Gang' Frederick casts himself as a previous Prince of Wales, the **mad-cap Prince Hal**, with his disreputable boon companions before becoming the legendary hero-king Henry V, leading another 'band of brothers' to victory.
- In this painting Frederick is **depicted as King Arthur** meeting on terms of equality with his **Knights of the Round Table**. He sits centrally, under some imposing voussoirs and a carved version of the Prince of Wales feathers, but not at the head of a table which can have no head; **no servants are seen** because the knights serves each other as the punchbowl circulates; none wears a hat. Even the inscriptions — 'Interruption' written under the man in the centre foreground who has overturned his chair and spilt his wine, 'Orders and Constitution' on the paper held by the man next to him — suggests the jocular-solemnity of club democracy.
- There are three bowls of punch and four bottles of sherry and one close has tipped over and is spilling its contents on the floor.
- The **hunting uniform** worn here, complete with boots and spurs, was **designed by Frederick** and seems to have caught on: a royal page described it in 1729, as 'blue,

trimmed with gold, and faced and lined with red. The Prince of Wales, Princess Anne, the Duke of Cumberland, Princess Mary, and Princess Louisa wear the same, and looked charming pretty in them. . . a world of gentlemen have had the ambition to follow his Royal Highness's fashion.' Such a fashion is an interesting variation on livery - uniform specific to a household and worn only by servants - and seems designed to express allegiance (perhaps reciprocal) rather than service. **The same hunting uniform is worn by Princess Anne in the painting** over the fireplace (from an **original by Mercier**). The idea of women sporting such masculine riding gear was not universally approved at this time:

- 'The Model of this **Amazonian Hunting-habit for Ladies**, was, as I take it, first imported from France, and well enough expresses the Gayety of a People who are taught to do any thing so it be with an Assurance; but I cannot help thinking that it **fits awkwardly yet on our English Modesty**. The Petticoat is a kind of Incumbrance upon it; and if the Amazons should think fit to go in this Plunder of our Sex's Ornaments, they ought to add to their Spoils, and complete their Triumph over us, by wearing the Breeches.' (Richard Steele, *Spectator* No 104, 29th June 1711)
- This painting is often said to depict the interior of Frederick's villa, the **White House at Kew**. The room here is clearly lit by a Venetian Window (that is of straight-arched form), **yet no such window occurred at the White House**. It is most likely that this is an **imaginary** hunting lodge, with Doric columns appropriate for such a manly sport, and with every available space for decoration bearing some symbol of the chase: animal skulls and circular hunting horns in the metopes of the frieze, hanging trophies of the hunt between the columns, and more hunting horns in the decoration between the capitals.
- **Charles Philips** was the son of a portrait painter and was born in London. His early portraits received great encouragement and their naïve charm attracted the nobility as patrons. His earliest conservation pieces are outside but he later painted the 7th Duke of Somerset and the Duchess of Portland in sumptuous Baroque interiors. He is known for his bright colouring and uncluttered directness. During the 1730s his conversation pieces became more complex and the number of sitters increased. In 1737 the Prince and Princess of Wales sat for full-length portraits inspired by the decorative portraits of **Philip Mercier** but they appear coarse in comparison. He died prematurely aged 44.

Eccentric #2

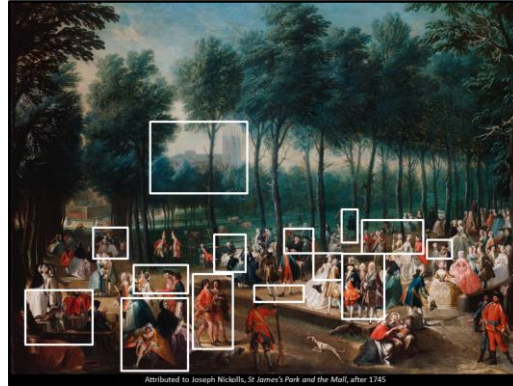
- Seeing so many of the nobility reminds me of another eccentric. A few years earlier during the reign of Queen Anne, **Lord Cornbury**, the 3rd Earl of Clarendon (1661-1723) was appointed as the Queen's representative in New York. He took it seriously and as he represented a woman he decided to dress as woman. He spent so much on the finest women's clothes his wife was reduced to stealing his

clothes. He continued to dress as a woman on his return to England in 1708 but remained a favourite of the Queen. The word eccentric may be too polite as from contemporary reports he was an imbecile and was described as profligate, corrupt, degenerate, perverted, a wastrel and a thief. He died in obscurity and debt but was buried in Westminster Abbey and by his daughter has many descendants today including Sarah, Duchess of York (née Ferguson, former wife of Prince Andrew).

References

The Conversation Piece: Scenes of fashionable life, London, 2009

<http://www.historic-uk.com/CultureUK/british-eccentrics/>



Attributed to **Joseph Nickolls** (active 1726-1755), *St James's Park and the Mall*, after 1745, Royal Collection

- Centre right is **Frederick, Prince of Wales**, with his friends, wearing the garter star on his blue jacket and a hat. He is talking to his friend who also wears the Order of the Garter. It is the highest order of chivalry and there are never more than 24 members or Companions. The entrance to the Prince's garden at Carlton House is just behind us.
- Whitehall Palace and **Westminster Abbey** are visible in the background. The abbey's two western towers had just been completed in 1745 by Nicholas Hawksmoor.
- On the left is the **Park's milk bar** with cows to supply the milk. The British were served with all the 'cleanliness peculiar to the English, in little mugs at a penny a mug'
- An **amorous** couple draws disapproving glances.
- A woman is **tying her stocking** shielded by the skirt of another woman.
- The **hoops** of another ladies skirt have flipped up as she sat. Before the Regency period women did not wear knickers as they wore multiple layers of warm clothing. It did not billow up but sitting on a hoop was always a danger. As fabrics became thinner during the Regency period a pair of drawers were worn, one for each leg and tied at the waist.
- A **man is relieving himself** over a fence.
- A woman is **scared by a cow** that suddenly appears as another cow is driven across the grass by a woman with a stick.
- A man's head is turned by a **passing beauty**.
- There is a well-dressed **black woman** in front of a sailor who is presumably her husband.
- And there are **soldiers and sailors** from many regiments including highlanders. Wearing tartan was illegal except for British soldiers serving in Highland regiments.

Sporting tartan was a form of protest against the brutality of the Duke of Cumberland's suppression of the Highlanders.

- There are **two priests** in black talking.
- There is even a well-dressed **Middle-Eastern gentleman** instructing a younger man.
- The surface is made from **crushed cockle shells** which were previously used for a game like croquet called **pall-mall**, which is why the road is called the **Mall**. Roads with a similar name exist in many cities (Paris, Hamburg, Geneva, Utrecht) and are long and straight and so often developed in shopping areas which is why they are called shopping malls in America today. Others became shady promenades also called malls today.

Notes

- Royal Collection website: St James's Park was laid out by Charles II in the formal French style with avenues of trees and a long rectangular canal. This scene is viewed looking back towards Whitehall Palace down the oblique avenue of trees. Westminster Abbey is visible in the distance including Hawksmoor's façade towers completed in 1745. To the right of this painting is the quadruple avenue of trees with a wide aperture down the middle, containing a surface of **crushed cockle-shells**. This was originally created (though at this date no longer used) for a **game** resembling croquet, called **pall-mall**, which was why this road was called '**the Mall**', a name it retains today.
- This royal park was kept open for the public, though chairs, horses and carriages were forbidden except by special permission of the King. It became a favourite resort for all fashionable (and not so fashionable) society, the Mall in particular being a place to be seen in the eighteenth-century London equivalent of the passeggiata. According to a French visitor:
 - 'Society comes to walk here [along the Mall] on fine, **warm days, from seven to ten in the evening**, and in **winter from one to three o'clock** . . . **the park is so crowded** at times that you cannot help touching your neighbour. Some people come to see, some to be seen, and others to seek their fortunes; for many **priestesses of Venus** are abroad . . . all on the look out for adventures.' (César de Saussure, Letters from London, 1725-30)
- Other accounts tell of cows and deer in the fields around the park, while a visitor in 1765 especially appreciated the availability of **udder-fresh cow's milk** 'served with all the cleanliness peculiar to the English, in little mugs at a **penny a mug**' (P.-J. Grosley, *A Tour of London*, 1772) and seen here in the lower left-hand corner.
- The purpose of an image like this is people-watching: contemporaries would clearly have recognised familiar scenes (like the milk-bar) and recognisable types, within the extraordinary variety of the London crowd. The low-life characters are kept somewhat to the periphery of the image: the woman pulling up her stocking on the left foreground and the suckling mother on the right. **Three different**

regiments are represented: two soldiers from a 'Grenadier Company' of a Guards or Line regiment with their high mitres chat in the centre background; two **Hungarian Officers**, the one in scarlet probably a Nádasdy Hussar, appear at the lower left — Austria was Britain's ally during the war of the Austrian Succession (1740-48); **two Highland Officers** in government tartan stride across the centre just in front of a foot-soldier. **Wearing tartan** at this time was **outlawed** for all except men like these, serving in Highland regiments in the British Army, though disgust at the brutality of the Duke of Cumberland, made sporting tartan a fashionable badge of protest at this time. Immediately behind the Scottish soldiers is a **sailor, talking to a friend while a well-dressed black woman, presumably his wife walks in front**. Two priests in black walk in the centre right, while further to the right an exotic-looking robed and bearded middle-eastern elder instructs a younger man. Otherwise, the Mall itself is given over to the beau monde, dressed in the height of fashion and saluting each other with elaborate grace and courtesy.

- This group is dominated by the clearly-identifiable figure of **Frederick, Prince of Wales**, speaking to a fellow Garter Knight in the centre of the composition. Immediately behind the viewpoint of the picture was the gate leading to the Prince's garden at Carlton House, so he is literally on his own doorstep. Royalty had mingled with the public in this setting at least since the time of Charles II, but Frederick's presence here is a perfect expression of his common touch - or his nauseating habit of ingratiation depending upon your point of view.
- (Text adapted from *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of fashionable life*, London, 2009")



George Stubbs, British, 1724 - 1806, *Captain Samuel Sharpe Pocklington with His Wife, Pleasance, and possibly His Sister, Frances*, 1769, National Gallery of Art, Washington

- National Gallery of Art website:
 - **George Stubbs**, one of Europe's **most important painters of animal subjects**, was **virtually self-taught** as a zoologist, botanist, painter, and engraver. Born in Liverpool, the son of a leatherworker, he embarked on a career as a portraitist and became lecturer on human and animal anatomy at York County Hospital. In 1754, he visited Italy 'to convince himself that nature was and is always superior to art whether Greek or Roman'. As much a **scientist as an artist**, in 1756 he rented a farmhouse in Lincolnshire, and spent 18 months dissecting horses, assisted by his **common-law wife**, Mary Spencer. He moved to London in about 1759 and in 1766 after working in the morning and evening for six years on the 18 plates he published *The Anatomy of the Horse*, illustrated from his own dissections. Aristocratic patrons recognised that his paintings of horses were more accurate than his rivals and his career was secure. He also experimented with Josiah Wedgwood in painting with enamels on ceramic plaques but these were less successful. He is known for his animal paintings and for his conversation pieces.
 - This canvas **celebrates the marriage** in 1769 of Captain **Samuel Sharpe** to **Pleasance Pocklington**, heiress of Chelsworth Hall, Suffolk. (The captain retired from the Scots Guard in the same year and adopted his wealthy wife's family name.) The bride in her wedding gown **offers a bouquet** to her husband's horse. The other woman may be Frances, the captain's **unmarried sister**.
 - Typical of Stubbs' straightforward, scientific approach, the horse is rendered accurately, without artificial sentiment. The lake's haze

demonstrates Stubbs' understanding of weather, and the majestic oak tree is an archetypal specimen that appears in his other conversation pieces.

- During his lifetime, George Stubbs was famous for his paintings of domestic and exotic animals, and was thought to have produced the most anatomically precise images of horses. Stubbs was an avid student of anatomy, having contributed illustrations to a treatise on midwifery and his own publication *The Anatomy of the Horse in 1766*—a **hugely influential volume** among naturalists and artists alike. Though he painted genre scenes, landscapes, and history paintings with less success, Stubbs was characterized as a **sporting painter** and so **denied membership to the Royal Academy**. Few of his paintings survive **undamaged** because Stubbs painted with **thin and diluted oils**.

Eccentric #3

- The water reminds me of another eccentric. Matthew Robinson, 2nd **Baron Rokeby** (1713-1800) who became a Fellow of the Royal Society when he was 33 but decided in later life to spend as much time as possible in water. He spent hours in the sea off the Kent beaches and sometimes had to be resuscitated by his servants. As he got older he had a swimming pool built at his home Mount Morris near Hythe so he could spend nearly all his life floating in the water. He had drinking fountains built everywhere and drank great quantities every day. If he saw anyone else drink from his fountains he gave them half a crown. His delight was to let his estate run to seed to show his repugnance for all forms of artificiality. He never heated his house, ate raw meat, never touched bread, refused to see any doctors yet lived to be 88.



George Stubbs (1724-1806), *Wedgwood Family*, 1780, 121.5 x 184 cm, Wedgwood Museum

- This is the **Wedgwood family** in the park of their home, **Etruria Hall**.
- Wedgwood Museum
 - George Stubbs was considered to be the greatest British painter of horses by the time his *Anatomy of the Horse* was published in 1766. He became interested in painting on various substances, and as a result he came to the attention of Josiah Wedgwood I's **partner, Thomas Bentley**.
 - Wedgwood then set about the task of providing **ceramic plaques** for Stubbs to paint on using **special enamel colours**. Wedgwood wrote to Bentley in 1779 saying – "When you see Mr Stubbs (sic) pray tell him how hard I have been labouring to furnish him with the means of adding immortality to his excellent pencil". At the time the paintings were **viewed by the public with disapproval**, with most of them **remaining unsold** at the time of Stubbs' death. Nowadays the paintings are highly prized.
 - In July 1780 Stubbs visited the Wedgwood family, **staying at Etruria Hall for several months**. During this time he modelled two bas-reliefs for Wedgwood, 'The Frightened Horse' and 'The Fall of Phaeton'. He also produced **the Wedgwood family painting** in oil on (wood) panel, which featured Josiah I, his wife Sarah, and their seven surviving children in the grounds of Etruria Hall, as well as producing twin portraits of Josiah and Sarah which were painted on ceramic plaques.
- On horseback, from left to right, we see Thomas, aged 9, **Susanna**, aged 15, Josiah II and John. In the foreground is Mary Anne, aged 2, sitting in the carriage, then Sarah and Catherine and their parents Sally and Josiah sitting under the tree. There is a distant view to Burslem to the right. Josiah was born in Burslem, Staffordshire

the eleventh and last child. He became a skilled potter when a child but smallpox weakened his knee and he could not work the potter's wheel so he took up design. He leased his first factory, the Ivy Works, in Burslem.

- As a leading industrialist, Wedgwood was a major backer of the **Trent and Mersey Canal** dug between the River Trent and River Mersey, during which time he became friends with Erasmus Darwin. Later in the 1770s, his growing business caused him to move from the smaller Ivy Works to the **newly built Etruria Works**, which would run for 180 years. The factory was so-named after the Etruria district of Italy, where black porcelain dating to Etruscan times was being excavated. He combined experiments in his art and in the technique of mass production with an interest in improved roads, canals, schools and living conditions. At Etruria, he even built a village for his workers. Not long after the new works opened, continuing trouble with his smallpox-afflicted knee made necessary the amputation of his right leg. In 1780, his long-time business partner Thomas Bentley died, and Wedgwood turned to **Erasmus Darwin for help in running the business**. As a result of the close association that grew up between the Wedgwood and Darwin families.
- The Darwin-Wedgwood family includes 10 Fellows of the Royal Society and several artists, poets and musicians including Ralph Vaughan Williams. The family was founded by Josiah Wedgwood (1730-1795) a friend of Erasmus Darwin. **Josiah's favourite daughter, Susannah** (1765-1817, 'Sukey') **married Erasmus's son Robert Darwin** and one of their children was **Charles Darwin** who married Josiah's granddaughter, Emma, daughter of Josiah II, who ran the family firm, became an MP and was a staunch abolitionist. Josiah II gave Samuel Taylor Coleridge a lifetime annuity of £150 on the condition that he discontinued his career in the ministry and devoted his life to poetry.



Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), *The Honourable Henry Fane (1739–1802) with Inigo Jones and Charles Blair*, 1761–66, 254.6 x 360.7 cm, The Metropolitan Museum of Art

- Seated at the centre with a greyhound is the **Honourable Henry Fane (1739-1802)**, second son of the eighth earl of Westmorland. To the left is **Inigo Jones**, a **relative of the celebrated architect**, and to the **right Charles Blair**, Fane's **brother-in-law**. **Reynolds's largest and most impressive conversation piece**, this canvas was begun in 1761 and completed in 1766. In the course of visits to London each of the three gentlemen would have **sat for Reynolds separately, in his studio**.
- Henry Fane was a Clerk at HM Treasury but was described as **‘very idle and careless and spending much time in the country’**.
- Henry Fane was the younger of two sons of Thomas Fane, who succeeded as **eighth Earl of Westmorland** in 1762 upon the death of his distant cousin. The Fanes had been long established at Fulbeck Hall, near Grantham, Lincolnshire, and Henry Fane was born at Fulbeck on May 4, 1739. Henry followed his father and elder brother to **Parliament as member for Lyme Regis, the family’s rotten borough**, serving from 1772 until 1802. A clerk in the treasury from 1757 to 1762, he held the **title of keeper of the king’s private roads** from 1772. On January 12, 1778, he married Anne Batson, daughter of a London banker, with whom he had **fourteen children**. Their family was raised at Fulbeck, which he inherited.
- Fane is seated at centre here. The older man on the left is Inigo Jones, a descendant of the famous architect of that name, who lived in Bristol and at Fulbeck Lodge. The standing figure, Charles Blair, married Mary Fane, the younger of Henry’s two sisters, at Fulbeck.
- Henry Fane seems first to have sat for this portrait during his twenty-first year and, as it has not been possible to discover any achievements that he then had to his credit, we can only assume that the picture constitutes a particularly monumental celebration of traditional ties of family and friendship. The canvas was likely

painted largely in 1761 and 1762, and was well under way by November 28, 1761, when the diarist Charles Brietzcke wrote that he went to “Mr. Reynolds in Leicester Field, [to] see Fane’s & Jones Pictures there.” The artist referenced “Mr Fane Mr Jones & Mr Blair in one Picture” in his **receipt of payment in the sum of £200**, which is dated February 18, 1766. Two head-and-shoulders portraits by Reynolds, one of Fane (location unknown) and one of Blair (private collection), are connected with the commission.

- **In 1829 the condition of the painting was considered ruinous** (see *Literary Gazette* 1829), but **treatment in 2008–9** proved the work to be in **much better state** than had been anticipated. Technical analysis **revealed changes made by Reynolds** in the course of execution (the **addition of the greyhound**, the elaboration of Fane's clothing and the simplification of Blair's) that seem to be an **attempt to emphasize Fane** as the principal sitter.

Eccentric #4

- **Lord North** married in September and spent his honeymoon in the Caribbean. When he returned with his new American wife to Burgholt House in England in October, he announced that he was going to bed. His wife was very surprised when he remained in bed for many days and was shocked to be told by a manservant that Lord North **always stayed in bed from October 9th until March 22nd**. A 25 foot dining table was brought into his bedchamber so that he could entertain people to dinner during these months. Lord North's explanation for this bizarre behaviour was that no Lord North had got out of bed from October to March since his ancestor had lost the American Colonies.

References

- The Metropolitan Museum of Art



Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen*, 1773, 233.7 x 290.8 cm, Tate

- **The foundation of the Royal Academy of Arts in 1768 gave British artists a new professional status** and the means to distinguish themselves from their artisan colleagues. The Academy's first president, Joshua Reynolds, led the campaign to **raise the profile and status of British art**.
- Reynolds developed the '**Grand Manner**' style which aimed to **elevate portraiture to the level of high art**. This was largely to be achieved **through classical allusion**. In this portrait, the aristocratic **Montgomery sisters**, dressed in the classical style, pay homage to the Greek god of marriage. Their poses are taken directly from the work of admired old master painters, which lend them a certain dignity but also laid Reynolds open to charges of plagiarism.
- **Barbara, Elizabeth and Anne**, the daughters of Sir William Montgomery of Macbie Hall, Peeblesshire, nicknamed the **Irish Graces** because they had grown up in Ireland. Elizabeth was engaged to the politician Luke Gardiner, who commissioned this picture.
- The three ladies are caught in motion as they adorn the statue of **Hymen, the Greek goddess of marriage**. Reynolds makes **them alluring but also modest**. It is the **sense of motion** that brings the composition to life and brings a **sense of sensuality**. All three **are young, beautiful and wealthy** and the delicate strand of flowers serves to unite them together in a common cause.
- 'Reynolds's painting states this with a hauteur miles away from the intimacy and idiosyncrasy we associate with British portraits. Reynolds made the British aristocratic portrait monumental; he argued in his *Discourses on Art* for an anti-naturalist, authoritative kind of painting - a mere copier of nature can never produce anything great - and what this noble ideal amounted to in his own practice was a new kind of grand portrait, of which this is a glorious example.

These women act as if it were perfectly natural for them to go and worship the god of marriage in the garden, where the stone Hymen recedes mysteriously into the shadows. They have even made a burnt offering on the altar; aristocratic marriage, the picture suggests, is a rite.' (Jones)

Eccentric #5

- The **Rothschild family** built more than 40 villas in the 19th and 20th centuries. One in the south of France took seven years to build and the owner spent a total of three nights there. Tring Mansion in Hertfordshire was extended into a chateau by Lionel de Rothschild whose grandson Walter drove around the estate in a carriage pulled by **six zebra**. In the house lived his tame bear that used to slap women guests on the bottom. On one occasion the 2nd Baron de Rothschild gave an important political dinner for Lord Salisbury and when the twelve guests were seated at the table, they noticed that each had an empty chair beside them. Just before the meal, twelve immaculately dressed monkeys walked in and sat down in the empty seats.

References

- Tate
- Jonathan Jones, *The Guardian*, 14 October, 2000



Sir Joshua Reynolds (English, 1723–1792), *The Ladies Waldegrave*, 1780–81, 143 x 168.3 cm, Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh

Previously seen in “Gainsborough and His Rivals” to make the point that Reynolds was the leading artist at the time, not Gainsborough

- This large-scale informal group portrait, or conversation piece, depicts the Waldegrave sisters, the grandnieces of the author and antiquarian **Horace Walpole**, who commissioned the work for his celebrated country house, **Strawberry Hill**. Strawberry Hill House is the earliest Gothic revival villa and was started in 1749. The villa became a marvel and was discussed by society and was regularly visited including a visit by the royal family.
- Reynolds’s gift for creating **sophisticated compositions** and rendering graceful gestures — at its height here — helped to establish him as one of the foremost English portraitists of the eighteenth century. The eldest sister, Laura, seated at centre, winds a card with silk thread from a skein held by her sister Maria, at left, while Horatia, the youngest, embroiders netting stretched in a tambour frame. An admirer (like Walpole) of the ancient past, Reynolds endows his sitters with a classical elegance emphasized by their pale muslin gowns and columned enclosure.
- The sisters, **all of whom were to marry in the following years**, were single when the painting was commissioned. Their portrait, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1781, would have **advertised their eligibility and desirability**. Individually and collectively, the Waldegrave sisters embody contemporary ideals of feminine accomplishment, style, and beauty.
- Reynolds was particularly skilled at choosing poses and actions which suggested a sitter's character and which also created a strong composition. Here, three sisters, the daughters of the 2nd Earl Waldegrave, are shown collaboratively working on a piece of needlework. The joint activity links the girls together. On the left, the eldest, Lady Charlotte, holds a skein of silk, which the middle sister, Lady Elizabeth,

winds onto a card. On the right, the youngest, Lady Anna, works a tambour frame, using a hook to make lace on a taut net.

Eccentric #6

- In 1770, at the age of 10 **William Beckford** inherited £1 million and several plantations in Jamaica. His income was £100,000 a year, an immense sum in the 18th century. He became obsessed with building: large buildings with towers were his speciality. However he was an impatient man and couldn't wait to see his projects finished. In 1794 he decided to build a Gothic abbey at his **Fonthill Estate** in Wiltshire. He was so impatient that he couldn't wait for proper foundations to be dug: the abbey was built on foundations suitable for a much smaller building. 500 men were involved and he plied them with great quantities of beer, in the hope that they would work faster. After six years the magnificent abbey was complete with a spire 300 feet high. A gale blew up and the spire snapped in two. Beckford gave orders to start on a new tower immediately. Seven years later, the new tower was finished. Beckford lived in the abbey with just one servant, a Spanish dwarf but every day his dining table was laid for 12 and the cooks ordered to prepare food for twelve. Beckford had vowed he would eat his Christmas dinner in his new abbey's kitchen. He did, but as soon as he had finished the meal, the kitchen collapsed. Little remains of Fonthill Abbey today.



Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), *Lady Lloyd and Her Son, Richard Savage Lloyd, of Hintlesham Hall, Suffolk*, 1745-46, 63.5 x 76.2 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- You have already seen this painting but I am showing it again as the earliest paintings by Gainsborough were conversation pieces of local Suffolk families. He painted this when he was 18.

Notes

- This is a **very early portrait** and within a few years his style had improved enormously.
- This was painted after he had moved to London but he frequently travelled to and from his home in Suffolk.
- Lady Lloyd and her son, **Richard Savage Lloyd**, of Hintlesham Hall, Suffolk – at the time, his clientele included mainly **local merchants and squires**.
- He found it difficult to sell his landscapes and **switched to portraits** of local merchants but **had to borrow against his wife's annuity** (Margaret Burr was the illegitimate daughter of the Duke of Beaufort and received an annuity of £200).
- The father, **Sir Richard Lloyd** (?1697-1761) was **an early patron of Gainsborough** and this is the earliest portrait he painted of the family. The father was knighted in 1745 following a loyal address he gave after the Jacobite uprising of 1745 called the 'Forty-Five' after its defeat at the Battle of Culloden. Also, in 1745 the 90-year old dowager **Countess of Winchelsea died inexplicably leaving him her entire estate**. This supported him in Parliament and enabled him to buy Hintlesham Hall, near Ipswich in 1747.

References

- Oxford Dictionary of National Biography



Thomas Gainsborough (1727-1788), *Mr and Mrs Andrews*, c. 1750, 69.08 x 119.04 cm, National Gallery

- This masterpiece of Gainsborough's early years can be seen as a double portrait or as a **conversation piece**. It was painted after his **return home from London** to Suffolk in 1748, soon after the marriage of Robert Andrews of the Auberies and Frances Carter of Ballingdon House, near Sudbury, in November of that year. The estate was two miles from Gainsborough's home and the unusual composition that combines a portrait with a landscape suggests the couple may have had a role in specifying it.
- Having seen many other outdoor conversation pieces we can now see **how different and how radical** Gainsborough's painting was.

References

- Web Gallery of Art



Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), *Mr and Mrs William Hallett ('The Morning Walk')*, 1785, 236 x 179 cm, National Gallery

- The Halletts are shown in their finest clothes taking a stroll through a woodland landscape with their dog. **This format and style of painting was a fashionable status symbol.** The couple, William Hallett and Elizabeth Stephen, were both 21 and due to be married that summer, shortly after the painting was completed.
- William is wearing a black, silk velvet frock-suit and his **apparent carelessness is a studied pose.** The undone jacket and with **one hand tucked** into it is a stance seen in many **fashionable** 18th-century conversation pieces. His feet are at ninety degrees in the pose expected of a gentleman. Elizabeth is in a dress of ivory silk - perhaps her wedding dress - caught at the waist with a black silk band. A frilled muslin kerchief covers her breast, with a knot of grape-green ribbon under it.
- The light, feathery brushstrokes used to describe the landscape are **typical of Gainsborough's late style.** William's hair and Elizabeth's gauzy shawl almost blend into the landscape they walk through. Gainsborough creates an enchanted world where even the ostrich feathers and powdered wigs look as natural as the foliage and woods around them.

References

- The National Gallery



Johann Zoffany (1733–1810), *Self-portrait as David with the head of Goliath*, 1756, 92.2 x 74.7 cm, National Gallery of Victoria

Johann Zoffany (1733–1810), *Portrait of David Garrick*, 1763, 75.2 x 63.2 cm, National Portrait Gallery

- Not a conversation piece but a self-portrait to enable me to introduce the **best known painter of conversation pieces in the eighteenth century**.
- **Johann Zoffany** (1733–1810) was a German neoclassical painter, active mainly in England. In this painting he was 23.
- Zoffany became the leading exponent of the conversation piece in England in the later 18th century. He was **born in Frankfurt** and was trained as a **sculptor** by Martin Speer in Regensburg, where his father was employed as a court architect and cabinet maker. He visited Rome in 1750 and was influenced by the German painter Anton Raphael Mengs (1728-1779) while studying with Agostino Masucci (c. 1691-1758). With the aid of a dowry brought by his recent bride he travelled to London in 1760 and changed his name from Zauffaly. His **poor English** made it difficult to find work as a portrait painter. **He was destitute** and was introduced to a **watchmaker** called **Stephen Rimbault** to work **painting clock faces**. Rimbault introduced him to a **minor portraitist** who liked the clock faces and offered him £40 a year to paint drapery and figures. Through him Zoffany **met** the actor-manager **David Garrick** who became his first major patron. Zoffany became well-known and successful and he was at one time the favourite of George III and although they had their differences their relationship spanned 30 years.
- He first exhibited at the Society of Artists in 1762, becoming a member of the Royal Academy in 1769. He was then active in Florence and Vienna. His work **declined in popularity after his return** to England in **1779**. He exhibited at the academy for the last time in 1800.

- From 1783 to 1789 he worked in Lucknow, India and on his return to England he was shipwrecked off the Andaman Islands. The survivors held a lottery in which the loser (a sailor) was eaten. William Dalrymple thus describes Zoffany as having been '**the first and last Royal Academician to have become a cannibal**'.

Eccentric #7

- **The eccentricity of the English nobility continued into the nineteenth century.** William John Cavendish-Scott-Bentinck, the 5th **Duke of Portland** (1800-1879) for example, was so shy he banned people from his home, Welbeck Abbey in Nottinghamshire. He decided to live underground and built enormous subterranean rooms connected by 15 miles of tunnels including one to take his coach to the local station underground where the coach with its curtained windows was lifted onto a railway carriage.



Johan Joseph Zoffany (1733 - 1810), *David Garrick and his wife by his Temple to Shakespeare, Hampton*, c. 1762, 129.5 x 154.9 cm, Yale Center for British Art

- **David Garrick** (1717–1779) was an **English actor, playwright, theatre manager and producer** who influenced nearly all aspects of theatrical practice throughout the 18th century, and was a pupil and friend of Dr Samuel Johnson. He appeared in a number of amateur theatricals, and with his appearance in the title role of Shakespeare's *Richard III*, audiences and managers began to take notice.
- He purchased a **share of the Drury Lane theatre** and managed it for the next 29 years, during which time it became one of the **leading theatres in Europe**. Three years after he retired he died and is buried in Poets' Corner, Westminster Abbey.
- He introduced the **modern realistic acting style** that departed from the then current bombastic, declamatory style. He also slowly managed to **reform audience behaviour** and achieved consistency in set design, costumes and special effects.
- He had a number of **unsuccessful love affairs**, including possibly fathering a son with Jane Green. He then met Eva Marie Veigel (1724–1822), a German dancer in opera choruses who emigrated to London in 1746. The pair married on 22 June 1749 and were preserved together in several portraits, including one by William Hogarth. The union was childless but happy, Garrick calling her '**the best of women and wives**', and they were **famously inseparable throughout their nearly 30 years of marriage**. Garrick's **increasing wealth** enabled him purchase a **palatial estate for Eva Marie and himself to live in, naming it Garrick's Villa**, that he bought at Hampton in **1754**. He also indulged his passion for Shakespeare by building a **Temple to Shakespeare in 1755** on the riverside at Hampton to house his **collection of memorabilia**. This conversation piece by Zoffany shows Garrick with Eva alongside the Temple to Shakespeare on the Thames at Hampton.
- The **ferry we see has operated since 1514** and was opened to allow fishermen from Hampton to cross to catch fish in the seasonally marshy and reed-laden

Moulsey Hurst, The ferry was incorporated by statute making it one of the ten oldest **companies** in the UK and one of the 150 oldest in Europe. (The oldest company in the UK is *The Bingley Arms* in Yorkshire which was incorporated in 953). The island in the distance is Platts Eyot and the church on the horizon could be St Mary's Church, Walton-on-Thames (the five Norman pillars in the North nave date from 1150 and the tower from 1450).

- This and the next painting were sold at Sotheby's recently to the Garrick Club for £6m (£6.8m including commission).
- Molesey Hurst is one of England's oldest sporting venues and was used in the 18th century for cricket, prizefighting and other sports. In 1603, the year James VI became King of England he played the first game of golf in England on Molesey Hurst. It is one of the oldest locations where organised cricket was played in 1723. In the nineteenth century it became a horse racing track and has also been used for ballooning, sprinting and archery. In the eighteenth century:
 - 1723 – the earliest known use of the site for cricket: Surrey v. London
 - 1726 – mentioned in the *London Evening Post* dated Sat 27 August 1726, in the paper's first year of publication; it carried an advertisement for a single wicket match.
 - 1733 – earliest known use of the site for an inter-county match when Surrey played Middlesex
 - May 1785 – James Sadler made a hot air balloon ascent near here, accompanied by a Member of Parliament, about a year after the success of the Montgolfier Brothers balloon
 - Autumn 1787 – a professional runner named Powell ran a mile in 4 minutes and 3 seconds at Moulsey Hurst in preparation for an attempt on the 4 minute mile
 - August 1795 – in a cricket match at Moulsey Hurst, John Tufton was dismissed leg before wicket (lbw) by John Wells; according to Arthur Haygarth it was the first time lbw had ever been recorded in a scorecard
 - 1798 – a Mr Troward, a member of the Toxophilite Society, shot an arrow on a level piece of ground on Moulsey Hurst seventeen score, or 340 yards



Johann Zoffany, *The Garden at Hampton House, with Mr and Mrs David Garrick taking tea*, 1762

- I include this for local interest as it shows Hurst field, Tagg's Island, the second seven-arched Hampton Court bridge and Hampton Court Palace.

Notes

- David and Eva Maria Garrick sit at the table having tea. To the left is their friend Colonel George Bodens, a noted wit and behind them stands the butler Charles Hart. Around them are three much-loved King Charles spaniels and on the right Garrick's brother George (1723-1779) is fishing.
- To the left there is a **tunnel to Garrick's villa** which was suggested by Capability Brown as an alternative to Garrick's idea of a bridge over the road, leading to Dr. Johnson's famous quip, 'David, David, what can't be over-done, may be under-done.'
- The **weeping willows** (*Salix babylonica*) were prize specimens of a type originally brought from northern Syria between 1692 and 1730. The garden may have been laid out by Capability Brown, a friend of Garrick. Garrick was the first to use a weeping willow and the craze soon caught on and spread to gardens around the country. They may have been inspired by Psalm 137, 'By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.'
- George Garrick's fishing rod points at the new bridge completed nine years previously and the first bridge to be built at Hampton Court. The **first bridge** was built from 1752 until 1753 and opened in December that year, after a 1750 parliamentary bill agreed on the construction of a privately owned bridge by James Clarke. It had **seven wooden arches** and was built in the **Chinoiserie design of the Willow pattern** that was popular at the time, attested by two prints made in the year of its opening and the year after.

- This bridge was replaced by a more sturdy eleven-arch wooden bridge in **1778**. By 1840 this bridge had become dilapidated and the owner appealed to the Corporation of London to support reconstruction. Among their arguments were that since the bridge was built, the City had created Molesey Lock and Weir and as a consequence navigation through the bridge was dangerous. The bridge was described at about this time as "**crazy, hog-backed**, inconvenient and obstructive of the navigation".
- From **1864 to 1865** construction took place of the **third bridge** on the site, and the first to be built in stone. It was built to a design by E. T. Murray and commissioned by the bridge's owner Thomas Allan. The new bridge consisted of wrought iron lattice girders resting on four cast iron columns. The road approach was between battlemented brick walls. An illustrative fragment of these approach walls remains on the south bank immediately west of the bridge. The design was heavily criticised; it was described simply in 1911 by one Historic Gazetteer, the Victoria County Histories as "inartistic". A less diplomatic contemporary commentator called it "**one of the ugliest bridges in England**, and a flagrant eyesore and disfigurement both to the river and to Hampton Court." Despite the criticism, it proved extremely lucrative for Allen, earning him over £3,000 annually in tolls until he was bought out in 1876 for £48,048 by a joint committee of the Hampton and Molesey Local Boards and the Corporation of London.
- The modern bridge is the fourth designed by the Surrey county engineer W. P. Robinson and the architect Sir **Edwin Lutyens** to reflect the style of the portions of Hampton Court Palace designed by Sir Christopher Wren. Construction began in 1930 and it opened on 3 July 1933.



Johann Zoffany (1733–1810), *Queen Charlotte with her Two Eldest Sons*, 1764, 112.2 × 128.3 cm, Royal Collection

- By 1764, Zoffany's patrons were **George III and Queen Charlotte**.
- The setting here is **Buckingham House**, but this time the **King's apartments on the ground floor's garden façade**; these were less redecorated and therefore preserved more of the character of the 1702-5 building. Zoffany has placed the **Queen's dressing table directly in front of the back door** at the centre of the garden façade — **the glimpse of formal garden**, the height of the aperture and the fenestration of the rooms visible beyond admit of no other explanation. **This is clearly a very unlikely** position for a dressing table, and suggests either that the Queen was temporarily occupying these rooms while her apartments above were being redecorated or that **Zoffany has stage-managed the scene** in order to achieve the effect of vistas opening in every direction. The character of the interior is more heterogeneous and in some cases old-fashioned than the other painting: dark-coloured panelling and door surrounds; pier glasses and table in the style of the 1730s.
- There are a French clock by Ferdinand Berthoud, with a case designed by Charles Cressent following a model of the 1730s; Chinese figures; an unidentified overdoor (perhaps depicting Ulysses and Nausicaa) resembling the work of Francesco Zuccarelli; **a lace cover for the dressing table**, supplied by Priscilla MacEune in 1762 for **£1,079 14s**; and similarly modern silver gilt toilet set.
- The image is a **conscious tribute to the great names of Dutch genre painting**, and in particular the work of **Gerard Ter Borch**, as can be seen by comparison with his *Lady at her Toilet* of c.1660 (Detroit Institute of Art, Michigan). Zoffany has created the same **miraculous effect of silk so glossy** that it seems to be a collage of **silver-paper**; like Ter Borch he similarly takes an oblique view of the corner of a room with many other rich stuffs and precious objects; he even follows the same devise

of repeating the sitters face in profile in the mirror. The perspective of the enfilade, chequered with light, pays tribute to the brightly lit interiors of Pieter de Hooch or Emmanuel de Witte (c.1617-92).

- **The moral of Dutch seventeenth-century scenes of ladies dressing is that beauty is transient and that it is vanity to concern yourself with it;** hence the extinguished candle on the table in Ter Borch's painting. **Zoffany turns the moral around:** time is carefully controlled. Father Time appears scythe-bearing on the clock, but he bends down to read the time which is exactly 2.30pm, which means that the Princes have finished their dinner (which since November 1764 they had taken at 2.00pm) and are visiting their mother, after she has dressed (a process which began at 1.00pm), while their governess waits in the room beyond. The Queen will dine with the King at exactly 4.00pm. The splendid and highly formal character of the **Queen's dress** would be regarded at this date **not as a sign of vanity** but of **respect for custom** and ceremony; **strict time-keeping** is the sign of an orderly mistress of a household; playing with children is clearly the action of a devoted and dutiful mother. Even the way in which the view opens onto a formal garden suggests an appreciation of fresh air and Nature which were becoming popular at this time.
- In September 1764 Lady Charlotte Finch (1725-1813), the Princes' governess, in September 1764 ordered 'a **Telemachus Dress for the Prince of Wales and a Turk's for Prince Frederick**'; it is assumed that this is what they wear in this painting. This attire may be associated with a famous educational text of the period, *The Adventures of Telemachus, Son of Ulysses* (1699) by Francois Fénelon, which describes the son of Ulysses travelling round the Mediterranean (like his father) with his advisor, Mentor, and seeing examples of good and bad government. It was written as a scathing criticism of the French monarchy. It may be that the contrast of Turkish and classical costume is just fancy dress: the eighteenth-century equivalent of cowboys and indians. Certainly there is a humour in the way that Prince George holds the dog like a warrior with his charger. **The empty chair at the left side** of the painting, with drum and standard, is surely intended to suggest the person and manly inspiration of the **absent King**.
- Both of Zoffany's images of the royal toddlers were private: **neither was engraved or exhibited at the Society of Arts**, though Zoffany must have wished to advertise such a prestigious commission; both seem to have been given to the elder Prince. Both paintings are examples of the **artist's love of layered reality; of a confusion of real, reflected, painted, carved and embroidered images of the world**. In this dressing-room scene there is more than a suggestion that we may **view the world with the eye of a child, lost in wonderment** at the phantasmagoria of reality and reflection.

References

The Conversation Piece: Scenes of fashionable life, London, 2009



Johann Zoffany (1733-1810), *The Family of William Sharp: Musical Party on the Thames*, 1779-81, 115.6 x 125.7 cm, National Portrait Gallery

- **Johann Zoffany was master of the conversation piece and this is a *tour de force*.**
- **The Sharp family** were living for a while on the **Thames** in a **barge** and would **play music** to entertain guests. Zoffany **painted each person individually over a period of one year.**
- The remarkable Sharp family **gave fortnightly concerts** as an orchestra from the 1750s onwards. This conversation piece, one of Zoffany's masterpieces, commemorates the concerts they gave on board their **sailing barge Apollo at Fulham.**
- The work was commissioned from Zoffany by **William Sharp (1729-1810), surgeon to George III** (although no documentary evidence confirms this). Sharp is seen standing at the tiller, hat raised, wearing the Windsor uniform with its distinctive red collar; his instruments are the French horns which rest on the piano.
- Of his **three brothers**, **Dr John Sharp is on the right** and has laid his cello aside for the moment; **Granville Sharp**, the **famous philanthropist and slavery abolitionist**, holds his favoured **flageolets** in one hand, his clarinet being nearby on the piano; while **James Sharp, an engineer, holds the serpent** (ancestor of the tuba). The **three Sharp sisters** complete the orchestra: **Elizabeth at the piano**, **Judith with music** in hand and, above to the right, **Frances with a theorbo** (a type of lute with an extended neck and two peg boxes) or perhaps an angélique.

Sitters

- William Sharp (1729-1810), Surgeon to George III, at the top on the tiller and waving his tricorne hat.
- Elizabeth Prowse (née Sharp) (1733-1810), sister of Granville and William Sharp, at

the piano.

- Judith Sharp (1733-1809), sister of Granville and William Sharp, holding the music.
- Frances Sharp (1738-1799), sister of Granville and William Sharp, with theorbo or angelica.
- Mary Lloyd-Baker (née Sharp) (1778-1812), daughter of William Sharp.
- Anna Jemima Sharp (born 1762?), daughter of John Sharp.
- Catherine Sharp (née Barwick) (1741?-1814), wife of William Sharp.
- Catherine Sharp (1770-1843), daughter of James Sharp.
- Granville Sharp (1735-1813), scholar and philanthropist, leaning on the piano and holding a flageolet and clarinet.
- James Sharp (1730-1783), ironmaster; brother of Granville and William Sharp, holds a serpent.
- Mrs James Sharp (née Lodge).
- Dr John Sharp (1723-1792), Archdeacon of Northumberland at the bottom right with Mary Sharp (née Dering) (1720-1798) his wife. He has laid his cello aside.

Granville Sharp and Jonathan Strong

- William Sharp treated the London poor and one night he was asked to help a slave beaten by his master. The man was Jonathan Strong and had been beaten so badly he was blind and required four months treatment at St Bartholomew's Hospital. Sharp got him a job with a pharmacist and two years later he was seen and kidnapped by his former owner David Lisle and sold to a Jamaican planter. Strong managed to get a message to Granville Sharp, William's brother, who contacted the Lord Mayor of London who called a hearing and declared Strong a free man. Lisle challenged Granville to a duel but he declined and Lisle took him to court for £200 damages for taking another man's property. The courts sided with the Sharp brothers and from this Granville dedicated the next fifty years, the rest of his life, to the abolition of slavery.



Johan Zoffany (1733-1810), *The Sayer Family of Richmond*, 1781, 101.5 x 127 cm, private collection

- **Robert Sayer was an old friend** and business colleague of Zoffany. Sayer **published and sold the engravings** based on Zoffany's work. Sayer was the leading publisher of engravings in the late 1760 and Zoffany's prints of David Garrick were extremely popular. Sayer also sold engravings from Zoffany's portraits of George III and Queen Charlotte. He also sold maps and by the 1780s was the leading cartographer in London. His maps were used by the British Admiralty until 1820 and by merchant fleets all through the nineteenth century.
- The picture shows Robert Sayer seated with his **second wife Alice Longfield** and his **son James** Sayer, the only surviving offspring from his first marriage. It embodies the usual message of inheritance and dynasty but combined with Zoffany's unique sense of humour. Zoffany can convey through a glance or the tilt of a head a deep physiological insight.
- Here we see the **new Mrs Sayer** has but her **book aside** briefly to **look up at her stepson** as if about to speak to him. Her husband leans forward to listen to the conversation. In addition, the dog and the house add to the drama. Sayer commissioned the work to celebrate his **new wife and his new house**. Zoffany places him beside an oak tree dressed modestly and blending partly into the foliage behind him. The dog looks out with an expression between boredom and irritation and is the only one to look directly out at the viewer. Alice was a wealthy widow whose first husband died aged only 44 followed two years later by her 24 year-old son. The relationship with her new stepson is therefore important. The son, James, is 24 and stands tall and elegant and adopts the pose expected of a gentleman with his **feet splayed at ninety degrees**. He wears the latest smart clothes with polished buckled shoes in contrast with his father's relaxed look. It has been suggested that his old coat with its brass buttons was fashionable in the

1730s and 40s and the wig and wide-brimmed hat are similarly old-fashioned. Is Zoffany suggesting his friend Sayer is out-of-date with fashion compared with his trendy young son?

- Zoffany introduces physiological subtlety and humour by the expressions of each person. Many interpretations are possible, for example, does the father have a sense of expectancy in his eyes or pride suggested by a restrained smile that expresses hope that he will be a deserving heir and form a good relationship with his wife? Or is there a slight note of concern in the pursed lips? His wife looks intently at James but there is a note of expectancy or is it wariness as she tries to gauge the reaction of her new son in advance.
- As David Wilson wrote, for Zoffany 'facial expressions, mannerisms, personal eccentricities, social rituals and material possessions, acted as important indices of behaviour and personal presentation.'
- The house has many of the windows apparently bricked up, perhaps it is Zoffany's joke regarding Sayer's meanness concerning paying windows tax. Windows tax had been introduced in 1696 but it had been increased to a variable rate that depended on the property's value in 1778. The house was built for Sayer between 1777 and 1781 and was later known as Cardigan House; it became part of the British Legion Poppy Factory and was demolished in 1970. At the end of the eighteenth century it was the principal residence of HRH the Duke of Clarence (the future King William IV) and briefly his elder brother George, Prince of Wales. The house was later visited by Queen Alexandra, widow of King Edward VII and by Queen Mary, consort of George V. Note that Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775-1851), *England: Richmond Hill, on the Prince Regent's Birthday* (exhibited 1819) is set further upstream in the grounds of Lansdowne House when Marquess Wellesley lent the house to Dowager Countess of Cardigan for the garden party to celebrate the birthday of the Prince on 12 August 1817.
- The painting shows the earliest known depiction of Richmond Bridge by a well known artist. Richmond grew as a London 'resort' during the eighteenth century. Well known figures such as Joshua Reynolds and Johann Christian Bach built or acquired properties in the area leading to a construction boom and the development of Richmond Hill with its sweeping view of the Thames. Richmond Bridge was completed in 1777 and this enabled Twickenham to develop as it provided easy access to the courts of George III at the Old Palace at Kew. Richmond Bridge was the eighth and is now the oldest bridge over the Thames in Greater London.
- Zoffany died in 1810 at Strand-on-the-Green and is buried in St Anne's Church, Kew.
- **The painting was deaccessioned** by a major US museum and has been turned from 'ugly duckling' into a **swan** by David Wilson's well researched book *Johan*

Zoffany RA and the Sayer Family of Richmond: A Masterpiece of Conversation (2014).

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