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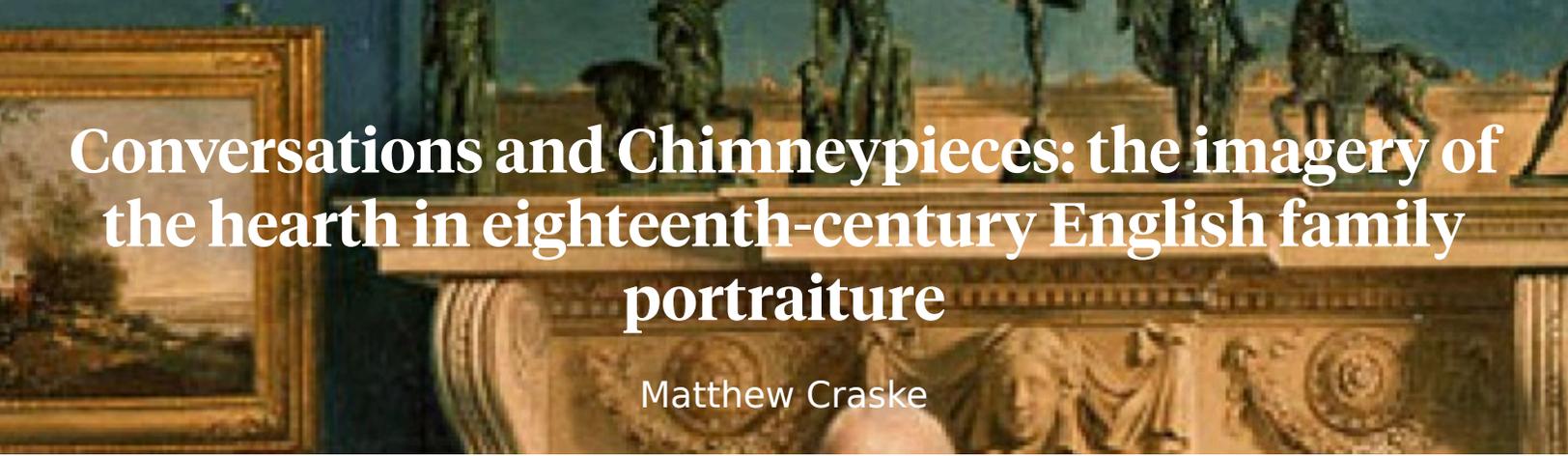


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# Contents

Conversations and Chimneypieces: the imagery of the hearth in eighteenth-century English family portraiture, Matthew Craske



# Conversations and Chimneypieces: the imagery of the hearth in eighteenth-century English family portraiture

Matthew Craske

## Abstract

*This is a study of the conventional settings that were employed by painters of conversation piece portraits in eighteenth-century England. The focus is upon the placement of groups “in conversation” around the hearth, in front of a chimney piece. My argument is that this situation was commonly used because it was understood that the hearth was a desirable place at which to greet one’s guests. I suggest that one of the main functions of the hearth conversation piece was to replicate the experience of meeting hosts who had placed themselves in a highly appropriate location. The main argument here is that this type of portrait generally replicated the experience of a private greeting. I suggest that this type of picture points to the strong connection between conversation piece portraits and rituals of hospitality. Hearth conversations were, it is argued here, not likely to be acts of conspicuous consumption. Similarly, it is unlikely that they functioned to project codes of politeness, as sometimes argued. These pictures undoubtedly reflect notions of good or polite behaviour, particularly as regarded the meeting and greeting of guests. It is, I suggest, open to question whether they were ever intended to promulgate values.*

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## I

The study of the “conversation piece” portrait, in which a family group poses in an elegant interior or garden, is now central to the history of English Georgian art. Such is the obvious relevance of these images to the history of “the family” that they are often used as material evidence in the analysis of domestic order.<sup>1</sup> The recent tendency to define the eighteenth century as a period of “polite sociability” has encouraged scholars to focus on determining the meaning of the “conversation” referred to in these works.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the typical conversational activities represented, from taking tea to playing cards, have attracted the notice of those concerned with tracing the essential rituals of genteel existence. David Solkin, for instance, has interpreted this kind of painting as a mode of exemplifying and fostering ideals of “politeness” as fashioned in the early and mid-Georgian “public sphere”.<sup>3</sup> Meanwhile, social historians have focused on the particularities of these paintings: the identification of sitters, the analysis of their familial grouping, and relationship to specific things.

This kind of focus has, to some degree, diverted attention from the conventional nature of the conversation piece. Types of situation have yet to be categorized, let alone to attract sustained analysis. Looking at such pictures from this perspective allows us to recognize the continuities of setting that they exhibit. Thus, where an indoor scenario was required, a family or couple were typically grouped around an architectural component such as a Serlian window or chimneypiece.<sup>4</sup> In particular, hearth conversation portraits, in which a group gather around a chimneypiece, comprise around a third of surviving interior “small figure” conversation pieces; this being the most popular scenario from the 1730s to 1760s. Sitters who demanded garden settings appear to have been no less conventional in their expectations. In gardens, families were posed around certain conspicuously artificial props, such as a vase or statue on a lawn, a terrace with a fine balustrade, a garden house or temple.<sup>5</sup> Clients who insisted upon being seen in an overtly natural setting were typically placed by the painter beyond the scope of architecture, interior or exterior. The most common convention in these circumstances was to place a tree, usually an oak, at the centre, as a meeting place. This device was employed in such well-known conversation portraits as Johann Zoffany’s two paintings of children of Lord Bute (1763–65) or Thomas Gainsborough’s *Mr and Mrs Andrews* (1748).



**Figure 1.**

Arthur Devis, Mr. and Mrs. Hill, circa 1750-51, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 63.5 cm Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection (B1981.25.226)

In composing settings, some painters, most overtly Arthur Devis, routinely employed a limited range of stock props (fig. 1). Devis's standard scenarios were envisaged as the context for certain proscribed polite postures; his sitters pose in accordance with the recommendations of conduct manuals, in particular François Nivelon's *Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour* (1737).<sup>6</sup> The most prestigious metropolitan purveyors of conversation portraits, led first by William Hogarth and afterwards by Johann Zoffany, distinguished themselves through providing works that more thoughtfully catered to the individual tastes, characteristics, and foibles of their employers.<sup>7</sup> However, these artists were no less dependent upon conventional staging; indeed, their superiority to routine practitioners was expressed in their witty subversion, or charming embellishment, of the stock modes of scene-setting employed by competitors.<sup>8</sup> Thus, whether defining convention or analysing

its variants, it is necessary for the art historian to establish the meaning of compositional constructs, which can be expressed linguistically through phrases such as “grouped beneath a fine tree” or “gathered around the chimney breast”.

In this article, which offers itself as a test-case for such an approach, I shall focus on that most popular of settings within such pictures: the hearth. The types of chimney breasts these paintings customarily depict are modest. They are indicative of a pictorial mode in which it was conventional to eschew such display of wealth as might be censured as luxurious. Marble, as a character in a play by John Aikin stated, “is the luxury of architecture” and the material of the ceremonious “chimneypiece and hearth”.<sup>9</sup> So expensive were premier marble chimneypieces that one architect’s primer by John Carter explicitly advised practitioners that patrons who were not carefully forewarned might balk at, or reject, the bill:

Let the person who proposes a chimney of this kind, or who receives a proposal from his proprietor, first represent to him the expense. This is a very needful article at first setting out, for if it be omitted, he must expect, either that the owner will be startled at the charge, or that the work will disgrace him.<sup>10</sup>

However, even though heavily carved Italian marble chimneypieces became an almost mandatory indication of a high status mid-Georgian dwelling, such works rarely featured in conversation portraits. I have only encountered one painted representation of the second highest order of chimneypiece, the “continued” design where the entire chimney breast was marble, centring upon a substantial high-relief panel above the mantel.<sup>11</sup> There are no paintings that pose families before the most expensive type of all, that with life-size caryatids, or “Persians”, supporting the mantel.



**Figure 2.**

William Hogarth, *Assembly at Wanstead House*, the family and friends of Sir Richard Child, Viscount Castlemaine, circa 1729–31, oil on canvas, 64.7 × 76.2 cm Digital image courtesy of Philadelphia Museum of Art: The John Howard McFadden Collection, 1928

Instead, the painters of hearth scenes preferred to set the scene in “family rooms”, in which mundane and intimate sociability was expected. In so doing, they left unrepresented what John Cornforth has defined as the chambers of “state” or “parade” that were reserved for ceremonious hospitality.<sup>12</sup> In this respect, Hogarth’s famous conversation piece, *Assembly at Wanstead House* (fig. 2), is extremely atypical in that it seems to feature an accurate representation of a large, convivial but distinctly stately, dynastic gathering before an impressive marble hearth in one of most magnificent reception rooms of a retirement palace which was famous, even notorious, for its grandeur.<sup>13</sup> Hearth “conversations”, in their focus on somewhat more modest interiors, were, in this regard, well suited to the social circumstances of provincial gentry families; an actuality that probably explains the great number of hearth portraits made by Arthur Devis, who catered specifically to the provincial gentry of the Midlands and North of England. Such clients, who aspired to affluent respectability rather than magnificence, generally did not own “state” chambers. As a consequence, their highest social expectation was to conduct a display of decency in a room modestly fitted out to receive company. The interiors of the conversation pieces they commissioned tended, as Lorna Weatherill has

observed, to represent the height of material aspirations for gentry families.<sup>14</sup> By contrast, dynasties which moved in the grandest metropolitan social circles, of the kind which commissioned hearth conversations from Hogarth and Zoffany, seem to have employed this conspicuously intimate form of portrait to celebrate a calculatedly understated form of hospitality. For the clients of these painters, as opposed to those of Devis, a conversation piece was regarded as a suitable format for “in-house” or “in-joke” forms of pictorial narrative. These pictures were primarily intended for the intimate observer. It was not simply that metropolitan sophisticates could afford to engage painters capable of wit or playfulness, such as Hogarth, Francis Hayman, and Zoffany. Rather, I would suggest, this class of person was more likely to adopt an air of informality, in which they revealed foibles suitable for exposure to privileged guests, and which was distinct from their capacity to conduct hospitality of a more formal and “stately” character. Art historians have debated whether the small figure conversation piece is essentially bourgeois or aristocratic in character.<sup>15</sup> This essay argues, instead, that it became suitable for a wide range of social “conversations”, above the level of “the middling sort”.<sup>16</sup> Yet, although conventions of scene-setting applied across classes, it seems that the tenor of social introductions varied considerably according to the cultural sophistication of the hosts, just as in the case of an actual invitation to tea or cards.

## II

As Isaac Ware asserted in *A Complete Body of Architecture* (1756), the hearth was typically the centre of attention in a well-appointed room; architects were advised to begin with the chimneypiece and plan a room to suit its proportions. Ware compared the significance of a chimneypiece within interior architecture to that of a portico in exterior design. Both components provided the essential point of determination from which to measure the proportion and character of all other, secondary, elements of “decorative architecture”:

The rule being established with respect to outside decorations, must therefore hold, according to what we have shown, with regard to those within. It follows therefore, that the chimneypiece being the first thing designed, and the fixed point from which an architect is to direct his work in the rest, all is to rise from it in a like proportion.<sup>17</sup>

Ware advocated a fresh response to decorative architecture and chimneypiece design. Formerly, in the 1720s and 1730s, such components had been the subject of a pattern-book approach to interior decoration; the

central indication of the importance of chimneypieces to English architecture being the sheer number of variants that were suggested to the solution of adorning the hearth. <sup>18</sup> From the mid-1750s onwards, however, attention shifted to a literary codification of decorative architecture. “Rules” of decorum were prescribed. This determined that a chimneypiece should be appropriate, whether in architectonic character or carved subject matter, to the kind of room in which it was placed. Following Ware, William Chambers, in his *Treatise on Civil Architecture* (1759), promoted the understanding that the architect who adorned the chimney breast was responsible for setting a moral and aesthetic tone for the household. <sup>19</sup> Both architects deplored the nude figures that were essential to the most ostentatious chimneypieces, which included “caryatid” and “Persian” supporting figures. These figurative elements were supposed to subvert domestic morals. Chambers advised that:

All nudities, and indecent representations must be avoided in chimneypieces and, indeed, in every other ornament of an apartment to which children, ladies and other modest and grave persons, have constant recourse. <sup>20</sup>

For Ware, who thought his professional responsibility was to protect “delicate” sensibilities, male nudity was the greatest problem. <sup>21</sup> He saw the virtue of female spectators as compromised by the life-size muscular males who were deployed as fictive props to premier mantelpieces:

Modern sculptors are fond of nudities; but in a chimneypiece it would be abominable; they would shock the delicacy of our sex and could not be seen by the modesty of the other . . . Let no statuary here object, that the great excellence of his art is withheld, for that it would consist of muscular figures. We banish anatomy from the parlour of the polite gentleman: that is all. <sup>22</sup>

By the mid-eighteenth century, the chimney breast had become an acknowledged locus for the definition of domestic morals for the full range of the propertied classes. By 1763, the national tendency to regard the chimney breast as the repository of domestic virtues was so familiar as to be theatrically lampooned by Isaac Bickerstaffe in his comic opera, *Love in the Village*. A lady’s sewing mania is here satirized in order to subvert the notion of “homespun” wisdom. She boasts to have stitched “the creed and the ten commandments in the hair of our family” and to have had the image “framed and glazed and hung over the chimneypiece in the parlour”. <sup>23</sup>

Furthermore, the hearth became a sacrosanct locus of a particularly *English* domesticity. From John Aheron's *General Treatise on Architecture* (1754) onwards, architectural treatises in the English language recognized the adornment of the chimney breast as a distinctive national concern.<sup>24</sup> George Richardson, who published a whole book on chimneypiece design in 1781, justified his project by claiming that he catered to an established and defining artistic preoccupation of the English:

Neither the French nor Italians have been famous in compositions for chimneys, their productions of this sort in common are whimsical fancies, at present this country surpasses all other nations with respect to magnificent chimneypiece, not only in point of expense, but likewise in taste and goodness of workmanship.<sup>25</sup>

Richardson took his nationalistic cue from Chambers's *Treatise on Civil Architecture*, which argued that the chimneypiece was, owing to the damp chill of the climate, the natural art form of the English:

The chimneypiece was not with them [foreigners from "hotter countries"], as it is with us, a part of such essential importance, that no common room, plain or elegant, could be constructed without it. The eye is immediately cast upon it when entering, and the place of sitting down is naturally near it. By this means it becomes the most eminent thing in the furnishing of the apartment . . .<sup>26</sup>

By these criteria, the Englishman could be expected, as a matter of natural inclination and cultural tradition, to seek out the hearth as he entered a room. English conversation piece portraits which assume the chimneypiece as a central focal point, and group their sitters around it, can reasonably be supposed to have followed a similar understanding of national social rituals.

In seeking to trace the origins of the tendency in English domestic lore to pay honour to the chimney breast, it is important to remember that the portrait painter's convention of posing a family before the hearth was not itself invented in England, nor did it have a particular currency in that country before the 1730s. Grand seventeenth-century family groups, as conceived in the courtly tradition established by Van Dyke, did not employ such mundane, functional props as chimney breasts. In this milieu of portraiture, architecture typically had no prosaic function, the preferred context of posturing being the heavily swagged, richly columned, garden pavilion.<sup>27</sup> Rather, it was

through the process of inventing the “small figure” conversation portrait, a type conspicuously at odds with traditions of aristocratic magnificence established in the Stuart court, that hearth imagery rose to the fore in English portraiture. “Small figure” conversations borrowed their scale and general sense of spatial relationship of figure to interior, from mid-seventeenth-century Dutch and Flemish cabinet paintings.<sup>28</sup> Given that much of this kind of painting commonly centred upon groups conversing before the chimney breast, there can be little doubt that they provided the fundamental prototypes which English portrait painters adapted. The group portrait by Gabriel Metsu known as *The Family of the Burgermeister, Dr. Gillis Valckeneir* (ca. 1675), anticipated by more than fifty years the hearth “conversations” of Hogarth.<sup>29</sup> The identification of “hearth” with “home” seems, thus, to have derived from the “Golden Age” culture which first defined pictorially the ideals of bourgeois Protestantism. The idea of expressing this ideal through group portraiture began, in the 1730s, to enjoy particular appeal in England. It was also in this decade that representatives of important English dynasties, seeking to entertain in “state”, began to make overt visual reference to the supposed “sacredness” of the ancestral hearth in decorating the great reception rooms of their dynastic seats. Employing marble sculpture to draw attention to the “ancient” traditions of hearth hospitality was clearly the province of the national political elite. By contrast, the “modern” hearth conversation was primarily suited to “bourgeois” modes of domestic living. Yet, particularly in the hands of highly prestigious metropolitan painters such as Hogarth and Zoffany, it clearly had applications to aristocratic and even to princely circumstances.

### III

When British architectural theorists codified the design of chimneypieces they were patently conscious that this was a modern form. There was broad agreement that nothing like a chimneypiece had been discovered in an archaeological investigation of an ancient classical site. George Richardson wrote that:

Among the ruins of ancient buildings which the author has seen and examined in Rome, throughout Italy and the south of France, he has not found any chimney in the manner of ours, nor even the smallest hint in favour of that opinion.<sup>30</sup>

Architectural writers advising on the design of chimneys and their adornments for classicizing apartments were thus required to integrate this modern form within an ancient decorative vocabulary. To help naturalize this process, a sense of the special significance of the hearth as the centre of the

modern English home was grafted onto an awareness that “the ancients” had regarded this locus as sacred to the family and its hospitality.<sup>31</sup> The most important ancient authors, Homer and Virgil, wrote in honour of the “sacred hearth”.<sup>32</sup> Pope in his notes upon his translation of Homer’s *Odyssey* described how the “genial hearth”, as sacred to Vesta, was regarded as a “place of refuge”.<sup>33</sup> As, in the ancient world, a man sought domestic sanctuary at his hearth, and it was the greatest of defilements to attack or denigrate him at this “hospitable” place.<sup>34</sup> For the Romans, the hearth had been sacred to ancestry. It was the essential province of the benign goddess of domestic accord, Vesta, and the residence of the most important household gods, the *lares* and *penates*.<sup>35</sup> The “images” of ancestors were stored in cupboards near to the main hearth, where they declared the legitimacy of a dynasty’s claim to be a bloodline of significance to the public weal.<sup>36</sup> In Georgian Britain, those who placed busts of honoured family members or political heroes and statues of gods appropriate to the spirit of the home on, or around, the chimneypiece, probably took their cue from such ancient precedent. Such was the vogue for erecting sculptured images of household gods on mantels that in 1756 *The Connoisseur* suggested, in jest, that a tax should be placed upon the practice. The English, it was claimed, were characterized by “the *Penates* in our libraries and *Lares* on every chimneypiece”.

From the 1730s onwards, sculptors and architects decorating the great English ancestral seats celebrated the ancient association of the hearth with sacredness through placing relief renditions of scenes of Roman sacrifice above or below the mantel. Solemn and ceremonious in character, such references to ancient fire rituals generally applied to the state rooms of dynasties at the pinnacle of the social pyramid. Michael Rysbrack helped to establish this tradition with the chimneypieces he produced for the great state entertainment chambers at Houghton and Clandon.<sup>37</sup> In the Stone Hall at Houghton, a sacrifice scene was situated directly above the bust on the mantel of Robert Walpole, the dynasty’s *paterfamilias* and the nation’s premier statesman. Immediately above, in the stucco ceiling, appeared portraits of his heirs and relations. This iconography recalled the understanding that the great classical atriums of consequential ancestral seats were places of ceremonial hospitality necessary to the social life of a man in public affairs. Here, by Roman tradition, visitors were introduced to a dynasty of consequence through the assembled “images” of family members and ancestors. Sir Richard Colt Hoare wrote, at the close of George III’s reign, of his decision to fill the atrium at Stourhead with portraits:

Family portraits [are] a very appropriate decoration for the first entrance into a house . . . They remind us of the genealogy of our families, and recall to our minds the hospitality, & co., of its former inhabitants, and on the first entrance of the friend, or stranger, seem to greet them with a SALVE or welcome.<sup>38</sup>

The employment of Latin in this quotation reminds us that the ultimate source of the tendency to regard the assemblages of portraits as a form of introduction “to friends and strangers” was in classical writing and practice.<sup>39</sup> Despite these “ancient” associations, the eighteenth-century English hearth was open to being celebrated in distinctly “modern”, even modish, ways. The hearth conversation portrait was among several fashions of this sort. It also became customary to keep the finely printed appointment cards, by which persons established and remembered their social engagements, on the mantelpiece.<sup>40</sup>

Furthermore, there were instances when the chimneypiece was reconstituted as a political shrine or tomb. These functions were observed in a pair of chimneypieces made by Joseph Wilton, to the designs of Joseph Gandon, for the once-famous library of Lord Charlemont’s Dublin townhouse. Here, one chimneypiece was equipped with a bust and long monumental inscription to General Wolfe. Another was conceived as a place sacred to the head of Charlemont’s Whig clan, Lord Rockingham, whose bust was attended by a long honorific inscription.<sup>41</sup> The monumental implications of the common practice of adorning mantels with busts were occasionally explicit. A bust completed by Peter Scheemakers in 1764 of the recently deceased Sir Paul Methuen (d. 1757), was placed in the grand picture gallery of Corsham Court, designed by Capability Brown to house his bequeathed collection. Accompanied by a monumental inscription and placed at the centre of the mantel, this bust defined the picture collection as Methuen’s domestic monument. It was a replica, and the inscription an abbreviated variant, of that placed upon Methuen’s slightly earlier monument in Westminster Abbey.

The association of the hearth with domestic veneration, whether of a blood ancestor or a sponsor of the family, is frequently manifest in the imagery of hearth conversation portraits. Francis Hayman, who produced numerous hearth conversations for London’s culturally sophisticated bourgeoisie, invoked the notion of the tributary chimney breasts in his portrait of the family of Jonathon Tyers, manager of Vauxhall Gardens (fig. 3).<sup>42</sup> He gathered the Tyers family around a chimneypiece, above which is represented a sculpted rendition of the bust of the prime sponsor of the family business, Frederick, Prince of Wales. In numerous conversation portraits painted for the northern English gentry by Arthur Devis, the

chimney breast is conceived as a mount for icons of the family, painted or sculpted.<sup>43</sup> This is the conceit of the portrait of John Orde (1702–1767) and his spouse welcoming to the family hearth their son and heir, Thomas (1746–1807), who brings a gift of a shot bird (fig. 4). This painting appears to commemorate some dynastic coming-of-age ritual, which has the blessing of dead ancestral benefactors who appear, in the form of busts, on the chimney breast.<sup>44</sup> Such was the association of the hearth with expressing honour to a patron, political hero, or ancestor, that for the head of the household to place above it an image of himself was a recognized indication of impropriety and pomposity. This was the kernel of a joke at the centre of Zoffany’s painting of a scene in Frederick Reynolds’s play, *Speculation* (fig. 5). Here the pomposity of the central character, “Alderman Arable”, is suggested by showing him seated before a grand chimneypiece surmounted by his own full-length portrait in City garb. Given that this is a satire upon vanity and luxury, it is significant that the chimneypiece represented here, with a lavish classical scene carved below the mantel, is much the grandest specimen in a “conversation” painting by Zoffany.



**Figure 3.**

Francis Hayman, Jonathan Tyers and his family, 1740, oil on canvas, 77.8 mm × 106.2 cm Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London



**Figure 4.**

Arthur Devis, John Orde, His Wife, Anne, His Eldest Son, William, and a Servant, 1754-56, oil on canvas, 94 × 96.2 cm Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection



**Figure 5.**

Johann Zoffany, William Thomas Lewis, Joseph Shepherd Munden, John Quick, and Tryphosa Jane Wallis, in Scene from "Speculation", 1796, oil on canvas, 102 x 128 cm Digital image courtesy of The Garrick Club

The mounting of ancestral busts on the mantel, as seen in the Orde conversation, echoed the iconographic conventions of contemporary funeral monuments; there was a simultaneous fashion for tombs that took the form of an architectural platform for "images" conceived as statements of legitimate succession.<sup>45</sup> One way of comprehending the hearth conversation piece, perhaps, is as a variant upon a church monument, and upon the function of such monuments in establishing patterns of succession, here adapted to the less sombre inflections of the living home environment. This relationship is particularly evident in a conversation piece by Hogarth depicting the performance of Dryden's play *The Conquest of Mexico* in the London house of Isaac Newton's heir, John Conduitt (1732-35; fig. 6).<sup>46</sup> The painting seems, literally, to play upon the solemn, tomb-like inflections of the ancestral hearth. One way of interpreting this picture is as a gentle subversion of the understanding that a hearth was a place of highly serious family drama. As is seldom noted, the part of the *Conquest* being performed in this painting (Act IV, scene iv) was, as can be seen from the contrast between the sombre prison setting and charming child actors on the stage below, a sophisticated tragicomic experience. Centred upon scenes of romantic attachment, confinement, and torture, this play was not obviously applicable to being performed, as we see it here, by children. The nature of the joke may well be inferred by the spectacle of the children's tutor, Dr

Desaguliers, in the dark wings, seeming to prompt the children as they stumble through their complex lines.<sup>47</sup> The employment in this humble role of Desaguliers, a figure otherwise famous for his serious mission of promoting Newton's ideas in the public realm, may well be part of the joke of this painting. He is situated behind a classical statue of a goddess that recalls, through its physical attachment to the hearth, the Roman cult of the *lares* and *penates*. The position of the figure exactly tallies with the definition of the *lares* provided in Ephraim Chambers's *Cyclopaedia* (1741):

**Lares**, among the ancients, a kind of domestic genii, worshipped in houses, the esteemed guardians and protectors of families; supposed to reside more immediately in the chimney corner.<sup>48</sup>

In this case, the imagery seems to suggest that the god of this household is theatrical, for the female figure clearly bears a classical actor's mask. Suitable to the tragicomic nature of Dryden's play, and to the comedic inflections of children playing such tortured roles, it is uncertain whether the figure represents Comedy or Tragedy, for the mouth of the mask seems purposefully hidden in the shadows. Yet, she is accompanied by a small faun playing pan pipes, which is indicative of the iconography of comedy. The gaze of this statue is clearly directed towards the bust of Newton that is set on the mantel, establishing the suggestion of a light-hearted reflection upon the redeployment for children's play of a place sacred to an ancestor famed for the most serious of philosophical reflections.



**Figure 6.**

William Hogarth, *The Conduitt Piece, a performance of Dryden's 'The Indian Emperor, or The Conquest of Mexico by the Spaniards' in the house of John Conduitt*, circa 1732-35, oil on canvas, 80 x 146.7 cm Digital image courtesy of Private Collection

Hogarth seems here to be making witty reference to the way in which children literally play with the sacred dynastic legacy of their elders. The portrait gently commemorates the movement of Conduitt's family into the courtly elite. The picture shows a group, including the young Duke of Cumberland and Princesses Louisa and Mary, watching Conduitt's sole heir, a daughter who was to marry into a peerage family. She performs with two children from a noble family. The entitlement of the family to move in exalted circles is asserted by the presence of the pseudo-Roman bust of Isaac Newton that dominates the mantel before which invited guests gather. On the chimney breast are also seen the portraits of the absent hosts, John Conduitt and his wife, the natural philosopher's niece. The visual proximity of their images to Newton's bust, set above the mantel in conjunction with a cast of a relief panel that appeared on the philosopher's tomb in Westminster Abbey, is essential to the monumental inflections of the painting.<sup>49</sup> This relief, indeed, may well have been the prompt for the charming comedy of the painting. It featured playful boys bearing emblems of Newton's achievement, who, like the children below, render charming a serious point of family honour and public circumstance. Indeed, Conduitt (who died in

1737, shortly after this painting was completed) had willed that he should be buried close to Newton's monument, for which he had paid.<sup>50</sup> John Conduitt's family erected a monument to him on the west wall of the Abbey, which was designed to be received as a pair with that of the philosopher. The presence of classicizing commemorative statuary establishes a sense of an antique hearth, sacred to the pieties of ancestral inheritance. Fittingly, it was the daughter of the painted couple, their sole heir, who was depicted as the main performer on the stage in front of the hearth. Yet, she does not here take the role of a starched representative of her dynasty. Rather, she recites her lines with a typically child-like incompetence that requires the anxious prompting of her tutor. The audience of royal and noble children immediately before the hearth do not misbehave, they communicate the charming artlessness of their years. They exist, literally, in the shadow of the most serious mind of the modern age, yet they are neither conspicuously beholden, nor is this their elder's indulgent expectation.

There had been a strong post-Reformation tradition of conceiving this locus of the home in the manner of a tomb.<sup>51</sup> Chimney breasts, like the canopies of funeral monuments, were frequently encrusted with complex armorial diagrams of dynasties (fig. 7). This practice did not die out in the eighteenth century, when a few great houses, such as Burton Constable and Boughton House, were fitted with conspicuous heraldic mantel adornments.<sup>52</sup> In the Georgian era, the chimney breast could function as a platform for family busts; the faces of relatives and ancestors replacing earlier heraldic abstractions in the communication of a family's lineage. However, the idea of depicting family groups in conversation before the hearth, sometimes placed in contrast to the static iconic presence of dead relations or patrons, offered a conceptualization of the family that was far more immediate than that conveyed by sculptural adornment. Unlike the busts which were customary upon funeral monuments, conversation portraits had no established role in the iconography of death; rather the family relationships recorded through conversational art were emphatically lively. A dynasty was literally brought to life at the same time as it was recorded for posterity, in a manner that had considerably greater emotive resonance than would an abstract family tree. The family laid out for the viewer before the mantel by Georgian portraitists might be an extended cousinhood, as in paintings such as Hogarth's *Assembly at Wanstead House* (fig. 2) and *Wollaston Family*. Generally, however, they were a small and affectionate group, as in Hayman's *Tyers Family* (fig. 3) or, later, in Zoffany's portraits of the *Dutton Family* (fig. 8) and *Willoughby de Brooke Family*. Through such imagery, the pompous, dynastic post-Reformation armorial hearth was translated into a form in which the family was reconceived as an institution of affectionate "conversation".<sup>53</sup>



**Figure 7.**  
Tudor timber fireplace, circa 1560s Digital image courtesy of The Library  
at Combermere Abbey



**Figure 8.**

Johann Zoffany, *The Dutton Family*, 1771–72, oil on canvas, 101.5 × 127 cm Digital image courtesy of Private Collection

Having first been realized in the 1730s, the understanding that a conversation piece constituted an option to display a more intimate vision of the family than other types of portrait available to patrons was maintained into the late eighteenth century. One important hearth conversation piece, Philip Reinagle's *Mrs Congreve and Family* (ca. 1785), seems to make similar points to Hogarth's *Conquest of Mexico* concerning the function of the hearth conversation as an alternative to more formal and public modes of revealing a family through portraiture. A hearth scenario has here been chosen as the appropriate format in which to represent the domestic relationships of a patron's wife to her youngest children. They sit in front of Reinagle's recently painted (ca. 1782) conversation portrait of the absent father of the family, General Congreve, and his eldest son, performing manoeuvres at Woolwich Military Academy. This imagery seems to define the outdoor conversation as, in this case, a more fitting format for encountering the family's men of action.<sup>54</sup> A contrast between the hearth as a forum for private child's play, and the outdoors as a public realm of adult activity, is made through the clever deployment of ballistic imagery. The youngest male child is playing with a small model of a siege cannon on a hearth table of the kind conventionally seen in this type of image. In the painting behind, the toddler's elder brother, who has reached a sufficient maturity to begin his training, takes part in real military exercises. He stands with his father before a rugged cliff, up which engineers haul a heavy cannon. This depicted

martial conversation piece is itself surrounded by a range of other family portraits, which introduce the dynasty in different guises. Above the mantel, in the traditional position of “sacred” honour, is encountered the most famous ancestor of the family, and ultimate *paterfamilias*, the playwright, William Congreve. Reinagle here created, as had Hogarth in *The Conquest of Mexico*, a portrait about portraiture; revealing pictorially the capability of the most economically successful representatives of the professional classes to celebrate their dynastic identity in a succession of contrasting portrait images.

The hearth conversation piece, then, demands to be understood in its original domestic environment: as a conventional option in the panoply of equally conventional types of portrait. It advanced an invitation to view the family that was likely to be manifestly more privileged, and revealing of intimacies, than other portraits accumulated by a household. Yet it is debatable whether the basic mode of invitation which such paintings, right through the century, seem to represent was ever radically revised from that operative in the 1730s. This essay is distinct from other approaches to conversation piece portraiture in the degree of importance that it attaches to its conventional character. From this stance, it is to be expected that conformity with traditional kinds of address is given priority over the narratives of transformative change in familial culture that have tended to be emphasized by previous historians of the genre. This essay shifts the scholarly agenda away from charting how portraiture developed under a gradually intensifying pressure to communicate some model of the “affective nuclear” family; rather, what appears to be at stake is the development of a new range of ways of employing art to celebrate domestic relationships. The hearth conversation piece was redolent of the most relaxed dimension of sociability: “family room” hospitality. The formation of this kind of hospitality did not necessarily reflect a cultural movement away from formal dynastic “parade”. On the contrary: families can be considered to have developed this kind of informal sociability, as John Cornforth implies, to escape some of the rigours of “state” hospitality in which more formal dynastic theatre was in demand.<sup>55</sup> In this regard, the rise of the “conversation” portrait might be interpreted as an indication of an intensification in the obligations of dynasties to “parade”, rather than as an indication of the development of “polite society” towards relaxed modes of congress.

#### IV

An important element of the hearth conversation piece is its literalism. The proposition that these paintings, though designed to operate within a culture where familial bonds could be considered as having a “sacred” or classically rooted character, also provided for those viewers who elected not to relate to such abstract concepts, is strongly supported by the evidence that they were

intended to replicate actual and ordinary experience. More specifically, many paintings have details suggestive of an intention to represent the sensation of meeting the family as arranged before the hearth in expectation of receiving guests.<sup>56</sup> Occasionally, the imagery makes clear that those depicted await company, as in Arthur Devis's portrait of Mr and Mrs Hill (ca. 1750-51, see [fig. 1](#)); the couple, the only persons in the room, stand before a tea table set with seven cups.<sup>57</sup> A vital factor in comprehending these paintings is that the viewer of the image was encouraged to feel as though he or she were meeting the family in accordance with established conventions of proffering hospitality. These dictated that a familiar guest, having been received through the main portal by a servant, would be conducted directly to a reception room, where the family, or host, would be prepared to grant welcome.<sup>58</sup> By convention, the hearth, as the visual focal point in its scheme of decoration, was construed as the best place to play host. Such was the literalism of the convention that there is a remarkable preponderance, across the subgenre, of chimney breasts that have been stripped of their grates for the summer season, temporarily boarded over or adorned with a vase of flowers.<sup>59</sup> Where windows also appear in the image, the prospect of green leaves generally emphasizes further the situation of the scene in the period of the year when families tended to return to their estates to avoid the heat of the town and enjoy the countryside. High summer, also the typical time of year celebrated in outdoor conversation pieces, was the main period in which guests were received at family seats.

The typical viewpoint of a hearth conversation piece replicates the experience of entering a reception room. In the majority of cases, the perspective is that of a central viewpoint with the chimneypiece seen directly from the front; the family being symmetrically disposed around the chimney breast to greet the viewer. A second convention placed the family before a hearth that was seen, in foreshortened perspective, on an end wall. In both traditions, the convention conformed with the advice of William Chambers in his *Treatise* of 1759, that the chimneypiece should be sited at some remove from the main entrance to a room to allow a host to greet his or her guest from before the hearth:

The chimney should always be situated so as to be easily seen by those who enter the room, that they may not have the persons already in the room, who are generally seated near the fire, to look for.<sup>60</sup>

Taking Chambers's standards of design as a guide to proper conduct, it seems that painters of conversation portraits recreated the correct ritual of welcome. In this respect, such paintings are a highly literal expression of

politeness. The literalism of this convention is occasionally made plain by the presence of an empty chair awaiting the guest and viewer. Arthur Devis's portrait of John Smith Barry, his wife, Dorothy, and two children (Marbury Hall Cheshire, ca. 1735) is typical. The focus of the viewer is on the male head of the family, standing before the chimneypiece. He looks directly at the viewer and leans against an empty chair, as if to offer a seat.

It is significant that the majority of these hearth conversations featured a small portable table that was placed before the hearth.<sup>61</sup> This was often set with tea, a hand of cards, or an open document, in such a manner as to create the impression that the viewer is invited to join the company. On account of its portability, a hearth table of this kind articulated the duty of the host to make his or her guest aware that the room had been purposefully prepared for their reception. These modest, though elegant, tables reminded the viewer of the character of the conversation piece itself: that of a permanent testimony to a temporary gesture of welcome. The table and the chimneypiece had contrasting functions in these dramas of hearth hospitality; the portability of the former contrasting with the fixed presence of the latter. As a temporary forum for shared activities, the table was regarded as a place of disclosure and welcome. The chimneypiece and hearth, a solid vertical presence beyond this temporary horizontal surface, was the host family's permanent inner-sanctum.



**Figure 9.**

Johann Zoffany, *Sir Lawrence Dundas and his Grandson*, 1769–70, oil on canvas, 101.5 × 127 cm Digital image courtesy of The Art Archive / Marquess of Zetland / Eileen Tweedy

With literalism of experience being central to the function of this kind of painting, it follows that excellence in the genre was often defined in terms of fidelity to actual sensation. In this respect, it is useful to compare Devis's image of the family of John Smith Barry, with Zoffany's portrait of Sir Lawrence Dundas and his grandson (fig. 9). When Zoffany inherited the tradition of the hearth conversation piece in the 1760s, it was a tradition more than thirty years old. His response seems to have been to adapt established types of composition along the lines set by Hogarth; handling the social drama of the conversation with wit and taking strict care to reproduce the actual interiors that his clients would recognize.<sup>62</sup> In the decades before Zoffany arrived in England, Devis had employed generic situations in the majority of his family conversations: the same hearth table, painting, or chimneypiece appearing in numerous works. Zoffany, by comparison, was careful to reproduce in loving detail every element of a room in 19 Arlington Street as it appeared in about 1769.<sup>63</sup> Yet, in constructing this record, Zoffany also appropriated the traditions utilized by Devis. Like Devis's patron and main male subject, Lawrence Dundas acts as welcoming host to the imagined viewer, who approaches in the conventional manner from a door in line with the mantel. An empty chair awaits this viewer, in a manner far more skilfully devised to make the viewer feel the invitation to sit down. The notion of witness to an act that defines the family is also more overt than in Devis's

painting. There is a clear impression that Dundas is presenting to his guest the infant (born 1766), who was defined by law of entail as his heir in the next generation, to the viewer.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, much as Dundas had recently been granted the title of baronet, which was inheritable in perpetuity, the painting ably communicates the dynastic significance of grandfather to grandchild. The conventional hearth table is spread with an open body of papers, with the empty chair drawn up to allow for their consultation. These details seem to have been important, because Zoffany deviated from his impeccable perspective to tilt the table and show them clearly. Giles Worsley believed, with good reason, from the seals and bindings, that these were formal documents, rather than letters. The figure of Dundas clearly points to a quill pen on the table as an invitation to the viewer to sign. One possibility, given that his grandson is at the other hand, is that these papers are representative of a will. Dundas had provided for this boy, the first born of his eldest son, as the eventual inheritor of the heirlooms that surround the two figures in Zoffany's painting.<sup>65</sup> The implication of the pointing gesture is that the viewer is invited to sign the pictured documents, suggesting that Zoffany and his patron regarded the painting as a symbolic form of witness.<sup>66</sup>

This scene, therefore, seems knowingly to proceed from the classical tradition of regarding the hearth as sacred to rites of patriarchal succession. By contrast to Devis, who mainly created entirely generic hearth scenes, Zoffany was careful to produce a precise representation of a particular chimneypiece that had an established significance to his patron. Such was Dundas's concern to define his architectural taste through his discernment in the field of chimneypieces that he later functioned as dedicatee of George Richardson's *A New Selection of Chimneypieces*. Published in 1781, the year of its patron's death, this book begins with a glowing tribute to Dundas's classical learning, as witnessed in his taste for chimneypieces.<sup>67</sup> Zoffany's care to make this painting a faithful witness of Dundas's taste, as well as the terms of his dynastic succession, was also displayed in the care taken to adorn the mantel with an assortment of bronzes that Dundas is known to have possessed.<sup>68</sup>



**Figure 10.**

Bernard Baron after William Hogarth, *Marriage à-la-Mode*, Plate II: The Breakfast Scene, 1745, engraving, dimensions unknown Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art

The fashion of adorning the chimneypiece with classical statuary, as recorded in the Dundas conversation, seems to have been a phenomenon of the second half of the eighteenth century.<sup>69</sup> It was one of a number of alternatives to the much criticized early and mid-eighteenth-century practice of loading the mantel with oriental ornaments; the most ridiculed tradition being for fatuously sage “Mandarin” figures, equipped with nodding heads.<sup>70</sup> One of Josiah Wedgwood’s contributions to national manners was his design of ranges of classical ornaments which displaced “exotics” in the national favour. One of those to praise Wedgwood for this type of innovation was John Ireland, who supplied one of the first literary glosses upon Hogarth’s prints. The context of Ireland’s eulogy upon Wedgwood was his review of the second print in the *Marriage à-la-Mode* series (1743). Wedgwood was praised for providing “beautiful Etruscan forms” to substitute for “the grotesque and fantastic ornaments” that Hogarth included on the mantel of the dissipated “Viscount Squanderfield” as an emblem of his modish tastelessness. It is an indication of the Viscount’s luxuriant excesses that he has equipped his mantel with not one, but two, “nodding mandarins”. A broken-nosed antique bust resides in the centre of the mantel, that position where it was customary to place a bust of an honoured relation or family patron. The point here was, probably, to sustain the theme of the first image of the series: that

this was a couple who lacked an honourable example of parenting and put fashion before moral substance (fig. 10).<sup>71</sup> In this instance the “mode” that was censured was that for collecting archaeologically recovered antiquities.

This image was clearly a knowing satire upon the conventions observed in the conversation pieces of jobbing painters such as Devis, in which a couple were stiffly seated before the hearth, their chairs turned attentively upon each other to symbolize their union. Hogarth lounged his dissolute pair on chairs diagonal to the hearth, confirming through their postures that they are oblivious to each other’s existence. The great marble chimneypiece, said by Ireland to be a satire upon the grandiose designs of William Kent, divides rather than unites. The obligatory small hearth table is in closest proximity, as was common, to the principal woman of the family. Yet, it is not drawn up directly in front of the hearth and she merely uses it as a repository for her opera accessories. The floor before the chimney is covered in the appointment cards that were customarily set upon the mantel, indicative of the couple’s neglect of the formal visitation rituals of polite society.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, a third chair, which in better households would have been proffered to a guest, is toppled over on the carpet. Approaching the couple from the typical stance of a guest moving from door to hearth, the viewer of the image is greeted with a chair that is not prepared for his visit. The conventions of reception before the hearth, as familiar to the viewer of conversation piece portraits, were thoroughly transgressed.

Hogarth’s *Marriage à-la-Mode* series is replete with imagery of effeminate men who, unobservant of the appropriate conduct of their gender, destroy the institution of marriage. The inability of Squanderfield to assert his masculinity upon his family hearth is signalled by the accumulation of “josses”, a word invented especially to describe the mantelpiece bauble. Such ornaments were widely considered to be a sign of feminine and effeminate excess. Beginning with Joseph Addison, eighteenth-century satirists regarded an overburdened mantel as an emblem of the domination of the household by the over-precious forces of fashion.<sup>73</sup> The main culprits for the introduction of this type of taste were most commonly identified as women. Addison’s fictional “Mary Oddly” was criticized for overtaking the house of Sir John Neville. She was said to have:

Set herself up to reform every room of my house having glazed all of my chimneypieces with looking glasses and planted every corner with such heaps of china, that I am obliged to move about my house with the greatest caution and circumspection for fear of hurting our brittle furniture.<sup>74</sup>

In the mid-eighteenth century, a new word, “knickknack”, evolved partly to describe the dressing of chimneypieces.<sup>75</sup> This onomatopoeic word, which echoed the sound of little useless things knocking together, was invented partly to describe the collection of modish trivia that empty-headed persons gathered together on the mantel. These persons were, by literary convention, most frequently ladies.<sup>76</sup> When, for instance, John Gwynn addressed the subject of poor taste in chimneypiece adornment in his *London and Westminster Improved* of 1766, he elected to castigate the “ladies”:

Ladies, nothing can be more trifling or ridiculous than to see a modern chimneypiece set out with josses and such horrid monsters, which can have no other charms to recommend them than deformity, a high price and the their being the production of a very remote country.<sup>77</sup>

On account of the strong association of the grossly adorned chimneypiece with female tastes, it became natural to link, when viewing a male household, a fussy mantel with an effeminate beau. In his expostulatory novel *Mount Henneth* (1788), Robert Bage imagined an adorned chimneypiece as the prime component of the rooms of a nauseating modish beau. On entering this apartment, he observed that:

On the Chimneypiece, amongst the mackaws and china josses, of the Worcester manufactory, lay a gold repeater, and a pamphlet, *The London Jester*. The chairs were furnished with a green coat, buttoned with the newest pattern from Soho; silk stockings, and embroidered waistcoats.<sup>78</sup>

Whilst a mantel piled with “josses” was widely considered a sign of excess, a well-ordered arrangement of china seems open to interpretation as definitive of neat domesticity. Arthur Devis and Francis Hayman, for instance, frequently placed porcelain vessels on the mantels in their conversation piece portraits, clearly considering such ornaments to be consistent with taste and domestic rectitude. Unlike the fantastic exotic beasts and “mandarins” which became icons of tawdriness, a well ordered line of modest vessels seems to have been considered consistent with the modesty of virtuous femininity. These values are summarized in Devis’s *Orde* portrait, in which a small collection of porcelain graces the mantel. This may well suggest the social authority of the matriarch of the *Orde* household, for there was a tradition of regarding such neat collections as emblems of the

discretion of a worthy woman.<sup>79</sup> The impression that the tastes of such a woman predominate in the Orde family is reinforced by the fact that it is she who extends her hand to receive the hunting trophy, which is presented as the focus of hospitable exchange.

These modest collections of elegant and exotic objects were appropriate for households who liked to be construed as tasteful, though not ostentatious. It is significant in this regard that, in devising his fictive hearths, Devis always preferred simple chimneypiece designs, redolent of taste without excess. There were, however, social constituencies in which even this kind of modest refinement was regarded as excessive. Rooms in which such values prevailed were usually male preserves. Modern military men were notorious for preferring to place guns over the mantel, an extension of the ancient English tradition, seen in Hogarth's *Falstaff*, of keeping swords and shields on the chimney breast.<sup>80</sup> As women were criticized for adorning the mantel with delicate, useless things, men of action and business were expected to regard it as a place of storage, suitable to matters of practical purpose.<sup>81</sup>

An important example of this tendency is Thomas Hudson's portrait of a group of City gents who are presented as the friends of William Benn and John Blachford, Lord Mayors of London, respectively, in 1746 and 1750 (fig. 11). The painting shows a group of seven sober men about to drink a toast from modestly proportioned glasses. A sense of the relaxed and modest affability of the masculine group can be taken from the casual placement of a cane and gloves on the plain mantelpiece. This scene of bourgeois respectability was presented to the Goldsmiths' Company by Blachford in 1752.<sup>82</sup> It was situated above the courtroom fireplace, where it served to define the tenor of affable masculine conviviality around which the business of the City turned.<sup>83</sup> Whilst being a celebration of drinking alcohol, it is not an image of drunkenness. The figure identified in the key as William Benn is defined as the leader of the company by being the only figure to hold a bottle. The others await, with empty glasses, his hospitality. To emphasize that this is an image celebrating the expectation of a drink, Hudson wittily shows Robert Alsop polishing his glass in anticipation of it being charged. The disposition of the room is reminiscent of Hogarth's well-known comic image, *A Midnight Modern Conversation* (1733; fig. 12), though stripped of the indecorous excesses therein recorded. In it, Hogarth posed a carousing group before an obliquely positioned chimney breast. Here the adornment of the mantel symbolizes the values of no-nonsense masculine drinking culture. Given over to wild carousing, the "Midnight" group were seen to use the mantel as a place to store their hats and empty bottles. As Ireland observed, the number of empty bottles—two for each person represented—had been collected, in the manner of defeated trophies, to "prove" the company had "not lost a moment" in dedicating itself to drunken oblivion.<sup>84</sup> Despite the

different tenor of these drinking scenes, both established the understanding that robust male company defined itself through its contempt for the delicate and ornamental mantel.



**Figure 11.**

John Faber the Younger after Thomas Hudson, Benn's Club; group portrait of six alderman around table in club, 1752-56, mezzotint, 25 x 35.1 cm  
Digital image courtesy of Trustees of the British Museum



**Figure 12.**

William Hogarth, A Midnight Modern Conversation, 1733, engraving, 32.7 x 45.4 cm Digital image courtesy of Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection

Given the strong association of over-precious mantel adornment with women, it is reasonable to associate the late eighteenth-century “reform” of this practice, through the utilization of refined classical pieces, with the reassertion of masculine values. In this respect, it is significant that Zoffany’s Dundas conversation piece is a scene of masculine sociability. With the exception of Giambologna’s Mercury at the centre, the bronzes seen over Lawrence Dundas’s mantel are miniature renditions of classical nudes. All, including the Mercury, are strongly muscled male figures. The masculine air of the collection asserts the gender of this mantel and of the sociability offered there. Indeed, the masculine tone of the image befitted Dundas. A member of a famous military family, Dundas had been Commissary-General of the army during the triumphs of the Seven Years’ War which had come to conclusion only a few years before this commission. Zoffany’s awareness that the hearth adorned with classical nudes was an essentially male social scenario was also expressed in his portrait of Charles Townley in his library at Park Street (1781–90). Zoffany is known to have arranged the room especially for this portrait, bringing statues from the gallery rooms to the library to form a composition that suited his particular creative ends. It is reasonable to posit, though it is not a feature of typical art-historical review, that part of Zoffany’s intentions were comedic, as was typical of the character of conversations depicting solely male company back to Hogarth’s early career.

It is known from a letter that Townley comically regarded the classical statues at Park Street as his household gods. He specifically employed the term “penates” to describe them.<sup>85</sup> The employment of this term may well explain why, for the purposes of this painting, Zoffany elected to group statues, which had been brought from the galleries, around Townley’s hearth. By the standards of the subgenre to which it belongs, the hearth conversation, this painting is conspicuously unconventional. The host, who was not married, could not be appropriately situated in the conventional act of introducing his family. Thus, he is not seen in the usual position, before his own chimney breast. Rather, Zoffany presented Townley at some remove from the chimneypiece, offering his guests the privilege of the hearth and the mandatory small table.<sup>86</sup> On this table, where by convention one expects to find a seated matriarch, Zoffany placed the famous bust of Clytie which Townley was known to refer to as his “wife”.<sup>87</sup> The witty variance upon tradition suggests a degree of knowing, sexually centred humour. Adding to this impression, male and female nudes, chiefly of an explicitly erotic type, are postured before and around the chimney breast. A figure of Eros arming his bow dominates the mantel and, in gathering around the bust of Clytie, Townley’s male guests are granted the opportunity of communing with the piece of antiquity in his collection that was most associated with the sexual charms of womanhood.

Significantly, the principal guest at Townley’s table, Pierre Hugues d’Hancarville, famously propounded the theory that the ancient Greeks had been phallus worshippers and that their sculpture was accordingly to be associated with fertility rights. D’Hancarville was at this very time compiling this theory in a text known as *Venere et Priapi*, which was published in association with the Duke of Hamilton in 1784. That this literary work was received as an erudite justification of sodomy may be of relevance here. Less controversially pertinent is the general interpretation of antiquity which was advanced and sustained by this particular social group. In this subculture the idea developed that antique civilization owed its exceptional vibrancy to its primal connection to invigorating sexual impulses, signified in an apparent dedication to phallus worship. This encouraged Townley to regard his impulse to collect as quasi-sexual, akin to what in other men was expressed in the desire to procreate and seek out mistresses. In this regard, it is unusually legitimate to take note of the phallic implications of Zoffany’s imagery. The figure of d’Hancarville directs his gaze towards a seated Townley, who has deposited his coat and cane at the base of a bust of Homer on a pedestal. The coat bulges forward in the very place where on an antique herm a phallus was situated, to be honoured with libations in the practices of fertility cults. The impression is of an erection, silhouetted against the light of a curtained window. D’Hancarville has at his feet a rendition of the Barberini

Faun that is pushed before the hearth. The legs of this figure are splayed wide open, his posture, hardly redolent of decorous restraint, indicative of the absence of shame in phallic display.

Like so many eighteenth-century conversation portraits that were dedicated to male sociability, as opposed to the typical conventions of familial domesticity, this painting seems redolent of a kind of “conversation” that strays beyond the usual restraints of familial respectability.<sup>88</sup> Zoffany’s placement of the nubile Eros over the mantel is indicative of the values of a company who were ready to entertain, in the privacy of their libraries, an ancient lore of love somewhat outside the conventions of modern respectability. It is probable that Townley, deeply read in matters of artistic cultivation as he was, knew the strictures of Ware and Chambers against the employment of nude classical figures, male and female, on the mantel. By Ware’s standards, in which it was contrary to the role of a “polite gentleman” to place a nude figure on his mantel, Townley and his friends had contravened the rules of respectable hospitality. Zoffany’s homage to the sociability of men who clearly did not “banish anatomy from the parlour of the polite gentleman” implies that his sitters were proud to be outsiders to the polite conventions of the hearth.

## VI

The essential argument of this essay has been that the conversation piece portrait is less about the representation of the family than the replication of a social encounter of a conventional, even ritualistic, character. The viewer was regarded not just as an observer, who stood to be impressed or informed, but as a participant in the “conversation”. The invitation of hospitality implied by these paintings was specific, as opposed to general; the viewer, conceived as an individual, or part of a small group, was imaginatively invited to share an experience such as taking tea, viewing a document, or joining a game of cards. Peter de Bolla has recently advanced the argument that this kind of work was about spectacle, or the viewing experience of a greater public.<sup>89</sup> Yet, it requires to be remembered that the essential conventions of the English conversation piece, including those which focused on the hearth, were formed in a time that long preceded annual public exhibitions. There is little indication that any of the paintings reviewed above—with the exception of Zoffany’s image of Townley’s library, which was displayed at the Royal Academy—were widely seen at the time of their completion. The only family painting mentioned in this essay to be engraved was Hudson’s image of Benn and Blachford. Hogarth’s *Conquest of Mexico* was engraved seventy years after its completion. It is significant, in this respect, that there survives no substantial contemporary literature of

reception for such works: the introduction advanced by the conversation piece was, in practice as well as by formal implication, a private and privileged matter. <sup>90</sup>

Hearth conversation pieces were, then, about replicating the experience of a private introduction, not displays of privacy or means of communicating to a broader public the values contingent upon a virtuous or normative domestic existence. That these paintings are now seen by crowds in galleries and employed as illustrations in books on art creates a deceptive impression that they existed to generate notions of morally excusable consumption or functioned as visual manifestos for new ideals of family life. In so far as they were experientially intimate, these pictures seem unlikely to have been produced to promote behavioural ideals. The intimate guest, whose experience this kind of painting reproduced, was likely to be a peer. These pictures seem to have assumed shared, unspoken values, and to align themselves with private forms of shared experience. The conversation piece itself, in fact, operated as a ritualistic means of sharing such shared experiences.

## Footnotes

- 1 For this approach at its most advanced, consult Kate Retford, *The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2006). For a sense of the considerable departure this socio-historical approach constitutes from traditional, formal, art-historical analysis, compare with Sacheverell Sitwell, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of English Domestic Portraits and their Painters* (London: Batsford, 1936). Retford was not the first, however, to analyse the mode of sociability implied in these works. In this respect, Ellen D'Oench's *The Conversation Piece: Arthur Devis and his Contemporaries* (New Haven: Yale Center for British Art, 1980) was groundbreaking. Five years earlier, Ronald Paulson suggested readings of conversation pieces which took into account the social history of the family. See Paulson, *Emblem and Expression: Meaning in English Art of the Eighteenth Century* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975), chap. 8, 121–36.
- 2 For an account of the relationship of notions of social “conversation” and the development of the conversation piece portrait, see Mark Hallett, *Hogarth* (London: Phaidon, 2000).
- 3 David Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 1993), 78–105.
- 4 A classic exemplar of this genre is Arthur Devis's *Robert Gwilym and Family*, in which the group poses in the locus of a chimneypiece and Serlian window (D'Oench, *Devis*, 15).
- 5 Some of these conventions were adapted from those of the *fête champêtre* as developed by Watteau and Pater. One of the artists who introduced the form of outdoor conversation to Britain, Philippe Mercier, was clearly thoroughly aware of the conventions of this type of painting. In general, though it is beyond the specific scope of this essay, modes of introduction implied in such rural settings are more relaxed and “natural” in tenor than indoor scenes. Lounging postures, redolent of *fête champêtre*, were far more tolerated.
- 6 See the exhibition catalogue: *Polite Society by Arthur Devis, 1712–1787: Portraits of the English Country Gentleman and His Family* (Preston: Harris Museum and Art Gallery, 1983), 16.
- 7 It was well established by George C. Williamson, in his introduction to *John Zoffany, R.A.: His Life and Works, 1735–1810* (London: Bodley Head, 1920), that Zoffany put great stress on visiting the houses of those to whom he was employed to make conversation portraits, and recording the specifics of their lives. Hogarth's works of this type strongly suggest that he had the same policy, as they do not exhibit the sort of standard studio furnishings which appear in the conversation pieces of Arthur Devis and Francis Hayman. On one occasion, that of the *Assembly at Wanstead House*, we can be completely satisfied that he visited and recorded the hearth that is seen in the picture. See Arthur S. Marks, “‘Assembly at Wanstead House’ by William Hogarth”, *Philadelphia Museum of Art Bulletin* 77, no. 322 (Spring 1981): 3–15.
- 8 Many painters fell between these types. Francis Hayman, for instance, seems to have composed his many hearth conversations in his studio, for we see a certain chair, with double-hoops (*Maurice Greene and John Hoadly, 1747*), in numerous works by this painter. Hayman does seem to have been far more attentive than Devis to the personality quirks of his groups of sitters, however, as witnessed in his most ambitious hearth conversation, the intimate and amusing *Family of Grosvenor Bedford*.
- 9 John Aikin, *Evenings at Home; or, the Juvenile Budget Opened* (London, 1794), 4.

- 10 John Carter, *The Builder's Magazine: or Monthly Companion for Architects, Carpenters, Masons, Bricklayers, &c.* (London, 1774-78), 121.
- 11 This is a little-known conversation portrait, probably by Charles Phillips, of Lady Portland and family at Bulstrode, which features a marble sacrifice scene and female bust, possibly also of Lady Portland, over the mantel. The chimney breast is as rich as any of the period, ornamented with a pair of Corinthian columns and two female emblematic figures, one of which is Minerva.
- 12 John Cornforth's *Early Georgian Interiors* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2004) has, for the first time, defined the kind of decorations that were deemed appropriate for each type of room in the highest status Georgian houses. His work, which begins with an account of chambers of state, has been a strong influence on this essay.
- 13 At Wanstead, Hogarth seems to have been recording a type of interior that evinced a Kentian grandeur in its furnishings that he was otherwise prone to satirize as ostentatious, in, for instance, the *Marriage à-la-Mode* series (ca. 1743). For an account of the Kentian furnishings in this portrait, see J. Downs, "Some William Kent Furniture", *Bulletin of the Pennsylvania Museum* 24, no. 125 (Feb. 1929): 13-20.
- 14 Lorna Weatherill, *Consumer Behaviour and Material Culture in Britain, 1660-1760* (London: Routledge, 1988), 18-42.
- 15 This argument is advanced by Alistair Young (*In Trust for the Nation: Paintings from National Trust Houses*, London: National Trust/National Gallery, 1995, 51) who takes issue, very persuasively, with Mario Praz's vision of the conversation piece as "bourgeois" (*Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America*, London: Methuen, 1971).
- 16 Weatherill chose an English hearth "conversation" by Joseph van Aken known as *Grace before a Meal* (ca. 1720) as the "best and most realistic" representation of the range of goods utilized by a family of "the middle-rank". By these standards of an unadorned, smoke-stained, chimney breast and rough wood mantel, all surviving hearth conversation portraits relate to the living standards of the gentry and above.
- 17 Isaac Ware, *A Complete Body of Architecture* (1756; London, 1787), 587.
- 18 The pattern-book method is exemplified by James Gibbs's *A Book of Architecture* (London, 1727). It continued to be a method after William Chambers and Isaac Ware supplied written rules. See Batty Langley, *One Hundred and Fifty New Designs for Chimneypieces* (London, 1758), and John Crunden's *The Chimneypiece Maker's Daily Assistant* (London, 1766).
- 19 Chambers's strictures were given comic expression in a play by Richard Jodrell, in which a certain Miss Harriot is corrupted by a relief of Cupid and Psyche placed over the mantel in "mama's bedchamber": *One and All; a farce of Two Acts* (London, 1787), 31.
- 20 William Chambers, *A Treatise on Civil Architecture* (London, 1759), 79.
- 21 An interesting elaboration on Ware's opinions appears in Carter's *Builder's Magazine*, 120-21.
- 22 Ware, *Complete Body of Architecture*, 574.
- 23 Isaac Bickerstaffe, *Love in the Village. A Comic Opera* (1763; London, 1787), 23.
- 24 One of the earliest British architectural treatises to express a sense of superiority over the rest of Europe as regards chimneys was John Aheron's *A General Treatise of Architecture* (Dublin, 1754), in which he complains of "the Italians who make very frugal fires". Much the most influential text on the subject was by William Chambers, who in his *Treatise on Civil Architecture* announced Inigo Jones as the first architect to perfect the chimneypiece, he having been followed in excellence by William Kent.
- 25 George Richardson, *A New Collection of Chimneypieces* (London, 1781), 5.
- 26 Chambers, *A Treatise*, 79.
- 27 The circumstances in which such columned structures, most commonly conceived as garden pavilions, were employed by painters of Georgian conversation portraits, are discussed below. This type of scenario was clearly different in its social associations to the mundane hearth, however embellished.
- 28 It is reasonable to suppose that it was in the 1720s, and in the works of Marcellus Laroon the younger, Philippe Mercier, Joseph van Aken, and Peter Angelis, that the transition was first made in England from genre painting to small figure conversation piece portrait.
- 29 Metsu painted numerous domestic scenes in which characters are grouped before the chimney breast, most conspicuously *Lady with Gentleman Tuning a Violin*, and can be seen to have adapted this form to portraiture.
- 30 This quote is drawn from an extensive passage in the introduction to Richardson's *New Collection of Chimneypieces* (3-5), in which he discusses the history of the chimney in classical architecture. He cites both Robert Adam and William Chambers as authorities on this matter.
- 31 For a long and exhaustively scholarly account of the sacred character of the hearth in ancient civilizations, see Gregory Nagy, "Six Studies of Sacral Vocabulary Relating to the Fireplace", *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 78 (1974): 71-106.
- 32 A long passage in *The Aeneid* (Book III, lines 254-61) describes the hearth as sacred to the ancestral gods and a place of sacrifice.
- 33 Alexander Pope, trans., *The Odyssey of Homer*, 5 vols. (London, 1760), 2:129.
- 34 As recounted in a famous passage of Virgil's *Aeneid*, Book II, lines 680-85.

- 35 The sacred hearths of antiquity were presided over by the goddess Vesta, whose name derived from the Greek for fire. The Roman practice of venerating their ancestors at their innermost hearth, through the cult of the *Iares* and *penates*, is discussed in every eighteenth-century Roman history and classical primer. A typical account appears in Joseph Spence's *Polymetis* (1741; London, 1765), 244–45.
- 36 Alexander Nisbet, *An Essay on the Ancient and Modern Use of Armouries* (Edinburgh, 1718), 5. The many sources which refer to the employment of the hearth as a location for images of the ancestors draw on Pliny the Elder and Polybius.
- 37 The notion of the hearth as a repository of the family's sacred flame, as borrowed from classical antiquity, was expressed in the popularity of the practice, introduced by Rysbrack, of placing sculptured scenes of sacrifice, involving a flame and tripod, above chimneypieces. The admixture of this imagery with a dynastic bust can be seen at the hearth of the Marble Hall at Houghton Hall (Rysbrack, 1731), in which a bust of Robert Walpole appears on the mantel below a sacrifice scene. Henry Home, Lord Kames considered a "Grecian or Roman sacrifice scene" the most suitable adornment for a "marble chimneypiece". See Kames, *Elements of Criticism*, 6th ed., 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1785), 2:474.
- 38 Richard Colt Hoare, *The History of Modern Wiltshire: The Hundred of Mere* (London, 1822), 70 (as recommended by Alistair Laing).
- 39 For a full account of the Roman employment of atriums and hearths and the "ancestral images" therein as a means of saluting guests, see the article on the "atrium" by Oskar Seyffert, in *A Dictionary of Classical Antiquities: Mythology, Religion, Literature & Art*, revised by Henry Nettleship and J. E. Sandys (London: Swan Sonnenschein, 1904).
- 40 Reference to this "modish" practice is made in numerous sources, such as George Lyttleton's *Dialogues of the Dead* (London, 1768), 332. Most sources refer to the chimneypiece as a place to display one's full social calendar. In this respect, see the anonymous pseudo-diary *The Bachelor: or speculations of Jeoffrey Wagstaffe, esq.* (Dublin, 1769), 24. This records the trials of living with a foolish woman who is preoccupied with such cards: "To imitate her betters, she sends cards to invite her company a month or two in advance, for fear they should be pre-engaged, and my parlour chimneypiece is full of cards, praying her to small parties, drums and routs." We will encounter this practice below as part of the comedy of the second scene of Hogarth's *Marriage à-la-Mode*.
- 41 A lost interior, known from photographs, it is described in Robert Bisset, ed., *The Historical, Biographical, Literary and Scientific Magazine* (London, 1799), 1:288.
- 42 The information here is largely drawn from John E. Ruch, "A Hayman Portrait of Jonathon Tyers's Family", *The Burlington Magazine* 112, no. 809 (Aug. 1970): 485–95.
- 43 The placement of the portraits of the most important ancestors over the mantel as a sign of respect is a practice much documented in this era. It is recorded, for instance, at Fonthill Abbey: see John Rutter, *A Description of Fonthill Abbey and Demesne* (London, 1822), 30, 52. In the Cabinet room, "Alderman Beckford" was recorded to have installed his father's portrait over the mantel, with his grandmother to the left and grandfather to the right.
- 44 D'Oench, *Devis*, 60, following Egerton, identifies these as the busts of John Orde's cousin William and his wife, who had bequeathed their fortune to the family. She dates the painting to the coming of age, at eighteen, of Thomas.
- 45 For this practice consult Matthew Craske, *The Silent Rhetoric of the Body: A History of Monumental Sculpture and Commemorative Art in England, 1720–1770* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2007), chaps. 6–15.
- 46 The interpretation of this painting as a reflection upon childish playfulness is a development upon that of Marcia Pointon in *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-century England* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press), 208–09.
- 47 The identification of the sitters is drawn from a strongly evidentially grounded account in Elizabeth Einberg, *Manners and Morals: Hogarth and British Painting, 1700–1760* (London: Tate Gallery, 1987), 89–90.
- 48 Ephraim Chambers, *Cyclopaedia: or An Universal Dictionary of Arts and Sciences*, 2 vols. (London, 1741), vol. 2 (unpaginated).
- 49 Casts of Rysbrack's relief for the Newton monument were certainly made for domestic decoration. One such work found its way into the hallway of Saltram House; its presence there is currently unexplained. I await compelling evidence to show that this chimney breast ever actually existed, and was not just a conceit invented by Hogarth to communicate a comic point.
- 50 For the monument and testamentary affairs, consult the Prerogative Court of Canterbury wills of John and Catherine Conduitt, respectively: PCC PROB 11/683, 1737 and PROB 11/700, 1740.
- 51 A case of the placement of carved arms over the chimneypiece is recorded by John Albin in his account of Carisbrooke Castle in *A New, Correct, and Much-Improved History of the Isle of Wight* (Newport, 1795), 486. Here, in the early seventeenth century, Richard Weston, Earl of Portland, had the mantel of the drawing room elaborately decorated with arms and military implements.
- 52 Kate Retford discusses the fitting of this heraldic mantel by the Catholic William Constable in *Art of Domestic Life*, 164. An illustration and discussion of the overmantel at Boughton appears in Cornforth, *Early Georgian Interiors*, 221. This kind of overmantel had been popular for around two centuries, witness a good sixteenth-century example at Chillingham Castle, Northumberland, in the Plaque Room.
- 53 This mode of interpretation is broadly inspired by Kate Retford's article, "Sensibility and Genealogy in the Eighteenth-century Family Portrait: The Collection of Kedleston Hall", *The Historical Journal* 46, no. 3 (Sept. 2003): 533–60.

- 54 It is important to note in this respect that the outdoor conversation portrait had, at this very juncture (the close of the American War), been adapted to the national business of recording the proceedings of military parades and exercises. Philippe Jacques de Loutherbourg had recently completed two grand conversation portraits of a *Mock Attack and Royal Review* at Warley Common (Royal Collection). In Ireland, Francis Wheatley had very recently embarked on a series of conversation portraits of the Dublin volunteer regiments on exercise.
- 55 See, for instance, Cornforth's comments on employing side entrances to allow for the family to occupy "family" chambers which did not require the standards of formal presentation demanded in state apartments (*Early Georgian Interiors*, 3-30).
- 56 A central means of achieving this was the direction of the sitter's gaze. A profitable comparison can be drawn between Devis's *John Orde and Family* and a painting with a very similar composition, *Mr and Mrs Richard Bull*. In the former, where the person entering into the room is seen, both receiving parties look towards the door and not outward. In the latter, where the viewer is the guest, the glance of the woman is outside the picture plane.
- 57 D'Oench, *Devis*, 60.
- 58 This convention is evident in the very rare cases where one sees the guest invited into the room, as in Devis's *John Orde and Family*, where one witnesses the servant opening the door for William Orde.
- 59 It is so familiar to encounter the represented hearths fitted for summer that it is best to note the remarkable works in which we do see a fire blazing in the hearth, such as Devis's Bacon family and Johann Zoffany's paintings of the Dutton and Willoughby de Brooke families.
- 60 Chambers, *A Treatise*, 78.
- 61 Clearly, this conventional aspect of these paintings would benefit from a protracted analysis of this item of furniture and its functions. Currently, there are only the beginnings of this type of discussion in Ralph Edwards's "Hogarth's Tea-Tables", *The Burlington Magazine* 93, no. 582 (Sept. 1951): 304.
- 62 Zoffany's largely unacknowledged role as a comic artist, who attached himself to the tradition of Hogarth, is important to recognize. Links with Hogarth did not escape contemporaries. Williamson (*Zoffany*, 121) produced an excellent quote to this effect. His conversation portrait of cockfighting at the court of the Nawab of Oudh was recognized in the *Public Advertiser* of 11 March 1791 as a tribute to Hogarth's famous print, *The Cock-Pit*.
- 63 The most detailed review of this painting is by Giles Worsley in "Recovering Sir Lawrence's Bronzes", *Country Life*, 9 June 1988, 270.
- 64 Dundas had one son, Thomas, who outlived and succeeded him. The grandchild, however, promised a succession of more than one generation: such was the perilous nature of succession where only one son had been produced, that Dundas named his brother and his heirs as successors, in the event of the death of Thomas. See the will of Lawrence Dundas: Prerogative Court of Canterbury, PCC PROB 11/1082, 1781.
- 65 Worsley assumed these to be "business papers" that are taken to refer to the acquisition of Dundas's "fortune of £600,000". This implies what I take to be a misunderstanding of the social meaning of the portrait as a kind of ostentatious expression of wealth and possessions. This assumed agenda seems entirely foreign to Dundas's reputation as an impeccably tasteful individual. More likely, the function of the painting was to witness and affirm the legitimacy of Dundas's succession.
- 66 The employment of a conversation piece by Zoffany as a statement of witness to a legal deed of succession seems also to be implied in the painting of Robert Ferguson of Raith. Consult the interpretation in Craske, *Silent Rhetoric*, 169.
- 67 In this respect it is entirely possible that the chimneypiece before which Dundas sits in Zoffany's painting, which Worsley attributes to Adam, is a work by Richardson. He was an assistant to Robert Adam when the latter administered the decoration of the interior of 19 Arlington Street.
- 68 Worsley very effectively documented the actual existence of these bronzes, along with the paintings seen on the walls.
- 69 Typical was an account of the Library chimneypiece at Kingsgate in Thomas Fisher, *The Kentish Travellers's Companion* (Canterbury, 1794), 253. Here a small collection of statuary was described, which was mixed "with some trifles dug out of the ruins of Herculaneum".
- 70 One of the many complaints at the "nodding mandarin on the chimneypiece" can be found in John Berkenhout, *A Volume of Letters from Dr. Berkenhout to his Son at the University* (Cambridge, 1790), 330. I have not been able to encounter a mandarin complaint as early as 1743, when Hogarth employed the joke. It may well be that the print made this literary reference popular.
- 71 John Ireland, *Hogarth Illustrated* (London, 1791), 1:221.
- 72 The cards on the floor in the second scene of *Marriage à-la-Mode* were commented upon by John Ireland (*Hogarth Illustrated*, 1:223).
- 73 This way of thinking about the chimneypiece was by no means only English. Stéphanie-Félicité, comtesse de Genlis, in her *Adelaide and Theodore: Or Letters on Education*, 3 vols. (London, 1783), 1:161, evoked the decoration of a chimneypiece as an emblem of empty-headed parade: "This apartment, which you may well imagine to be a Temple consecrated to friendship, to study, to meditation, is only a room for parade; all these books spread on the desk are merely designed for ornament, like the china on a chimneypiece."
- 74 *The Spectator*, no. 299, 12 Feb. 1712.

- 75 An instance of the emergence of this word can be taken from the anonymous erotic novel *The History of Miss Pamela Howard* (Dublin, 1773), 26, in which a character contemplates his friend seducing an attractive girl and setting her "on his chimney-piece with the rest of thy nick-nackery".
- 76 The strong association of the adornment of the chimneypiece with a kind of fussy, false, respectability is expressed in William Dodd's description of the pretensions of an exalted whore in *The Visitor*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1768), 1:49. This character was observed to have always followed the fashion: "her dress was ever in the mode: and her dining room was furnished with taste; the chimneypiece had no small share of Bow-China Ware."
- 77 John Gwynn, *London and Westminster Improved, illustrated by plans* (London, 1766), 131.
- 78 Robert Bage, *Mount Henneth; a novel, in a series of letters*, 2 vols. (London, 1788), 2:78.
- 79 A sense of the degree of modest respectability that could be attained by a lady who set ceramics neatly upon the mantel is indicated by a description of the modest and frugal "Lady Frances" in *The Agreeable Medley or Universal Entertainer* (Malton, 1748), 28. Here a female admirer comments that "my ladyship finds as great satisfaction in ranking a set of delft dishes on a freestone chimneypiece, as I ever I have in disposing my fine china on an Indian cabinet."
- 80 This practice is satirized in Zoffany's *Scene from "The Mayor of Garratt"* (1764), in which arms appear above the chimneypiece of an obviously old-fashioned house in which men perform absurd military theatrics. Record of this as an actual practice is preserved in a court case against an individual rumoured to store arms above the chimneypiece. See *Trials at Large. On Prosecutions for the Crown*, 2 vols. (Dublin, 1792), 1:153.
- 81 A sign of the masculine contempt for the precious adornment of the hearth was the tendency to deck it with overtly brutal things, like shotguns. Thomas Rowlandson satirized the etiquette of the hearth in a drawing where he posed his famously irreverent friend, Henry Wigstead, standing before an elegant fire to warm his backside. A hearth inscription recorded in *The Asylum or Weekly Miscellany*, 3 vols. (Glasgow, 1795), 1:304, declares this a place where a man is free to be who he chooses: "To my best of friends are free/ Free with that, and free with me;/ Free to pass a harmless joke,/ And the Tube sedately smoke,/ Free to drink just what they please,/ As at home and at their ease."
- 82 This beautiful portrait was unfortunately damaged by fire. It has a key added some years after its presentation by Blachford. The painting is signed with a date of 1751, suggesting it was painted with the intention of presenting it to the Goldsmiths' Company.
- 83 A description of this painting in its original position appears in James Peller Malcolm, *Londinium Redivivum; or, An Antient History and Modern Description of London*, 2 vols. (London, 1802-07), 2:572.
- 84 Ireland, *Hogarth Illustrated*, 1:103.
- 85 Vicky Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique: Neoclassicism in Britain, 1760-1800* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2006), 190.
- 86 A reliable account of the identity of the figures and date has been provided by Mary Webster in "Zoffany's Painting of Charles Towneley's Library at Park Street", *The Burlington Magazine* 106, no. 736 (July 1964): 316-23.
- 87 Coltman, *Fabricating the Antique*, 191.
- 88 A number of conversation pieces survive in which the company is solely male and the characters clearly drunk and behaving with domestic impropriety. The most famous of these are Hogarth's *Captain Lord George Graham in his Cabin* (1715-47) and *The Hervey Conversation Piece* (ca. 1739). Equally interesting are Philippe Mercier's *Sir Thomas Samwell and Friends* (ca. 1733) and Joseph Highmore's *Nathaniel Oldham and Friends* (1735-45).
- 89 Peter de Bolla, *The Education of the Eye: Painting, Landscape and Architecture in Eighteenth-century Britain* (Stanford Univ. Press, 2003), 49-71.
- 90 Kate Retford, in "From Interior to Interiority: The Conversation Piece in Georgian England", *Journal of Design History* 20 (2007): 291-30, was only able to draw on two, significantly brief, comments inferring reception; one relating to George Vertue, the other to Horace Walpole.

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