Abstract

At around the same time as the places, practices and objects of sociability began to flourish, British portraitists started to offer a new mode of portraiture expressive of this culture. After a tentative start in the 1720s, the ‘conversation piece’ took off around 1730, thanks to artists such as William Hogarth, Gawen Hamilton, and Charles Philips. Portrayal of the sitters at full length allowed amplification of the physical gestures and interactions of sociability. Their reduced scale also meant that accompanying objects and settings could be represented in detail, facilitating the portrayal of tea parties, assemblies and card games.

As the practices, objects and sites of sociability flourished in early eighteenth-century Britain, so a new mode of portraiture was developed to encapsulate them: the conversation piece.1
Whilst this category became more capacious as the century progressed, and key characteristics of these portraits diffused through the genre of portraiture more broadly, this was a highly distinctive, immediately recognisable tradition when it emerged in the 1730s, developed by artists such as William Hogarth, Gawen Hamilton and Charles Philips. Their production of small, often heavily populated group portraits, placing a novel emphasis on narrative and setting, was continued by the likes of Arthur Devis, before Johan Zoffany breathed fresh life into the sub-genre in the 1760s, making it newly popular, and even securing sustained patronage from George III and Charlotte. The little paintings produced by these artists provide some of the most vivid visual representations of sociability from the period.

The arrival of the conversation piece can be charted effectively through the writings of George Vertue, artist, antiquarian, and unparalleled commentator on the art world of his day. There are a smattering of references to ‘conversation pieces’ throughout his notebooks of the 1720s, following an established use of the label to describe genre paintings by French and Netherlandish artists such as Jean-Antoine Watteau and Egbert van Heemskerk. However, at the end of that decade, Vertue’s occasional use of the term becomes a profusion, and he starts to apply it consistently to a new fashion for small group portraiture. He comments that the ‘paintings of Conversations small figures’ by Gawen Hamilton ‘are agreeable & much variety & correctnes of mode & manner of the time & habits’ (Vertue III, 71). He records that the ‘small figures portraits & conversations’ of Charles Philips ‘has met with great encouragement amongst People of fashion’ (Vertue III, 54). However, the artist about whom he writes at greatest length is William Hogarth: ‘The daily success of Mr Hogarth in painting small family peices & Conversations with so much Air & agreeableness Causes him to be much followd, & esteemed. whereby he has much imployment & like to be a master of great reputation in that way’ (Vertue III, 40).

Group portraits had, of course, been executed before, but these conversation pieces could easily include a dozen, or even two dozen sitters. This was facilitated by their small size, often around a metre in width, resulting in the representation of figures at typically only 45-60 centimetres in height. This meant that far greater numbers could be included than would have been feasible in a portrait on the scale of life and, indeed, the populousness of these portraits struck Vertue time and time again. He noted there to be ‘at least 18 or 20’ figures in Hogarth’s portrait of *The Wollaston Family*, for example, and described the artist’s specialism as ‘conversations consisting of many figures’ (Vertue III, 54, 57; my italics).

One of Hogarth’s first experiments in the new mode of portraiture was particularly densely packed: *An Assembly at Wanstead House*.3
Having started the painting in 1728, he described it in a list of pictures on which he was working the following year: ‘An assembly of twenty-five figures, for Lord Castelmain [Sir Richard Child]’ (actually 26, if one includes the servant). Measuring less than 80 centimetres in width, this is a strikingly crowded canvas, crammed with diminutive figures, and it shows the difficulties of managing such a large group in the unsatisfactorily rigid line into which the more distant figures fall, creating an unmodulated row of heads across the back of the scene. Ten years later, the finished work was described by John Loveday as a ‘Conversation-piece of this family and the neighbourhood’. This label neatly underscores the key advantage of such multi-figured portraits: they could depict an extensive network of people, not only including members of an extended family as well as the nuclear family, but also encompassing friends and associates. As such they could express the bonds and connections fundamental to the workings of eighteenth-century society, depicting the sociable gatherings which both evidenced and helped to sustain those ties.

A longstanding suggestion is that this gathering, and its commemorative representation, was prompted by Sir Richard and Lady Dorothy Child’s 25th wedding anniversary, giving the
The format of the conversation piece also allowed sitters to be shown in the spaces in which such sociable activities typically took place, rather than with only the relatively plain backdrop, or generic setting of a column and drape, of much earlier portraiture. The Childs, their family and friends are posed in a specific setting, described in a later sale catalogue as ‘A View of the Interior of the Ball Room of Wanstead House, with a Numerous Assemblage of Ladies and Gentlemen’. This was a vast space in a vast mansion, running the entire breadth of one end of the house, illuminated by nine windows, and contemporary evidence confirms the depicted lavish decoration and furnishing. We also here have a specific time of day for the assembly: it is late afternoon, as the curtains are in the process of being drawn, and a servant has climbed up to light the chandelier. Many conversation pieces conversely situate figures in fabricated settings, generic rather than specific spaces, but all typically show décor and furnishing considered fashionable, tasteful, and appropriate to the wealth and status
of the sitters. And they are always spaces intended for gatherings, of greater or lesser
intimacy, such as dining rooms, parlours, drawing rooms and saloons. If outside, then those
spaces are most commonly sites in a garden or wider parkland with a focal point, such as the
side of a lake, a bench in the shade of a mature tree, or a temple designed to provide both a
viewing point over the landscape, and cover whilst taking rest and refreshment on a walk or
ride.

It is, finally, also worth noting that the physical objects of conversation pieces themselves
contributed to the workings of sociability, as well as representing its processes. This is not
because the term encompassed a generally more modern idea of a ‘conversation piece’ as a
‘talking point’, but rather because it was not uncommon to commission more than one
version of such a portrait, so that two or more of the sitters could own and display it. This is
particularly notable with conversation pieces executed in Italy in the second half of the
century, depicting groups of Grand Tourists. Copies could be provided for each of the
milordi to display in their homes once back in Britain or Ireland. Nathaniel Dance’s 1760
portrait of James Grant, John Mytton, Thomas Robinson and Thomas Wynne is a case in
point, with four copies produced.

Nathaniel Dance, ‘James Grant of Grant, John Mytton, the Hon. Thomas
Robinson, and Thomas Wynne’, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon
Collection, B1976.7.19, c. 1760.

On the one hand, this picture depicted the sociability of these friends, discussing a drawing of
the Temple of Jupiter, flanked by further examples of the classical material culture which
they explored and discussed on their travels: the Colosseum and an urn bearing the relief of
The Borghese Dancers. On the other, it also sustained that sociability, as its replicated surface in the sitters’ four houses continued to mark their shared experiences, and bonds of friendship (Retford 267-9, Dormont 90-7).


3. For one of the most recent accounts of this painting, see Elizabeth Einberg, William Hogarth: A Complete Catalogue of the Paintings (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), p. 53-6, cat. 20.


Cite this article


Further Reading


Shawe-Taylor, Desmond, The Conversation Piece: Scenes from Fashionable Life (London: Royal Collection, 2009)


In the DIGIT.ENS Anthology

Horace Wapole, Strawberry-hill (1774).