

IN THE FOREGROUND: OBJECT STUDIES

A Podcast from the Research and Academic Program (RAP) at the Clark Art Institute

“A Rebuke to Polite Masculinity”: Charles Keiffer on Thomas Patch’s
British Gentlemen at Sir Horace Mann’s Home in Florence



Thomas Patch (British, 1725–1782), *British Gentlemen at Sir Horace Mann’s Home in Florence*,
between 1763 and 1765. Oil on canvas, 37 15/16 x 48 15/16 in. (96.4 x 124.3 cm).

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection.

Season 1, Episode 3

Recording date: February 24, 2021

Release date: June 8, 2021

Transcript

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Join us for an immersive, personal encounter with a single work of art as seen through the eyes of an art historian. You're listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast series from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute.

In this episode, Charles Keiffer, a recent graduate of the Williams College Graduate Program in the History of Art, describes how Thomas Patch's caricature painting *British Gentlemen at Sir Horace Mann's Home in Florence* subverts norms of masculinity and sustainability in the late eighteenth century.

Charles Keiffer

We're looking at *British Gentlemen at Sir Horace Mann's Home in Florence*, painted by Thomas Patch between 1763 and 1765. At first glance, a group of gentlemen in standard eighteenth-century European costume are gathered around a table, seen as if on stage, all in profile. Some are raising a glass to one on the left who appears to have just entered. As we look more carefully, we start to notice strange inconsistencies with the proportions. The man who appears to have just entered is very tall. The man next to him is only half his size. The three standing figures grouped on the right side of the composition vary in height, the smallest being exactly half the height of the tallest and the tallest having a head that is more than twice the size of the smallest, and abnormally long feet. Smaller still is a servant carrying a glass of wine on a tray, who is only half the height of the second smallest man. Wine bottles littered under the table provide a clue to the wonky proportions. In a dizzying moment of conversation, egos swell and deflate, bolstered by wine.

When I first stumbled on this painting, I guess stumbled is a very appropriate term here, in the Yale Center for British Art, the effect was almost psychedelic. The longer I looked at it, the weirder it got. I love how this is a painting about egos. You can see this not only in the dramatic distortions of sizes, but in the way the seated man in pink is quite rotund, but appears looking tall, skinny, and noble in a portrait on the wall behind him.

I appreciated the painting even more when I learned about Thomas Patch's biography. He was born in 1725 in Exeter, England, to a family of surgeons. His father was a surgeon, both his brothers became surgeons, and it was expected that he would become a surgeon as well. From what little is known about him, it sounds like he had a lot in common with many artists. He took an interest in drawing at a young age and convinced his father to let him abandon his studies in medicine. He travels to Rome around 1747, when he's about 22, and joins a colony of British artists and connoisseurs of antiquity, and studies under the landscape painter Claude-Joseph Vernet. Here's where it gets interesting. Between 1750 and 1755 there are some tense letters between the Bishop of Tivoli and British diplomat Sir Horace Mann, where the Bishop complains of unspecified behavior on Patch's part, and Sir Mann

urges him to let it go. Illusions are made to indiscreet homosexual behavior. In 1755, Patch is exiled from Rome with no specific reason given, so he relocates to Florence.

[brief string musical interlude]

The city of Florence was already notorious for homosexual behavior. In the Renaissance, a German word for sodomite was “florener.” Here, Patch joined a community of British expats and befriended Sir Horace Mann in person. We can imagine how vibrant the scene must have been. Florence was a key stop on the Grand Tour, so social life was always supplemented by new arrivals from England, the sons of British nobility and aristocrats traveling alone for the first time, wanting to see art, party, and have fun. Patch made his living mostly by selling paintings of cityscapes to these tourists, before becoming better known for his caricatures.

The caricature group here is one of his most ambitious. Many of the characters have not been identified, though the painting’s original audience would have recognized them. All are rendered with careful sensitivity to specific facial features. The figure of the tiny servant is rendered with the same individualizing attention. We can see his sideburns and that his jacket is too large. His patient expression reminds us that these evenings would have probably felt very long for the serving class.

[brief electronic musical interlude]

We can read this painting of the late stages of a drunken evening as, in part, a rebuke to 18th-century British expectations around polite masculinity, which revealed intense anxieties over potentially undisciplined male behavior. As a rising colonial power, Britain was seeing itself in relation to the rest of the world, in part through the lens of a new categorical imagination triggered by Linnaeus’s recent system of classification. It is hard not to read the impulse to classify types in Patch’s variously sized figures.

Patch himself is represented in the bust over the fireplace, the only face not shown in profile. Like us, he is more of an outsider, observing the scene. In his other caricature paintings, he uses similar techniques to remove himself from the scene, showing himself as a bust or as the face of a bull in a painting on the wall, or as a monkey sketching the scene in a corner, indicating that he did not caricature others without also caricaturing himself. His facial features are consistent throughout, and his few self-portraits are quite unflattering, showing himself with an upturned nose and an oversized forehead and large lips, none of which would have been considered typically attractive masculine features. While it certainly makes sense that a caricaturist would caricature himself to promote his abilities in the genre, I also wonder whether these consistently unflattering self-portraits, in which he is

removed from the scene, also reflect a certain self-loathing, maybe informed by the shame of being exiled from Rome.

As a caricaturist, he had to be a critical observer of those around him, so one can imagine he may have been even more critical of himself. Playing with size and shape and distorting figures to communicate something ephemeral, such as egos or temperaments, is a standard technique in caricature. Here Patch expands on this to include the insubstantial shared nature of sociable experience. We don't usually think of deliberate distortion to convey the ephemeral as coming into painting until modernism in the late 19th century. That Patch is doing this here reflects a very experimental approach that would not have had an audience probably outside of the in-crowd depicted. However, looking at it in the 21st century, the effect is quite modern, while still communicating the timeless quality of drunken white men's oversized egos.

Caitlin Woolsey (host)

Thank you for listening to *In the Foreground: Object Studies*, a podcast from the Research and Academic Program at the Clark Art Institute. The Clark sits on the ancestral homelands of the Mohican people. We acknowledge the tremendous hardship of their forcible removal from these homelands by colonial settlers. A federally recognized nation, they now reside in Wisconsin and are known as the Stockbridge Munsee Community. As we learn, speak, and gather here at the Clark, we pay honor to their ancestors past and present, and to future generations, by committing to building a more inclusive and equitable space for all.

This series is created and produced by me, Caitlin Woolsey, with assistance from Caro Fowler, Samantha Page, and Jessie Sentivan; sound editing and musical interludes composed by John Buteyn; and theme music by lightchaser. To see images and more information about the artwork discussed, please visit clarkart.edu/podcast/object-studies.