

Zitierhinweis

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Historians of British art have needed a book-length re-examination of the conversation piece and its role(s) in 18th-century society for some time. It has been almost 50 years since the publication of Mario Praz's 1971 study of this fascinating and complex sub-genre of portraiture.⁽¹⁾ Reiterating arguments posited by Philip Sassoon in 1930, Praz's monograph entrenched notions of the conversation piece such as its supposed 'peculiarly English' character, its ability to capture a 'snapshot' of daily life, and its classification as a middle-class genre. These categorizations remain, as Kate Retford notes, 'surprisingly influential' for modern scholarship and it is these ideas that she seeks to complicate in her meticulously researched new book *The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain* (p. 8).

Unlike early scholars of the conversation piece, Retford is not seeking to offer an authoritative checklist by which to measure the 'formation, development, and meaning' of the sub-genre (p. 9). Rather, throughout her well-argued and accessible account she positions the conversation piece as a reflective and evolving genre that was utilized across class boundaries for a range of reasons within a variety of social contexts. Insisting on a flexible, broad framework within which to understand the conversation piece, Retford illustrates the multiple social and artistic influences that must be considered in order to understand the inherent complexity of these images. Positioning the conversation piece within histories of masculinity, humour, literary 'conversations,' family lineage, 'friendship,' and European artistic traditions, this book makes the case that the conversation piece was a 'modern, innovative ... mode of portraiture' (p. 9). By engaging with issues of class, gender, and, to a lesser extent, race, Retford's book is a welcome and valuable contribution not just to the history of British art, but to the broader cultural history of the Georgian period.

Retford's book is organized into three parts. After a short introduction, the first establishes the contemporary contexts in which the conversation piece developed and the ways in which this innovative genre was in dialogue with ideas of conversation, sociability, and the 'mode and manners of the time' (p. 93). Prior to the establishment of a state-sponsored Academy, artists like William Hogarth, Gawen Hamilton, and Philippe Mercier gathered at informal societies and clubs to share 'company' and 'talk'. While contemporary commentators bemoaned the lack of a regulated Academy, Retford argues this lack of formality fostered an environment of originality that 'stimulated hybrid genres and experiments' – the most successful of which was the conversation piece (p. 38). Acting as a nexus for artists and patrons, these informal homosocial clubs provided a space in which artists could both develop their artistic skills and forge their social networks. The dual nature of these clubs is reflected in early conversation pieces, which Retford argues came into fashion as they commemorated the social networks established in these spaces.

Developing the connection between the formal qualities of the conversation piece and the mode and manners of the time, Retford upends perceptions of these paintings as stiff reflections of 'artistic incompetence' (p. 65). Rather, she argues that the tension modern viewers feel between the seemingly rigid nature of the figures and composition, and contemporary claims to conversation pieces' 'agreeable,' 'easy,' and 'graceful' nature, can be found in the interrelationship between the sub-genre and the concept of *theatrum mundi* – the 'world as a stage' (p. 63–5). Abstracted from words and conversational subject matters, these images are less concerned with capturing the actual exchange of spoken words than they are with capturing the codified displays of sociable exchange (p. 123). Emerging at a time when the aesthetics of sociability were circulated in etiquette manuals and London theatrics flourished, Retford makes the tantalizing claim that these complex portraits were linked to the 'bodily lexicon' found in manuals and theatrical productions. As the idiom of *theatrum mundi* spread far beyond the theatre and came to be a governing assumption of public life, artists engaged with the performative nature of polite sociability. Thus, conversation pieces were rooted in engaging with these notions of performativity and the 'forms of conversation' depicted in etiquette manuals and the theatre (p. 67 author italics).

While the conversation piece has been primarily associated with the modes and manners of English society, Retford argues that rather than displaying a peculiar Englishness, conversation pieces reflected the peculiarities of the geographic and cultural space in which they were painted. Analyzing works produced in India and Scotland, Retford locates the sub-genre within the context of the expanding imperial world. Repositioning the conversation piece as regionally reactive rather than peculiarly English, Retford unsettles Praz's restrictive definition of the sub-genre. While she makes a compelling case for this argument, Retford's analysis of the Indian case in particular might have benefited from a deeper engagement with the intersections between regional specificity and Englishness. The possibility that these works were both asserting Englishness and displaying geographic specificity is intriguing. However, this does not undermine Retford's key point, it simply suggests there may be further work to be done unpacking, for example, Johan Zoffany's work whilst in India.

The second section of the book examines the contemporary settings utilized in conversation pieces. Set both out of doors in expressive pastoral settings and precise locations in front of country houses, and indoors in spaces that were modified or constructed by the artists or, more infrequently, faithful reproductions of a patron's home, space played an integral role in the sub-genre. Unpacking the use of exterior space, Retford contextualizes the sub-genre within the longstanding, fundamental relationship between landscape and elite social status. Drawing on genres such as the gardenscape and the country house view, exterior conversation pieces emphasized landed status. While she places the conversation piece on a spectrum rather than within a tidy, bounded system of classification, Retford notes that conversation piece portraits that positioned the family out-of-doors undermine the assumption that these portraits were a largely middle-class phenomenon, for these works emphasize the aesthetics of sociability and act as a record of the family, their home, and its landscape, and thus carried with them an implied status. Probing the relationship between landscape and sociability uncovers how depictions of gardenscapes in conversation pieces expressed ideals of hospitality. Beyond entertaining guests, the traditional ideals of hospitality extended to a landowner's attitude toward the community surrounding his estate. Depicting scenes of community involvement in the land, these works were 'landscape(s) of 'connection' (p. 148). Thus, if one views exterior conversation piece portraits as simply group portraits set out-of-doors, one misses the crucial role the landscape played in the narrative of the image. While not necessarily faithful reproductions of physical space, these works depict the particular values and activities associated with landownership and, by extension, sociability.

Retford probes the fictiveness or the veracity of setting in more detail in her discussion of interior spaces. Often hung above the fireplace, conversation pieces both presented a scene of polite hospitality and contributed to the sociability taking place in the room. Yet while they existed in a real space, the spaces and objects depicted in the work were often 'artificially constructed' (p. 178). It is perhaps not a new idea that these works are in many cases fictive and, particularly in the case of Arthur Devis, repetitive artistic constructions. However, Retford's contention that this replication was not a lack of artistic originality, but rather a carefully constructed visual tool that signified social membership, is intriguing. In positioning these works in this light, Retford counters the claim that these works depicted middle-class aspirations, suggesting instead that they are narrative constructions designed to convey information about social membership.

The final section of the book unpacks the manner in which people are depicted in conversation piece portraits. Re-examining the long standing assertion that conversation pieces were 'family piece(s)', Retford argues that there are two misleading issues inherent with this assumption. Not only does it do a disservice to the rich array of relationships captured in these portraits, but 'thanks to our dominant conception of a "family" as ... a nuclear unit,' the label can have counterfactual implications (p. 217). Examining the multiplicity of ways in which people were depicted in conversation pieces, it is clear that nuclear relationships blended with extended familial relationships, which in turn blended with

business, political, commercial, or friendly relationships. Calling this potentially limited label into question, Retford examines the role of in-laws and extended familial connections in conversation pieces. Visually representing extended kinship networks, these works memorialized bonds and relationships that may have been important for a number of social and political reasons beyond issues of lineage. Thus, in this context again the conversation piece was about connections, relationships that could be between blood or marital relatives or could extend beyond family ties.

Given the complicated nature of the relationships depicted in conversation pieces, gender offers one way to distinguish images of kinship from images of non-blood related friends. However hard one looks, conversation pieces of friends universally depict homosocial gatherings of men. Thus, while family images were far more complicated than the term 'family piece' would suggest, they were distinctly different from images of non-related friends. Located within coffee houses, taverns, or clubs, all spaces in which a range of male sociability could be enacted, images of friendships demonstrate the variety of ways men performed their masculinity. Further, these works illustrate the importance of enacting the right type of masculinity in the proper space. Thus, Retford argues that these depictions of masculine friendship 'commemorate behavior considered very much part of being a man – ideally in the right place, at the right time' (p. 285). Thinking deeply about the ways in which masculinity was constructed both in these spaces and was captured in conversation pieces contributes to the growing body of literature on masculinity in the 18th century.

The final chapter, one of the most enjoyable in the book, examines the role of humour or 'light incidents' in conversation pieces (p. 287). Retford's entertaining case studies of William Hogarth and Gawen Hamilton's conversation pieces shows that jests involving small dogs and children played a fundamental role in creating a warm atmosphere of affection and hospitality within the work. Indeed, Retford contends that children can be seen as performing something of a jester role, adding to the sociable nature of the portrait. Concluding with portraits like Johan Zoffany's masterful *The Sharp Family* (1779–81), Retford showcases her superb analytical skills, unpicking the private jokes scattered throughout the composition. Building on the light incidents inherent within Hogarth's work, Zoffany's portrait played with the family's well-developed and well-documented sense of humour, to depict elaborate, bespoke jests like the cuckold horns held behind the head of one of the sitters by his brother. While the use of humour in these portraits ebbed and flowed throughout the 18th century, Retford convincingly argues that humour is one of the core components of the conversation piece tradition and that humour, with its links to sociability, was a vital part of the appeal of the early conversation piece.

With *The Conversation Piece: Making Modern Art in Eighteenth-Century Britain* Retford has succeeded in updating our understanding of the conversation piece as a category of 18th-century art. While it does not provide historians of British art with a definitive lexicon of what the conversation piece is and what it is not, Retford's book is a vital contribution to the field. Indeed, it is arguably precisely because she does not seek to offer a restrictive understanding of the sub-genre and engages with its evolving socio-cultural dimensions that this book is essential reading for scholars of the conversation piece, group portraiture, 18th-century art broadly speaking, and socio-cultural historians of the Georgian period. Including 231 images, her well organized and methodologically superb treatment of the subject matter successfully brings together recent examinations of the family, sociability, class, gender, and 18th-century art, demonstrating how these portraits offer a rich window into the 'relationships and practices that brought people together in eighteenth-century England' (p. 327). Retford's text is a valuable resource that promises to shift scholarship on the conversation piece by inviting a new generation of scholars to ask innovative questions of the sub-genre in particular and of Georgian society in general.

Notes

1. Mario Praz, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Eighteenth-Century England* (London, 1971).