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Book Review of The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life, by Desmond Shawe-Taylor

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Desmond Shawe-Taylor *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life* Exh.

cat. London: Royal Collection Publications, 2009. 191 pp.; 157 color ill.; 14 b/w

ills. Paper \$30.00(9781905686070)

Exhibition schedule: [Queen's Gallery, Palace of Holyroodhouse](#), Edinburgh, March 27–September 20, 2008; [Queen's Gallery, Buckingham Palace](#), London, October 30, 2009–February 14, 2010

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Johann Zoffany. *Queen Charlotte with her Two Eldest Sons* (ca.1765). Oil on canvas. 112.2 x 128.3 cm. The Royal Collection © 2011, Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II.

Sir Philip Sassoon organized the first exhibition of the English conversation piece in 1930. Describing this type of painting as “a representation of two or more persons in a state of dramatic or psychological relation to each other,” Sassoon displayed over 150 eighteenth-century pictures in his own house. Following Sassoon’s identification of the genre, books and exhibitions about the conversation piece appeared steadily between the 1930s and 1980s. More recently, studies on the emergence of the modern consumer society and the bourgeois public sphere have renewed interest in the picture type because of its depictions of fine material possessions and elegant social gatherings. Even with all this attention, however, a serious publication on the conversation piece is long overdue. *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life*, staged by the Royal Collection at the Queen’s Gallery, Buckingham Palace, marked the first major exhibition on the subject since *The Conversation Piece in Georgian England*, held in Kenwood in 1965. The accompanying catalogue by Desmond Shawe-Taylor is the most important publication devoted to the genre since Mario Praz’s *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of the Informal Group Portrait in Europe and America* of 1971 (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press). Handsomely produced, it has 157 wonderful color plates, with illustrations of works that have rarely been reproduced in color.

Including only thirty-six pictures, the exhibition at the Queen’s Gallery was relatively small. This disadvantage in number, however, was amply compensated for by the range of the paintings. While earlier shows focused largely on pictures made in eighteenth-century England, *The Conversation Piece: Scenes of Fashionable Life* included works from the Low Countries, and extended the time frame from the seventeenth century to the Victorian period, neatly charting the development of the genre from its origin in the United Provinces, first flowering in England around 1730, and Johan Zoffany’s Royal conversation pieces, to works produced in the nineteenth century, when the fashion for this type of portrait had long passed. The catalogue’s introductory essay, “In Custom and in Ceremony: the Meaning of the Conversation Piece,” explains the particular opportunities afforded by the Royal collection, which establishes the focus of the book in terms of Royal patronage and its relation to the genre. Continuing the approaches of Sacheverell Sitwell and Praz rather than David Solkin or Marcia Pointon, Shawe-Taylor also reflects upon the changing attitudes toward family, children, property, and manners as expressed in the pictures (Sacheverell Sitwell, *Conversation Pieces: A Survey of English Domestic Portraits and their Painters*, London: Batsford, 1936; Praz, *Conversation Pieces*, 1971; David H. Solkin, *Painting for Money: The Visual Arts and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993; Marcia R. Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and Social Formation in Eighteenth-Century England*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

The catalogue entries are organized chronologically into six chapters: Charles I (1600–1649); the Dutch Republic (1648–1714); Frederick, Prince of Wales (1707–1751); George III (1739–1820); George IV (1762–1830); and Queen Victoria (1819–1901) and Prince Albert (1819–1861). Each opens with a discussion about the cultural and artistic context of the period under consideration. The catalogue entries are very useful, especially in terms of how the pictures fit into the history of Royal patronage. In addition to describing where the pictures were hung originally, the entries often provide thorough information about the settings depicted in the paintings, down to such details as the wall sconce in Philip Mercier's *The Music Party* (1733). Consideration of the influence of specific Old Master works already in the Royal Collection when the portraits were commissioned introduces a topic seldom explored. Not surprisingly, Zoffany and Edwin Landseer were the stars of the show, represented with seven and five paintings respectively.

At first glance, the exhibition seemed to include works that can hardly be described as conversation pieces. *St. James's Park and the Mall* (ca. 1745) by Joseph Nickolls, for example, shows the popular park crowded with over a hundred tiny figures, including soldiers, sailors, priests, a nursing mother, and a woman selling cow milk. The real subjects in *The Duke of Cumberland Visiting his Stud* (ca. 1765), in which the small figure of the Duke is easily overlooked, are the horses painted by Sawrey Gilpin and the lush forest in front of Windsor Castle painted by William Marlow. The inclusion of such works in an exhibition of conversation pieces, however, made perfect sense in view of the genre's development in England. With one exception, all the paintings included in "Charles I" and "The Dutch Republic" can best be described as accidental conversation pieces, works that happen to display qualities conventionally associated with the picture type, e.g., small-scale figures or detailed, naturalistically described settings. Many also do not fit neatly into the academic hierarchy of pictorial genres. The first three entries consist of a family portrait reduced to the scale of a conversation, an extensive landscape with miniscule portraits, and a splendid palace interior with tiny figures. In addition to one typical Dutch genre picture, *A Music Party* (1677) by Pieter de Hooch, the other paintings include a prankish game in an interior, a view of a formal garden, and three that are a "mix of favourite horse, trusty stable hands, brand new buildings and ancient vernacular castle" (59).

The selection and organization of these works trace the sources of the English conversation piece to its Dutch origin and underscore its emergence from the various minor genres. The artists who produced the pictures in "Charles I," minor Netherlandish painters specializing in high-life genre and small-scale portraits (Hendrick Pot), landscape (Adriaen van Stalbeem), fantastic architecture views (Bartholomewus van Bassen), and a Dutch copyist (Jan van Belcamp), anticipate the pioneers of the English conversation piece in the 1720s. Not only were the early practitioners predominantly foreign trained, but they also specialized in lowly genres. The Flemish Joseph van Aken, for example, was the top drapery painter of his day. Another Fleming, Peter Tillemans, painted landscapes and sporting scenes. Marcellus Laroon, of French parentage, was trained in the Dutch tradition of genre pictures by his father, who was born and trained in the Northern Netherlands.

While the inclusion of straightforward genre scenes and animal pictures highlights "the fluid margins of this type of painting in the visual cultures of Britain and the Low Countries" (19), it does bring up questions about the nature of the conversation piece. Shawe-Taylor quotes the art historian Ralph Edwards: "If a picture is to pass as a 'Conversation' the figures should be considerably smaller than life, represent real people, and be associated in an informal portrait group; from which it follows (though this is not essential) that some incident or domestic occupation may be introduced" (18). But since Edwards's definition would exclude a considerable number of works in the show, there clearly are other elements that allow these pictures to be considered as conversations. Shawe-Taylor hints at some of them. In the case of the sporting scene, for example, it is because its conventions were adapted "to provide an interesting activity" (145). In the portraits of single figures, it is the "informal 'snapshot' character and affectionate comedy" of the portrayals (173). The format that is conducive "to provide an interesting activity" is in fact the same combination of small, full-length figures and clearly defined, plausible setting that had been relied upon to tell the story in genre pictures. In other words, it is both the format and the element of narrative that distinguish the conversation piece from other types of portraits.

Having been drawn exclusively from the Royal collection, the exhibition included a disproportionate number of pictures that portray Royal sitters. Of the twenty-seven identified portraits in the catalogue, nineteen feature Royal sitters. (Three of these are single portraits.) An additional five, of John Cuff (a Fleet Street optician), British tourists in Florence, the Academicians of the Royal Academy, and

servants of the future George IV (one of which is a single portrait), were commissioned by members of the Royal family. Perhaps because the Royal collection cannot be used as an accurate index for the patronage of the conversation piece in general, Shawe-Taylor does not challenge Praz's idea about the conversation piece as the art of the middle class. Instead, he modifies Praz's middle class to a prosperous class, suggesting that the conversation piece "represents common ground occupied by aristocrats as much as by merchants" (15). While Shawe-Taylor does not elaborate on this common ground, the title of the show, *Scenes of Fashionable Life*, aptly describes the class that peopled the English conversation pieces. In other words, in spite of a wide range in terms of social, economic, and political positions, all the sitters shared the status of gentlemen and ladies, endowed with the resources needed to maintain a leisurely and elegant lifestyle. The popularity of the conversation piece lay precisely in its ability to record and signify the experiences of these people.

The Royal Collection gives Shawe-Taylor the opportunity to explore new dimensions of the conversation piece. Distinguished by high-quality color illustrations and new materials on Royal patronage, this catalogue is a welcome addition to the growing literature on the subject. The exhibition and the publication should inspire new interest in this fascinating topic.

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