

Artwork of the Month June 2020

The John Cheere Busts in York Art Gallery (mid 18th century)

Above the stairs in York Art Gallery, on the left as you go up, there are a number of 18th-century portrait busts. Moira Fulton here explains what these are, and how they come to be in the Gallery.

High up on a shelf at the top of the Art Gallery's main staircase are a group of bronzed plaster busts. You may not have noticed them as they are above head height as you ascend the stairs; they can only be seen easily if you stand on the top landing and look up. However, these busts, which were many years in store until the reopening of the Gallery in 2015, have an interesting history and are significant examples of the accepted ornament for the decoration of libraries, halls, and staircases in mid-Georgian England.

In 1950 York Castle Museum purchased, from the sale of the contents of Kirkleatham Hospital Museum, nine plaster busts, ten statuettes, and some rococo style wall-brackets for £36. This collection was transferred in 1972, on loan, to the Art Gallery, where they still remain, although, as far as I know, they have never been all displayed together. The bronze plaster busts are of poets, playwrights, philosophers and writers, all appropriate figures to adorn the tops of library bookcases: Cicero, Horace, Bacon, Dryden, Matthew Prior, Dean Jonathan Swift, Congreve, Addison, and Dr Samuel Clark. The busts of Bacon and Clark are 23 inches high while the rest are 17 inches high. Their names are on the front of the curved supports or socles. While they are not signed or dated, they can be securely attributed to John Cheere from examples elsewhere. Fortunately, the ten statuettes of Homer, Spenser, Shakespeare, Milton, Pope, Inigo Jones, Rubens, Van Dyck, Locke, and Sir Isaac Newton are all dated 1749, and signed Cheere Ft.



William Congreve (1670- 1729)



John Dryden (1631-1700)

This remarkable collection of bronzed plaster busts and statuettes is important, because, though it is known that John Cheere (1709-1787) produced such sets in large quantities, this one in York Art Gallery is the largest documented set to survive. It was presented in 1749 by Chomley Turner (1685-1757) to the Free Library and Public Museum he had founded in 1738, in the former Kirkleatham Free School. The School had been built in 1709 by Chomley Turner in accordance with the will of his great-uncle, Sir William Turner (1615-1692), but had ceased to function as a school by 1738. The school was later revived, and in 1869 re-opened in Redcar as Sir William Turner Grammar School. The fine, early eighteenth-century building of Kirkleatham Free School had a variety of uses in the nineteenth century, finally becoming a private house. It was bought by Cleveland County Council in 1978, which in 1981 opened it as a local history museum, thus reviving, after over 200 years, Chomley Turner's original intentions. His public museum and free library, the second earliest in Yorkshire, attracted many visitors and donations in the eighteenth century. In 1781 the contents of the museum and library were moved from the Free School to the upper rooms in the nearby Sir William Turner Hospital. This had been founded as alms houses for ten poor men and ten poor women in 1676 by Sir William Turner, a native of Kirkleatham, who had become a wealthy London merchant and Lord Mayor of London. The Museum and Library continued to be housed in the Hospital until, in 1949 and 1950, the entire contents of both were sold by auction. The John Cheere busts and statuettes were part of an

eclectic assemblage of objects, including three crocodiles and the death-mask of Oliver Cromwell, purchased by the Castle Museum in 1950.



Joseph Addison (1672-1719)



Sir Francis Bacon (1561-1629)

John Cheere is probably now less well known than his elder brother, the sculptor, Sir Henry Cheere (1703-1781). From 1737, John had a workshop at Hyde Park Corner, where he produced not only a wide range of plaster busts and figures, but also lead garden statues, all of very high quality. In the eighteenth-century plaster and lead figures were not considered merely cheap substitutes, but were regarded as acceptable alternatives to statues and busts in stone, marble, and bronze. Although many of the lead statues were copies of iconic classical figures, John Cheere was capable of producing original designs to suit the tastes of his clients or, as in the case of an enormous export order of 57 statues to the court of Portugal in 1756, modifying the nudity of the figures. By the 1740s Cheere was well known as the pre-eminent supplier of lead and plaster statues and busts, and Chomley Turner would certainly be aware of his work. Turner probably commissioned from Cheere the two lead statues of an elderly man and woman that are on the façade of Sir William Turner Hospital in Kirkleatham, which he had refurbished in the 1740s. Plaster portrait busts, which were sold for two guineas each, were a popular choice for display in libraries, where, placed high on the top of book cases, they would appear to be made of either bronze or marble. In 1749 the Fellows of All Souls, Oxford commissioned from Cheere 24 portrait busts of eminent Fellows for the

Codrington Library. Another fashionable use of busts was to adorn staircases as part of the rococo stucco decoration. John Carr purchased busts of Shakespeare and Newton by Cheere in 1762 for the staircase of Fairfax House.

Because of the present lock-down, I have been unable to check which of the nine Kirkleatham portrait busts are actually on display in the Gallery, but, for symmetry, they will probably have been chosen from the seven smaller busts. Some of these busts were based on the work of contemporary sculptors, such as Peter Scheemakers (1691-1781), Michael Rysbrack (1694-1770), and Louis François Roubiliac (1695-1762); others were probably original creations by Cheere, based on engravings. The bust of Matthew Prior (1664-1721), poet and diplomat, derives from the marble bust by the French sculptor, Antoine Coysevox, which is on Rysbrack's 1723 funerary monument to Prior in Westminster Abbey. The busts of Bacon and Dryden are loosely based on busts by Peter Scheemakers, while the very youthful looking one of Addison imitates an engraving by George Vertue of a painting by Kneller. The busts of Cicero and Horace were taken from casts of antique originals, probably brought back from Rome. The origin of the designs for the busts of Swift, Congreve, and Clark is uncertain. In the 1780s the Cheere bust of Congreve was copied by Wedgwood in black basalt, as were some of the other busts, though the rococo style base or socle was replaced by a more classical design.

The unique collection of the ten very finely modelled statuettes by Cheere will have to await discussion until the time when they are rescued from storage and put back on display in the Gallery. In 1984, the bust of Prior, the statuette of Pope and 2 brackets from the Kirkleatham collection were considered sufficiently important to be included in the exhibition at the V & A, 'Rococo: Art & Design in Hogarth's England'. Sadly, it is unlikely they will be on show again, as today plaster busts and statuettes are deeply unfashionable and are regarded as inferior mass-produced objects. However, as significant examples of the English rococo style, they are without doubt worthy of serious consideration.

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