

Summary of the talk given to FYAG on 10th August 2022 by Moira Fulton, who is currently Events-Co-ordinator for the Friends

Artwork of the Month August 2022

Portrait of Captain John Foote, (1761-5) by Joshua Reynolds (1723-92)



Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), *Portrait of Captain Foote, 1761-1765*,
oil on canvas, 127cm x 100cm, YORAG : 216
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This painting was bought by York Art Gallery in 1950, together with the robe which Captain Foote wears in the portrait.

The talk is divided into four parts:

1. The known facts about the painting
2. A study of the painting itself
3. A description of the robe
4. Changing reactions to the portrait

1. The Known Facts

Captain Foote was a sea captain in the service of the East India Company. He was born in 1718, and died aged 50 in 1768. He came from near Plymouth and was a friend of Reynolds from his Devon days. He is recorded as sitting for his portrait five times in Reynolds's Sitters Book (in 1761 on 3rd, 7th, 11th March; 17th April; and in January 1765 for a further sitting).

The painting and the robe remained together, in the possession of members of Captain Foote's family, until 1929. Whilst in family ownership it was exhibited in 1877 at the Royal Academy in an exhibition of Old Master Paintings. After the exhibition in 1878 the portrait was engraved, but otherwise does not seem to have been seen in public.

The portrait and the robe were sold by Agnew's, on behalf of a client in 1950 to York Art Gallery, then under the curatorship of Hans Hesse. The price was £350; since £200 was given towards the purchase by the National Art Collection Fund (now the Art Fund), the purchase only cost the Gallery £150. This price must have been recouped many times over with reproduction rights. It has remained a highly popular painting, and has been loaned on many occasions to exhibitions both in the UK and abroad. The last time it was lent was to the Tate in 2016 for their exhibition *Artist and Empire*; from London it accompanied the exhibition when it transferred to Singapore in 2017.

2. The Painting.

The style of the portrait is influenced by the Grand Manner of 17th- and 18th- century Italian portraits, which were greatly admired by Reynolds. The figure of Captain Foote is centrally placed and dominates the composition, but his pose is balanced by the diagonal of the curtain behind him and the angle of his stick, together with the position of his left arm. The work is boldly and fluidly painted, though the details of the embroidery on the robe are more tightly executed, possibly the work of a studio assistant.

Several commentators have remarked on the greenish tinge of the sky in the background which has been attributed to Reynolds use of blue verditer which changes colour quickly, but this alteration of tone has been rather exaggerated since the sky still appears basically blue in hue. The number of sittings for this portrait indicate that Reynolds took great care painting it. Reynolds is known to have retouched it later, possibly as a result of his

notorious experiments with paints. The artist is recorded as saying that the portrait of Captain Foote was one of his favourite works and would survive when many others had faded. The portrait gives the impression of a sympathetic painting of an old friend, a rather over-weight, undistinguished looking man, given an air of dignity by his magnificent robe.

Nicholas Penny, in the catalogue of the major exhibition on Reynolds in 1986, makes the point that, though Reynolds could make his sitters look impressive and distinguished, he was sometimes let down by faulty technique; in particular the hands are often hidden by drapery or poorly painted. The painting of the hands in our portrait is fairly perfunctory, and the hands look featureless and distinctly podgy. But that may be accurate, since Captain Foote is depicted with a noticeable double chin.

At the time of the painting, Reynolds had become the most popular painter for the aristocracy, and was commanding much higher prices than his contemporaries. In the early 1760s he charged 50 guineas for a half-length, while by 1765 the price had gone up to 70 guineas. Possibly Reynolds did our work at a reduced rate for an old friend and because he was intrigued by painting the exotic costume. Reynolds did not undertake the portrait for the purpose of publicity, as the painting was not engraved until 1878, after the exhibition at the RA in 1877, and does not seem to have been exhibited before that date.

3. The Robe

A remarkable survival, the robe Captain Foote is wearing has been preserved with the portrait, and has been carefully looked after by his descendants and by subsequent owners. The gallery possesses both the robe and the sash around the waist from the portrait, as well as another sash for the shoulder, but not the turban or the cane. The sash over the shoulder is not the one in the painting, but is of the same date. Possibly one of Captain Foote's family decided to use the very attractive sash to wear, and substituted a plainer one that Captain Foote had perhaps also brought back from India.

When the robe was examined by a textile conservator in 2011, she reported it was in very good condition, which suggests it was a prized possession and not used for fancy dress or masquerades, as one commentator has suggested.

The robe is known as a jama, a garment introduced to India by the Mughals. It has a cross-over bodice, tight sleeves, and a full skirt. It is of the finest Indian muslin with embroidery of dark blue and yellow silk, and silver-gilt thread in Indo-Persian style. The sash is known as a patka. The muslin is so fine as to be almost transparent. It was an expensive and ceremonial garment, and would worn be by a nawab or ruler. It has been suggested that it could have been presented to Captain Foote by a prince. The turban, with its jewelled aigrette, sadly not in the collection, adds to the splendour of the costume.

4. Reactions to the Painting and the Costume

Present-day commentators use the painting, and to a lesser extent the costume, as the excuse to display anti-colonial sentiments and to criticise the whole concept of Empire. All the sins of Empire seem to be heaped on poor Captain Foote's not unsubstantial shoulders. In the recent exhibition of 2016, *Art and the Empire*, in the introduction to the catalogue the comment is made that any art connected to the Empire is regarded as embarrassing by galleries and is often kept tucked away in store. I suspect, from the comments put beside the painting in York Art Gallery, that it is seen as one which needs a modern gloss. Possibly, if it was not by Reynolds, the Gallery would keep it in store and it would not be on display.

I noted two examples of captions put up beside the painting in the Gallery: the first one is the present caption beside the painting, the second, in the archives, was written in less censorious times. The present caption reads: 'Many Western sitters adopted or appropriated elements of Eastern dress to show their international connections. Western use of Eastern aesthetics was often paired with disdain for the creators of the item'. An earlier caption to the painting just noted that in the 18th century it was fashionable for British sitters with Indian connections to have their portraits painted in Indian dress, without making any value judgement about the matter. When it was exhibited in 1990 in the exhibition *The Raj: India and the British*, galleries were less likely to criticise a non-Indian wearing native dress. In the catalogue to the exhibition, the point was made that Indian costume was sometimes worn in private in the 18th century, but never on public occasions, while in the 19th century wearing native costume was regarded as eccentric.

When Captain Foote served with the East India Company, it was just establishing its dominance over much of India. Robert Clive had defeated

Nawab Siraj-ud-Daulah and his French allies at the Battle of Plassey in 1757, when the Company became in effect ruler of Bengal. India was not at that time either a colony or part of the Empire. In a previous lunch-time talk in 2012, the speaker described Foote as a colonial character who has returned home with his wealth; he is said to be a dominating figure with an air of authority. There is no evidence that Captain Foote was particularly wealthy, although, if he commissioned and paid for the painting, he must have had some spare cash. His perceived air of authority is more a subjective reading of the portrait than is obvious from a less prejudiced examination of the subject's expression. The speaker also made the point that wearing Indian dress demonstrated assimilation into Indian culture. She also suggested that the robe could have been worn for masquerades back in England. As the robe is in good condition and has been carefully preserved, that seems unlikely, as we have seen. The robes and the portrait appear to have been regarded as an important family heirloom for over 150 years.

In the exhibition *Art and Empire* it was suggested that the fact Foote is wearing princely robes is an example of cultural cross-dressing, which can be interpreted as the sitter's claim to share the ruler's status as well as a claim to his own oriental identity. In the caption next to the painting the comment was made that the beauty and refinement of Foote's garments are poignant when one remembers that the East India Company's import of such fabrics back to England and the export back to India of cheap mass-produced textiles would soon decimate the luxury Indian textile trade. However, as the Calico Act of 1721, which banned the import of Indian cotton, was not repealed until 1774, the comment about a painting completed by 1765 is completely irrelevant.

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