

An occasional essay for Friends of York Art Gallery by Kuhu Kopariha, a curator from Mumbai, currently completing her MA in History of Art. She is the recipient of the Friends of York Art Gallery Scholarship

Reading Decoloniality in the Portrait of Captain John Foote by Joshua Reynolds, c. 1765: An Indian Perspective



Joshua Reynolds (1723-92), *Portrait of Captain Foote, 1761-1765*,
oil on canvas, 127cm x 100cm, YORAG : 216
Image courtesy of York Museums Trust ::

The portrait of Captain John Foote wearing a jama by Joshua Reynolds is a complex painting, not least because it is one of the earliest examples of cultural cross-dressing in English society. John Foote, a friend and neighbour of the painter, is posed using a formal background of a heavily draped curtain in the four-foot oil painting. This drape cuts off part of the real background of a cloudy sky, placing the East India Company Captain in a vague atmosphere. He could be anywhere in London or Colonial Mumbai (Bombay), when he was actually in the artist's studio at various points between 1761 and 1765. He chose to pose in the jama, a North Indian court attire, and a turban in which the painter shows great interest,

portraying the delicacy of the muslin cotton and the glittering gold of the embroidered flowers. Its authenticity in relation to the original attire, [also part of the York Museums Trust collection](#), is undeniable.

At present, the jama, with the portrait, has found its way back to the shores of Mumbai, displayed at the newly opened Nita Mukesh Ambani Cultural Centre (NMACC). The two exhibits are part of the exhibition 'India in Fashion' which explores the international impact of Indian craft and design in the 18th century (open till 4th June 2023).

In December 1600, the English East India Company, a trading enterprise, was empowered by the British government to sail across the sea and monopolise trade in India and Southeast Asia. Success would come slowly, as local kingdoms and other European powers pushed back against the new English competitors. Rising to the challenge, the Company would meddle in local politics, acquiring the role of an agent of British Imperialism in the 18th and early 19th century. Against this political background, British interest in Indian craft and design would grow, manifested in cultural cross-dressing. Looking back, art historians have explored whether the depiction of cross-dressing in portraits indicated flattery or homage to the culture emulated, or constituted presentations of a 'found' culture, a nostalgia for the exotic that the officers now claimed knowledge of, or was perhaps about self-promotion, of new money disrupting the class system. In reality the intentions behind the portrait can only be revealed by understanding the subject, the artist, and the circumstances in which it was produced. And a dearth of information on Captain Foote makes the portrait subject to several speculative theories. The portrait's complexity lies in its ambiguity, so we must look, and look again, and again, and once more.

Who was John Foote? An officer in charge of Company ships carrying goods for trade to and from Britain and India, in his late 30s Foote had risen from fifth to first mate, serving two trips in that position. In the next decade he was promoted to Captain, commanding the ships Salisbury (1753) and Latham (1757). Latham was his last voyage, reaching India at the most tumultuous time in Bengal, where he was headed via the port of Bombay. Just a month or two before his arrival, the Company under Robert Clive had defeated Nawab Shiraj ud Daula in Bengal, and signed a treaty allowing them to further their fortification plans, establish an independent mint, and partake in trade tax-free. It was an economic conquest which would later settle comfortably into a political one. It must have been during this trip that Foote obtained the garments depicted either as a purchase to wear as more appropriate clothing for the tropical

state or as a diplomatic gift from the court of Bengal. Gifts from Indian lords to Company officers were controversial at the time and were often considered to be bribes. It was rumoured that the Company officials were taking advantage of Mughal rules of gifting, where valuable tributes (nazr) were presented by subordinates to obtain a jama from the ruler's wardrobe.

In 1761, when he sat for this portrait, Foote was perhaps trying to position himself in line with other navy officers like Captain Keppel or gentlemen like Sir John Molesworth, both of whom were painted by his neighbour Joshua Reynolds. This positioning is clear from where and how Foote stands, in front of a hefty dark curtain, one hand enveloping the knob of a stick and the other resting on the 'kamarbandh' (waistband) of his attire. The pose mimics the famous gentlemanly pose of hand-in-waistcoat, which was described as 'manly boldness tempered with modesty' by François Nivelon, the author of *The Rudiments of Genteel Behaviour*. However, our subject is also wearing an attire from the Mughal court emulating the kings of a distant land. A decade later the king of Hyderabad, Muhammad Ali Khan, would be [depicted in this exact pose](#) by George Willison.

Unfortunately for Foote, shortly after the portrait was finished the English 'Nabobs', a deformation of Nawabs, were condemned for their gaudy clothes, their hybridity and new wealth being seen as vulgar. Whether it was for these reasons or because Reynolds did not imagine this painting to be his best work, it remained out of public view until 1878.

Unlike his contemporaries' fancy dress portraits, Foote's attire betrays a rather authentic display of a court dress missing only the turban, which lacks the shape or symbolic folds betraying the religious, caste or class identity of the wearer. The jama is embroidered with floral motifs; these use threads of metallic gold, yellow, and green silk over the white muslin cloth. The motifs are placed in a diagonal pattern typical of the time, in this particular jama they are also embroidered on the collars which are usually laced in golden borders. It has a cross-over chest tied here on the left, which is the way Hindus style it, while Muslim rulers like Shiraj ud Daula tied it to their right. The kamarbandh or patka on the waist is a Kashmiri shawl; the soft wool embroidery also of floral motifs uses red and golden threads. The most intricate of Kashmiri shawls would sometimes take an artist a year to finish. The attire is completed with a small white shawl with similar patterns and minimal embroidery, and a white turban with golden-silver tassels.

In the words of the art historian Tara Mayar,

it can also be argued that the mimicry (however crude) of foreign forms of dress represented a sense of admiration, interest or an effort at flattery, even homage. Similarly, we cannot deduce that the confusing of (possibly subtle) distinctions in foreign dress represents a deliberate attempt to decontextualise and manage colonised cultures.

Foote's authentic jama can very well be seen as evidence of admiration for the dress, partaking in the nostalgia of the land he survived. And while this is plausible, equally plausible is the argument of the postcolonial scholar Edward Said that we are not bigger than our political and social contexts. An underlying theme in the cross-dressing portrait is an air of authority, the power of taking, wearing, appropriating, and most of all looking. This authority is being performed both passively for the Western audiences and through the action of subjugation of those in the East. Foote and other crossdressers exist in a liminal space between home and the colonies, and the aim is to find prominence in the home country through projections of wealth and authority. It is important to note also that one does not need considerable wealth to project authority. The sitter was also only a segment in the pillar of authority, as it would be both he and the artist who benefited from the oppressive East India Company. Reynolds' busy decade of the 1760s was substantially funded by cross-dressing men and women and Company officers, including the Governor General of an Indian state, Warren Hastings.

Centuries later, in 1950, the jama and the portrait found its way to York Art Gallery. Here the sparse knowledge on Captain Foote allowed the research to focus much more on the attire, and in many ways the attire became the primary subject of the portrait. This can be attributed to Reynolds' love for ornamentation influenced by a Venetian style of painting; symbolism is enjoyed by both the authorities and artists of West and East. In these circumstances, it is far more interesting to think of the sensuality of the cloth, and perhaps even that of Foote himself, than to think of the power dynamics embedded in the image. The motif on the jama for example is not a typical Mughal flower, and perhaps represents an English flower yet to be identified. None of these interpretations would be a definite account of the portrait, as all readings remain speculative, evolving with the currents of art-historical knowledge. However, ideas of authority continued with the portrait and the jama, as they remained the art of Sir Joshua Reynolds and the craft of unidentified artists, the latter misidentified as a banyan (vest) for several years at the Gallery. It is only

through the recognition of the authority projected that we can begin to dismantle it.

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