

RCEWA – Portrait of Omai, Sir Joshua Reynolds

Statement of the Expert Adviser to the Secretary of State that the portrait meets Waverley criteria one, two and three

Further Information

The 'Note of Case History' is available on the Arts Council Website:

www.artscouncil.org.uk/reviewing-committee-case-hearings

Please note that images and appendices referenced are not reproduced.

Brief Description of item

Portrait of Omai

Oil on canvas

230 x 140 cm

Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792)

c. 1776

Context

Provenance: The artist's studio sale, Greenwood's 16 April 1796 (lot 51), bt. Michael Bryan; Frederick, 5th Earl of Carlisle, at Castle Howard, Yorkshire by 13 August 1796; thence by descent; sold by the Trustees of the Will of Lord Howard of Henderskelfe Deceased; Sotheby's 29 November 2001, where bought by present owner.

Exhibited: Royal Academy of Arts, London, 1776 (236: 'Omiah whole length'); possibly Manchester 1829 (200: 'Portrait of Omai [by] Sir Joshua Reynolds, lender's name not given); Royal Academy of Arts, London, *European Masters of the Eighteenth Century*, 1954 (57); Birmingham Art Gallery, *Reynolds Exhibition*, March 1961 (63); Auckland City Art Gallery, New Zealand, *The Two Worlds of Omai*, November 1977 (23); Galeries nationales du Grand Palais, Paris, *Reynolds*, 1985 (47) Royal Academy of Arts, London, *Reynolds*, 1986 (100); The Castle Howard Collection, York 1994 (16); Palazzo dei Diamante, Ferrara, and Tate, London, *Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity*, 2005 (67); Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, *High Society – Four Centuries of Glamour*, 2018.

Literature: Manners, J.H. *Travels in Great Britain* (i.e. *Journals of Tours Through Different Parts of Great Britain in 1795, 1796, 1797*), London 1813, i, 92; Neale, J. P. *Views of the Seats of Nobleman and Gentleman, in England, Wales, Scotland and Ireland*, 6 vols, London 1819-23, v, n.p; Waagen, G. *Works of Art and Artists in England*, 3 vols, London 1838, iii, 205; *Treasures of Art in Great Britain*, 3 vols, London 1854, iii, 323; Leslie, C.R. and Taylor, T., *The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, London, 1865 ii, 104-06; Graves, A. & Cronin, W. V. *A History of the Works of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 4 vols, London 1899-1901, vol. ii, 707-08; vol. iv, 1639; Tinker, C.B. *Painter and Poet: Studies in the Literary Relations of English Painting*, Cambridge, Mass., 1939; Waterhouse, E. K. Reynolds, London 1941, 66, 124; Luke, H. 'Omiah: England's First Polynesian Visitor', *The Geographical Magazine*, April 1950, 497-500; Burke, J. *English Art 1714-1800*, Oxford 1976, 205; Joppien, R. 'Phillipe Jacques de Louterbourg's Pantomime "Omiah, or a Trip round the World" and the Artists of Captain Cook's Voyages', *British Museum Yearbook*, 1979, 81-136; Guest, H. 'Curiously Marked: Tattooing, Masculinity and Nationality in Eighteenth-Century British Perceptions of the South Pacific', in John Barrell (ed.), *Painting and Politics of Culture: New Essays in British Art, 1700-1850*; Oxford 1992, 101-134; Manning, D. and Postle, M., *Sir Joshua Reynolds. A Complete Catalogue of his Paintings, with subject paintings catalogued by Martin Postle*, New Haven and London 2000, i, 357, ii, pl. 101, fig. 1191; Turner, C. 'Images of Mai', in *Cook and Omiah. The Cult of the South Seas*, exh. cat., National Library of Australia, Canberra 2001, 23-9; Fullagar, K., 'Reynolds' New Masterpiece', *Cultural and Social History*, 2010, 7:2, 191-212, DOI: [10.2752/147800410X12634795054612](https://doi.org/10.2752/147800410X12634795054612)

Engraved: John Jacobé 15 August 1777; S W Reynolds.

Waverley criteria

- Meets Waverley Criteria 1, 2 and 3

1.

The portrait depicts one of the earliest and most celebrated Indigenous visitors to England in the 18th century. Both subject and composition offer key visual testimony to the British reception, understanding and representation of non-Europeans, in particular New World peoples. It is inextricably linked to the great voyages of discovery and exploration of the 18th century that contributed to the expansion of knowledge and of colonial empire, extending diplomatic and trade relations to new territories.

Since it was purchased in 1792 by Frederick Howard, 5th Earl of Carlisle (1748-1825), one of the most important collectors of contemporary British art of his day, the portrait remained in England, with his descendants until 2002.

2.

The portrait is among the most original, ambitious and best-preserved portraits painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), one of the most influential European artists and aestheticians of the 18th century. That Reynolds attached particular significance to the portrait is suggested by the fact that he kept it on display in his studio until his death in 1792.

3.

The painting is of outstanding significance in the study of 18th century art, in particular portraiture. It is also a signal work in the study colonialism and empire, scientific exploration and the history of the Pacific.

DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

Mai, celebrated in Pacific history as Omai, was perhaps the best known of all Indigenous visitors to Britain in the 18th century. Born around 1753 on Ra'iatea, one of the islands which formed the archipelago of the Society Islands, he moved to Tahiti with this family as a result of threats from warriors of neighbouring Bora Bora, who killed his father.

In 1768, Omai met Captain James Cook in Tahiti, following the discovery of the island by British expeditionary forces the previous year. When Cook returned in 1773 in command of the *Resolution*, he met Omai for a second time. Cook disliked Omai and was reluctant to bring Islanders back to Britain. However, Omai travelled with Tobias Furneaux, Commander of Cook's consort, the *Adventure*, serving as an able seaman. The purpose of bringing Omai to England was claimed to be 'scientific', to gauge his responses to 'civilised' Western society. Omai's own motivation was strategic, to seek an arms alliance with King George III in order to take revenge on the marauding Boraborans.

Not long after his arrival in Plymouth in July 1774, Omai was introduced to King George III, and his Court, and ceremoniously shown the key architectural sights of the capital. His official patrons were the Earl of Sandwich (1718-1792), First Lord of the Admiralty, and the naturalists Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) and Daniel Solander (1733-1782), who had accompanied Cook on the *Endeavour*.

In the two years that followed, Mai ('O-mai' means from the family of Mai) quickly became the object of feverish interest and fantasy among literati, university dons, and leading artists of the day, including the Royal academicians William Parry, William Hodges and Nathaniel Dance, all of whom painted his likeness. During his stay Omai maintained high visibility in polite society. His impeccable manners and easy charm were routinely praised, though detractors were ill-at-ease with some aspects of his perceived 'savagery'. Such was Omai's contemporary celebrity that, both during his visit and after his return to the Islands, his presence spawned a series of popular broadsides, songs and theatrical performances.

In August 1777, Omai returned to the Islands with Cook on board the *Resolution*. He settled in Huaheine where Cook bought him a house with a garden. He appears to have died around two years later.

Reynolds's full-length, life-size, portrait depicts Omai in flowing white robes, reminiscent of a classical toga, but which also resemble Tahitian dress; the sash and turban in particular were probably made from *tapa*, a cloth made from tree bark. The bare-footed pose ultimately derives from the (sandaled) sculpture of the Apollo Belvedere (c.AD 120-140; Vatican City), which in Reynolds' day was considered among the finest statues of Antiquity, thus endowing the portrait with a nobility and 'general air of the antique' enhanced by the sheer scale of the canvas. The wild landscape background with winding river and lowering sky recall Reynolds's portraits of military and naval commanders, hinting at distant adventure and exploration, the palm trees adding an allusion to exotic climes.

Technically the portrait – in unusually good condition given the artist's often damaging penchant to experiment with his media – shows Reynolds in full mastery of his art. At the same time, it reflects his unease in trying to overlay a European mode of portraiture with the trappings of the 'exotic', in particular the tattoos on Omai's hands and forearms, which at the time were widely regarded disapprovingly as 'indicators of the idea of savagery'.

Joshua Reynolds was one of the foremost British painters of his day, fêted by his contemporaries as 'the Modern Apelles'. Devon-born, he came to London at the beginning of the 1740s and soon befriended the leading lights of the London intelligentsia, such as Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Henry Thrale, David Garrick and the philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke. His immense popularity as a portraitist brought him into contact with the most wealthy and powerful individuals of the day, and while he only slowly accessed Royal circles, he became first President of the Royal Academy in 1768. In that role, he published a series of fifteen 'Discourses' in which he set out his aesthetic beliefs, notably as regards the importance of idealising, rather than copying, nature and the superiority of history painting (a genre he himself practiced rarely). In formulating and promoting 'the grand manner' Reynolds also emphasised the intellectual role of painting, so raising the status of the profession in England. Loved (by J.M.W. Turner, John Constable and William Wordsworth) or loathed (by William Blake and the Pre-Raphaelites), his work and beliefs had a profound impact on subsequent generations of British artists and his published *Discourses* remain a fundamental source in the study of 18th-century art and aesthetics.

Reynolds' work is well represented in UK collections however there is very little that is comparable in terms of subject, ambition and state of preservation. There are no related works in the UK. A pencil portrait of Omai is in the National Library of Australia; an oil sketch is in Yale Art Gallery: both are dated c. 1775.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

The portrait remained in Reynolds' possession until his death, displayed in his Leicester Square studio. It was bought at his posthumous sale by Frederick Howard, 5th Earl of Carlisle (1748-1825) one of the artist's most important patrons; interestingly, both the scale of the picture and Omai's *ad locutio* pose recall a portrait Reynolds painted of the Earl some years earlier (1769, Tate).

Reynolds' portrait of Omai epitomises the ambivalence of British society towards Indigenous peoples and cultures. Elevating his sitter through references to classical ideals of human perfection in European art, Reynolds at the same time endeavours to evoke the figure of the 'noble savage' living close to nature, uncorrupted by civilization and virtuous, an ambitious but uncomfortable alignment that has been described as embodying a 'tussle of idealisations'. As such, Omai's portrait reflects the contemporary polemic about the state of British society and ongoing discourses that opposed 'civilisation' and 'nature', in particular as related to the problematic role of Pacific exploration in exposing and examining New World peoples and cultures.

Fundamental as it is to the study of 18th-century art, culture and history, Reynolds' magnificent portrait and the complex issues it raises – not least as regards the Western construct of the 'noble savage' – make it of continuing relevance today. Recent examination of the painting's critical heritage and mixed history of reception has challenged the aesthetic judgement of the painting by 21st-century art historians and cultural commentators; but in doing so has only underlined its fundamental significance and ability to sustain intellectual, artistic, ethical and historical scrutiny well over two centuries after it was painted.

Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest, note of case hearing on Wednesday 9th June: *Portrait of Omai*, Sir Joshua Reynolds (Case 19, 2020-21)

Application

1. The Reviewing Committee on the Export of Works of Art and Objects of Cultural Interest (RCEWA) met on Wednesday 9th June to consider an application to export a *Portrait of Omai* by Sir Joshua Reynolds P.R.A. (1723–1792). The value shown on the export licence application was £50,000,000 which the applicant said represented the current market value supported by an independent valuation. The expert adviser had objected to the export of the painting on the grounds that its departure from the UK would be a misfortune because it met all three of the Waverley criteria.

2. All of the regular eight RCEWA members were present and were joined by three independent assessors, acting as temporary members of the Reviewing Committee.

3. The applicant confirmed that the value did not include VAT and that VAT would not be payable in the event of a UK sale. The applicant also confirmed that the owner understood the circumstances under which an export licence might be refused and that, if the decision on the licence was deferred, the owner would allow the painting to be displayed for fundraising.

Expert's submission

4. The expert adviser had provided a written submission stating that the portrait depicted one of the earliest and most celebrated Polynesian visitors to England in the 18th century. Both subject and composition offered key visual testimony to the British reception, understanding and representation of non-Europeans, in particular New World peoples. It was inextricably linked to the great voyages of discovery and exploration of the 18th century that contributed to the expansion of knowledge and of colonial empire, extending diplomatic and trade relations to new territories.

5. Reynolds's full-length, life-size, portrait depicted Omai in flowing white robes, reminiscent of a classical toga, but which also resembled Tahitian dress; the sash and turban in particular were probably made from *tapa*, a cloth made from tree bark. The bare-footed pose ultimately derives from the (sandaled) sculpture of the Apollo Belvedere (c.AD 120-140; Vatican City), which in Reynolds' day was considered among the finest statues of Antiquity, thus endowing the portrait with a nobility and 'general air of the antique' enhanced by the sheer scale of the canvas. The wild landscape background with winding river and lowering sky recall Reynolds's portraits of military and naval commanders, hinting at distant adventure and exploration, the palm trees adding an allusion to exotic climes.

6. Joshua Reynolds was one of the foremost British painters of his day fêted by his contemporaries as 'the Modern Apelles'. Devon-born, he came to London at the beginning of the 1740s and soon befriended the leading lights of the London intelligentsia, such as Samuel Johnson, Oliver Goldsmith, Henry Thrale, David Garrick and the philosopher and statesman Edmund Burke. His immense popularity as a portraitist brought him into contact with the most wealthy and powerful individuals of the day, and while he only slowly accessed Royal circles, he became first President of the Royal Academy in 1768. His work and beliefs had a profound impact on subsequent generations of British artists and his published *Discourses* remain a fundamental source in the study of 18th-century art and aesthetics.

7. The portrait was among the most original, ambitious and best-preserved portraits painted by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), one of the most influential European artists and aestheticians of the 18th century. That Reynolds attached particular significance to the portrait was suggested by the fact that he kept it on display in his studio until his death in 1792.

8. The painting was of outstanding significance in the study of 18th century art, in particular portraiture. It was also a signal work in the study of colonialism and empire, scientific exploration and the history of the Pacific.

Applicant's submission

9. The applicant had stated in a written submission that they did not contest that the portrait met one or more of the three Waverley criteria.

Discussion by the Committee

10. The expert adviser and applicant retired and the Committee discussed the case. The Committee unanimously agreed that the painting met all three of the Waverley criteria. It was agreed that there had been no material change to the arguments for or against the criteria since the Committee had previously considered the painting in December 2002. The portrait was one of the great iconic works of the 18th century, and arguably the greatest portrait by one of the greatest British portraitists.

11. The Committee considered the valuation provided by the applicant. It noted that this was an exceptional work by Reynolds. The painting had an extraordinary status but the current value of £50m would be an unprecedented price for an 18th-century portrait and it would be prudent, given its history, that the valuation be verified by an independent process.

Waverley Criteria

12. The Committee voted on whether the portrait met the Waverley criteria. All eleven members voted that it met all three of the Waverley criteria. The painting

was therefore found to meet all three of the Waverley criteria.

Matching offer

13. Given the significance of the painting and the size of the value the Committee agreed that it would be prudent for the Secretary of State to get an independent valuation.

Communication of findings

14. The expert adviser and the applicant returned. The Chairman notified them of the Committee's decision on its recommendations to the Secretary of State.

15. The expert adviser agreed to act as champion if a decision on the licence was deferred by the Secretary of State.

Subsequent Developments

16. The Secretary of State agreed the Committee's recommendation to obtain an independent valuation. The process of establishing an independent valuation, which was agreed with the applicant beforehand, was as set out in paragraph 54 of the 2021 Issue 2 Arts Council's [Guidance for exporters](#) and in this case proceeded as follows:

- (i) The Secretary of State appointed Anthony Mould as an independent valuer suitably qualified to advise on the painting. The owner was informed of his identity and the letter of instruction to him was agreed beforehand with the applicant.
- (ii) Anthony Mould agreed with the applicant's valuation of £50m and their detailed justification of it. This was shared with the owner and submitted to the Secretary of State who agreed that as the fair market price for the painting.
- (iii) Having regard to this the Committee agreed to recommend to the Secretary of State that the decision on the export licence should be deferred for an initial period of four months to allow an offer to purchase to be made at the fair matching price of £50m. It further recommended that if, by the end of the initial deferral period, a potential purchaser had shown a serious intention to raise funds with a view to making an offer to purchase the painting, the deferral should be extended by a further eight months.