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GEORGE STEUART: A PORTRAIT REVEALED

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The career of the architect George Steuart (c.1730–1806) is illuminated by his numerous letters, architectural drawings and his surviving buildings. This is in stark contrast to his personal life, and appearance, which has remained a mystery.

The Public Catalogue Foundation has recently published the only known image of Steuart, in the collection of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh (Fig. 1). It depicts him in his mid forties and at the point of that career change between interior painter and architect which was discussed in my previous article.¹ The accoutrements of both occupations are prominent in the portrait; palette, mahl stick and brushes to the fore, a plain Doric column behind.

The attribution to William Beechey (1753–1839), suggested at the time of its donation in 1940, is tenuous. It would make this Beechey's earliest known portrait and his only confirmed work on copper; an expensive material for a student at the Royal Academy Schools. It looks amateurish alongside Beechey's early works, such as his late 1770s portrait of Richard Fenton, now in the National Museum of Wales. As a student, however, Beechey is known to have lodged with Charles Lucas, a coach painter.² Steuart also undertook occasional coach-painting commissions, which may have put him in contact with Beechey.

Another possibility is that this is a self portrait, which would explain the anatomically awkward right arm. George's brother, Charles, regularly exhibited his views of noblemen's parks and houses at the Society of Artists of Great Britain between 1764 and



Fig. 1: Attributed to William Beechey. 'George Steuart',
c.1775, oil on copper
(*Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh*)

1790, and was elected its President in 1783. George also exhibited at the Society in 1783, perhaps encouraged by his President brother, and two of his works were portraits of artists, of a kit-cat format.³ Although this work does not follow the dimensions of a kit-cat portrait, it does follow the format in depicting the hands, but not down to the legs.

However, Steuart's own architectural drawings in ink and wash show sensitivity to shade, proportion and attenuation of detail, and it would be unlikely that he would have worked in such an amateur style in oils.

The portrait's donor was Bessie Gray Steuart (1879–1940), who described herself as George's great-great niece in her correspondence with the Gallery. Bessie named George's wife as Isabella Sorsbie, from Newcastle, whom he married in London on 3 July 1765. Bessie's grandfather was factor to Lord Glenlyon in the early nineteenth century, and they descended from the Steuarts of Dalguise, local landowners close to the Duke of Atholl's main seat at Blair Castle.⁴ The Atholls were Steuart's main patrons. The Steuarts of Dalguise have not yet been traced as patrons of a particular portraitist in the eighteenth century; in the nineteenth they favoured the Scottish painters John Watson Gordon (1788–1864) and Robert McInnes (1801–86).⁵

Bessie Steuart initially loaned the portrait to the Gallery from her home in west London in the late 1930s, as she was concerned for its safety should war be declared. This concern proved to be justified; the portrait became part of the Gallery's permanent collection following her death in a bombing raid in 1940.⁶

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NOTES

- 1 S. Goodsir, 'George Steuart and Robert Adam: A Professional Relationship Revealed', *The Georgian Group Journal*, 18 (2010)
- 2 W. Roberts, *Sir William Beechey R.A.* (London, 1907)
- 3 A. Graves, *The Society of Artists of Great Britain, 1760 – 91* (London, 1907)
- 4 Lord Glenlyon (1782–1837), second son of the fourth Duke of Atholl. His brother, the fifth Duke, was unable to manage his own estates and Glenlyon managed on his behalf.
- 5 *Catalogue Of An Interesting Collection Of Old Portraits Belonging To The Estate Of The Late J. N. Durrant-Steuart, Esq., of Dalguise.* Dowell's, Edinburgh, 19th March 1904.
- 6 Commonwealth War Graves Commission. www.cwgc.org/find-war-dead.aspx.