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ANCIENT ART AND MODERN POLITICS: THE SCULPTURE INSTALLATION OF 1768 AT SHELBURNE HOUSE, BERKELEY SQUARE

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Democratic populism, as an articulated principle of political life, was manifested in Georgian Britain in the careers of William Pitt, Earl of Chatham (1708–78) and his disciple the second Earl of Shelburne (1737–1805). Elizabeth Montagu wrote that the former was a ‘minister raised by popular favour’;¹ Jeremy Bentham wrote of the latter that

‘though ambitious of rising, he was desirous of rising by means of the people’.² Chatham and Shelburne, however, have been omitted from explorations of the political dimensions to collecting and display in the period. Scholars have explored antique sculpture in terms of various aspects of the Whig intellectual tradition in the eighteenth century, but not that of



Fig. 1. Dining room of Lansdowne House, formerly titled Shelburne House, facing north-west, 1913. In the niches on the right are the statues of Trajan and a senator.
(Unknown photographer for *Country Life*)

the ‘Great Commoner’.³ This article reconstructs a lost sculptural installation to propose a tribute to Chatham expressed through the antique.

William Petty, second Earl of Shelburne, later first Marquess of Lansdowne, is one of the iconic names of Georgian collecting. Alongside Charles Townley, he was the era’s greatest patron of antique Roman sculpture, but unlike Townley’s, his collection has been dispersed and in many cases dismantled.⁴ Partly for this reason, Shelburne has not received extensive analysis, and the analysis that he has attracted relates to works that he acquired following his belated grand tour of 1771, after which his correspondence with Gavin Hamilton provides a rich source of information.⁵ With the publication in 2017 of a catalogue of Shelburne’s antiquities by Elizabeth Angelicoussis, much more can finally be said. This article discusses the initial installation of sculpture at Shelburne House (later renamed Lansdowne House), designed by Robert Adam and completed in 1768 (Fig. 1). On the partial demolition of the house, the room was acquired by the Metropolitan Museum and has been installed in New York in various altered forms since 1954.⁶

One of the innovations available to early adopters of Robert Adam’s architecture was the combined dining room and sculpture gallery, pioneered at Syon House. The dining room at Shelburne House was an advance on Syon’s in that the sculptures were not casts of canonical works in plaster, but original Roman sculptures in stone, completed by Bartolomeo Cavaceppi (c.1716–99). There were nine niches as part of Adam’s design of August 1766, each to be filled with sculpture. The only one identified on his original drawings, however, was a Bacchus, to be installed in the centre of the wall opposite the window.

The work of Angelicoussis has not been utilised in recent work on the Adam brothers as dealers.⁷ But it answers long-standing questions about their supply of sculptures to Shelburne, and, in particular, it identifies which works were in the dining room

at Shelburne House. Because most of these works have been dismantled by collectors and institutions, their identities have long been a mystery. They represented, however, some of the highlights of the entire collection, even after Shelburne turned his patronage from the Adam brothers to Gavin Hamilton.

There is no depiction or catalogue to record the arrangement made by Shelburne to compare to the invaluable images made of the interior of Charles Townley’s house on Park Street. But there is sufficient evidence to put together a convincing reconstruction. The earliest definitive record of the arrangement was made in 1882, and was recorded in a drawing in the Adolf Michaelis Papers at the Bibliothèque Nationale et Universitaire de Strasbourg.⁸ The arrangement cannot be entirely that of 1768, however, because two herms shown on the plan by the window were only acquired by Shelburne in the 1770s.

The arrangement with the herms in 1882 is as far back as Angelicoussis goes in her catalogue, but it is possible to go further with corroborative sources. The first is a sale catalogue of 1810, which lists the sculptures in the house.⁹ Though a rationale is not given for the numbering, it is reasonable to assume that it has been done by location. The two herms noted by Michaelis are not listed together. In the list of 38 statues, however, all those listed by Michaelis correspond to the group numbered from 19 to 28. The only exception is number 22, which is the ‘Diana Cacciatrice’, later recorded in the staircase hall, and which would have been too large for a niche. This suggests that the statues described together in 1881 were also together in 1810, with the addition of the Diana that may have occupied in 1810 the position by the window later taken by the herms.

The second corroborative source, and the only one that provides evidence from the first installation, is a bill from 1768 to the carver John Gilbert for wooden fig leaves for ‘figures in ye niches’ in the dining room, at five shillings a leaf.¹⁰ Gilbert was

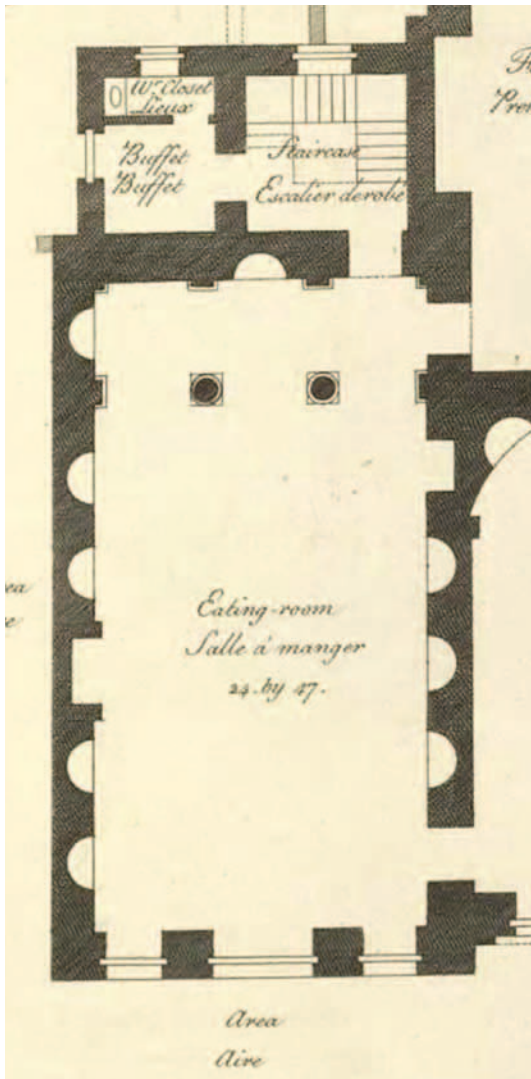


Fig. 2. Plan of the 'eating room' at Shelburne House:
Robert Adam, *The Works in Architecture*, vol. 2
(1779), pl. 1 (detail).

paid for six, which correspond to the six nude male figures that are listed together in the catalogue of 1810, and the drawing of 1882. As the works were symmetrically arranged in 1882, and there is no other arrangement that would preserve the symmetry, it is

unlikely that the arrangement can have changed in the intervening decades.

There is evidence therefore to suggest that what was seen by Michaelis in 1882 was the original arrangement of the marbles in the niches of the dining room in 1768. Two further sources supplement this information, and allow us to say more about the installation than simply listing its contents. Firstly, titles were given to the sculptures. Some would have been very straightforward: Apollo and Bacchus from their attributes would have been as instantly recognizable, while the Amazon was closely comparable to an Amazon in the Capitoline Museum in Rome. The portrait of Trajan was recognizable from many versions of the 'optimus princeps' in the Uffizi and other Grand Tour destinations. The identities of some, however, would not have been obvious in the 1760s, and would have required an introduction of some kind. We know that Shelburne consulted Adam on the titles of other sculptures in correspondence.¹¹

The earliest source for the original identities is the catalogue of 1810. That all the titles given here were consistent since the installation is made highly probable by the correspondence with those for which documentary evidence survives from the 1760s. 'A Pugilitor' is identified as a 'boxer' by Cavaceppi and Lipyeatt.¹² 'Germanicus' has the same title in a letter from James to Robert Adam, derived from the similar figure then at Versailles, and now at the Louvre as Marcellus.¹³ 'A Roman Senator' is called 'consolo conosciuto' by Cavaceppi.¹⁴ Other creative acts of nomenclature were 'The Emperor Claudius' and 'Plotina, in the character of Fortune', and no earlier mention of these statues is known. But the correspondence of the names of the other unusual figures suggests that these too underwent no alteration between 1768 and 1810.

Apart from the titles, the second piece of supplementary information is Adam's plan of the room, published in the second volume of his *Works in Architecture* in 1779 (Fig. 2). In his drawing,

Michaelis distorted the scale of the room, and his distortion was repeated by Angelicoussis. But if the arrangement is returned to the original layout, then correspondences become clear. 'Plotina' turns out to be placed directly opposite her husband 'the Emperor Trajan'. 'The Emperor Claudius' is revealed to be directly opposite his brother 'Germanicus'.

These correspondences confirm an overall intention behind the arrangement, but in the absence of papers discussing it the question arises: how could such a programme have been assembled? Before James Adam's departure from Rome in 1763, the brothers had a warehouse of sculpture in the city that could have been modified by Cavaceppi. Correspondence records James Adam searching for specific types of figure, presumably at

the request of the patron. In 1761, he was looking in vain for 'consular figures of 7 ft. 6 high' for the Duke of Northumberland.¹⁵ It would be reasonable to infer that Shelburne could communicate similarly specific requests, such as for two emperors and one 'consular' figure of the same scale. The identities of the Roman figures could be further shaped through the names of those sculptures like 'The Emperor Claudius' where the identity has no further reality. Unlike plaster casts after works in the Uffizi or Vatican, there were no established identities for these sculptures.

The first two works to be acquired were the 'Germanicus' and the 'Pugilitore', first described in letters in July 1762 and March 1763 respectively, long before the room was conceived. When the Adam arrangement is restored, they become more clearly

Fig. 3. Pair of sculptures to the left of the chimneypiece in the dining room at Shelburne House. Left: 'A Pugilitore' now titled 'The Lansdowne Athlete' (*Los Angeles County Museum of Art*, 49.23.12). Right: 'Germanicus', now titled 'Hermes' (*Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, MMA* 56.234.15).



a pair, contrasted with the female pair on the other side of the chimneypiece (Fig. 3). It is tempting to relate the two pairs with the portraits of the Duke and Duchess of Northumberland on opposite sides in the dining room at Syon, as if this were another portrait of the hosts in the dining space. Germanicus and a boxer would have been appropriate analogues for Shelburne, whose success was due to his military career in the Seven Years War, as aide-de-camp to George III in 1760. Germanicus was particularly noted as a model for leadership: the Marquise de Lambert, and later Lord Chesterfield, retold Tacitus's story of how he would visit his camps incognito to hear his soldiers' discussions.¹⁶

Opposite these two pairs on the south wall was a trio of sculptures whose arrangement is particularly remarkable (Fig. 4). The flanking figures were identified in 1810 with the titles 'the Emperor Trajan' and 'the Emperor Claudius'. Trajan had been created from a portrait bust of the emperor, combined with a nude torso of a portrait statue of the Hermes Richelieu type. In his hand he held a crucifix, added by a restorer in reference to the story of Trajan's redemption in the Golden Legend. Today the figure survives mostly intact at the San Antonio Museum of Art in Texas. 'Claudius' had been created from a portrait bust now known as Tiberius, and the body of a heroically nude portrait statue. In 1971 the dealer Jerome Eisenberg separated the head from the body to sell the former to J. Paul Getty and the latter to Walter P. Chrysler, Jr., both of whom presented them to their respective museums.

Between the pair was 'A Roman Senator'.

Opposite the chimneypiece, at the centre of the wall, it was compositionally the most prominent in the main space of the room (Fig. 1). The statue is known from Cavaceppi's depiction, where he noted that some have identified it as Marcus Ulpius Trajanus, the father of the emperor Trajan, who was appointed consul by Vespasian. However in 1810, the cataloguer noted that 'the countenance resembles the bust of Cicero, formerly in the Gallery of the Campadoglio

in Rome'.¹⁷ Michaelis identified the bust as that in the Vatican traditionally identified as Sulla, but with pupils drilled into the eyes to bring it to life. All agree that it depicts a great orator in action. Of all the nine statues it is the only one whose current location is unknown, following its sale to the dealer Arthur Kevorkian in 1930.

The trio comprise a clear compositional unity (Fig. 4). The two emperors are nude, while the senator is in a toga; the two emperors both look up and towards the senator, while the senator looks straight ahead. Unlike the others, he enters the space of the room, extending his right hand beyond the area of the niche. The great size of the central sculpture is known from the catalogue of 1810: 6 ft. 8 in., three inches higher than Trajan and five higher than Claudius. In the room the trio was itself flanked by two identical doors, one false, reinforcing the centrality of the senator.

The senator and emperors form in effect a composed group, creating a single scene from what had been autonomous sculptures. This was a highly unusual approach to the display of the antique whose few precedents include the Niobe group at the Villa Medici in Rome. Shortly afterwards, and not far away, Shelburne's colleague and rival the Marquess of Rockingham gathered a group of antique sculptures into a narrative composition at his house in No. 4 Grosvenor Square. To join a restored antique figure of Paris, acquired from Lyde Browne at some point before 1768, Rockingham commissioned Nollekens to add Venus (1773), Minerva (1775) and Juno (1776).¹⁸

What is also striking about the trio at Shelburne House is the scene it depicted: two emperors looking up at a senator. It is sufficiently counter-intuitive as an arrangement to demand a particular interpretation. The quintessential senator in the eighteenth-century imagination was Cicero, the model for statesmanship and public office since the era of Walpole.¹⁹ But if it were Cicero presented here, or any other statesman of the Republic, the

combination with Imperial figures would clearly be anachronistic. Furthermore, in the 1760s, during the conflict between the new king and Parliament, Cicero was the particular advocate of the constitution mixed between monarchy, aristocracy and democracy. At Shelburne House, the sculpture of the senator was being elevated over those of the monarchical figures. The trio do not embody a mixed constitution so much as a monarchy deferring to a charismatic statesman orator. For context we must look not to the ancient past but to the present.

On his purchase of the house in 1765, the Earl of Shelburne switched his allegiance from the Earl of Bute, the previous owner, to William Pitt the Elder, a national hero, but one representing a much smaller parliamentary interest. Pitt represented the

most successful recent embodiment of the Whig tradition of personal virtue, and crucially without the aristocratic birth of traditional appeals to the example of senatorial Rome. After leading the country to success in the Seven Years War, and resisting the influence of both King and party, in the 1760s and '70s he led the opposition reform movement for a more democratic constitution. In 1766, Pitt accepted the King's offer to become Lord Privy Seal as the Earl of Chatham.

A cult of Pitt developed in sculptural form throughout the 1760s, but exclusively outside the imperial metropolis. In the Mansion House in Cork, Joseph Wilton's statue was installed in 1766. In the American colonies, following the repeal of the Stamp Act in March 1766, Pitt was a particular favourite.

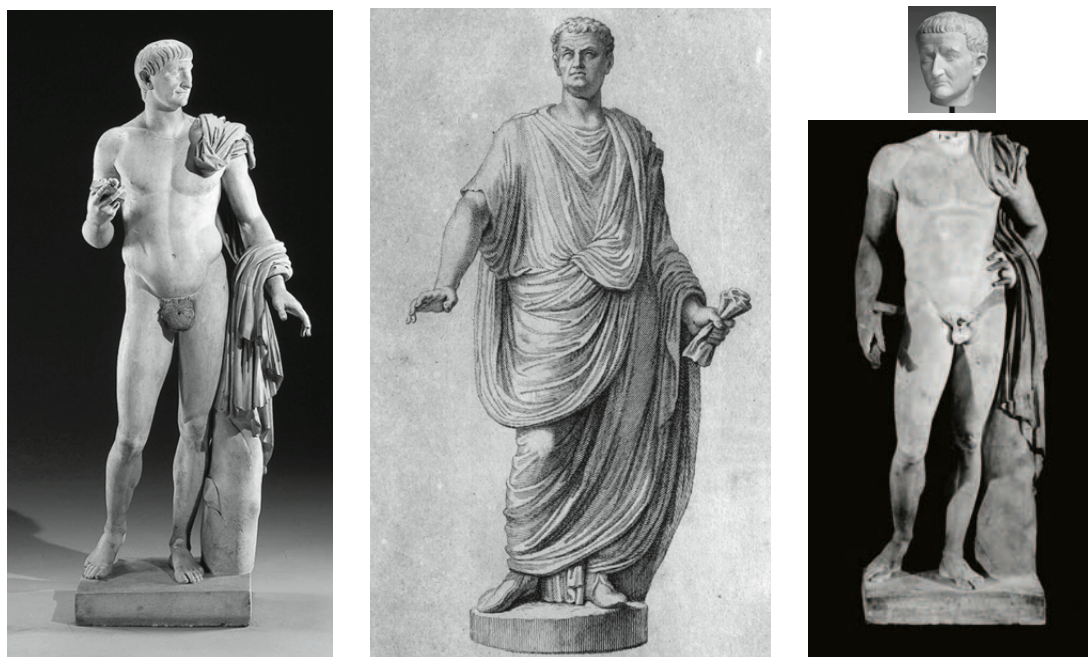


Fig. 4. Reconstruction of three sculptures on the north wall of the dining room at Shelburne House. Left: 'The Emperor Trajan', now titled 'The Lansdowne Trajan', San Antonio Museum of Art. Centre: 'Senator', illustrated in Cavaceppi, *Raccolta d'antiche statue* (1768) vol. 1. Right: 'The Emperor Claudius', now titled 'The Lansdowne Tiberius', The J. Paul Getty Museum, Los Angeles (head), and Chrysler Museum of Art, Norfolk, Virginia (body).

Benjamin Franklin gave a bust to Harvard University in 1769, while in Charleston and New York new versions by Wilton of his Cork statue were installed in 1770. The enthusiasm was chilled, however, by Pitt's transformation into the Earl of Chatham, and his move into the King's confidence in 1766, shortly after those commissions were made. No such chill was felt by Shelburne, however, who joined the new ministry as Secretary of State for the South, and after its demise, remained Pitt's greatest supporter until the latter's death fifteen years later.

Pitt's alliance with the monarch should not have come as a surprise to his admirers. On George III's accession to the throne in 1760, the King's opinion of the national hero could not have been lower, due to the latter's support for continued prosecution of the expensive war in Germany. But Pitt had no objection to the King as long as the latter did not interfere with him leading the country. Over the next few years, the King discovered that, while his personal favourite was too unpopular to hold office, aristocratic Whig alternatives all treated His Majesty with open contempt. So it was that he sought out Pitt to lead the country again, finally succeeding when the latter felt that the Whig factions were weakened and his personal authority would be unchallenged. At that point, in July 1766, it seemed that the national hero would lead the country in a harmonious relationship with the King, with royal authority recognized but subservient, just as in the trio of sculptures in the dining room at Shelburne House.

The visible support for Chatham embodied by the sculptural display would have been particularly necessary in 1768. Chatham had been forced to retire from Westminster within months of forming his ministry, afflicted with gout and depression. In March 1767, without formally resigning, he stepped down from leadership, leaving the Duke of Grafton the *de facto* head of the administration, and the renegade chancellor Charles Townshend sowing chaos. The Prime Minister of the country was unseen, entirely withdrawn from society at North

End, the house he rented in Hampstead. Burke later wrote that 'when his face was hid but for a moment, his whole system was on a wide sea, without chart or compass'.²⁰ Nevertheless, the King encouraged his minister to persist in formal office for a year and a half in this state.

After Chatham's death in 1778, Shelburne continued his mentor's legacy in his own political career, frustrating Rockingham and the Whig opposition, whose senatorial virtue made no popular appeal, as well as court Whigs who would do the King's bidding. Shelburne commented on the ultimate paradox of this strategy in his memoirs:

'It is a wonderful blessing that while almost all Princes make the extension of their Power the great object of their lives, the narrowness, jealousy and incapacity which for the most part characterises them deprives them of the only means of accomplishing their object: an honest and capable Minister. Whenever they are driven by opposition, or by difficulty, to take one, from that moment they become his bitterest enemy, and are indefatigable till they get quit of him and in many cases sacrifice him.'²¹

Shelburne is best known as the Prime Minister during the negotiations that ended the War of American Independence. But his ministry was brief, from July 1782 to March 1783, and, compared to Rockingham and Fox, he remains a shadowy figure among the political radicals of George III's reign. Gillray shows him wearing stubble and an enigmatic smile in 'Gloria Mundi' (1782), looking down as the sun at Fox. The smile is an unsettling motif throughout the years, through to 'Prosmis'd Horrors of the French Invasion' (1796), where he operates the guillotine. A revival of interest from historians is currently under way, attempting to rehabilitate Shelburne's radicalism and drawing attention to a 'Bowood Circle' of progressive thinkers whom he patronised.²² This revival, however, has not yet made the connection between Shelburne's politics and his art collection.

The sculptural trio of senator and emperors,

once reconstructed, can be interpreted as a tribute to Shelburne's political mentor in the era of the Chatham administration of 1766–8. It also represents a radically advanced version of the classic Whig model of senatorial virtue, clearly showing monarchical power in a position of deference. The political vision is one of a charismatic statesman supported by the monarchy, leading the country through oratory. While it may not have succeeded for Chatham or Shelburne, it would be increasingly relevant with the expansion of the franchise in the nineteenth century. By reconstructing the group at Shelburne House, we can see that the antique could be a vehicle for a modern political vision, at once an appeal to Roman virtue and an innovative reconception of it.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Elizabeth Montagu, letter to Sir William Weller Pepys, Bt. (May 23, 1778), Huntington Library, Montagu MSS, MO4036. Quoted in M. Peters, 2004, rev. 2009, 'Pitt, William, first earl of Chatham [known as Pitt the elder]' *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*.
- 2 Quoted in J. Bowring, *The Life of Bentham* (Edinburgh, 1843), p. 187.
- 3 For the Marquess of Rockingham and the Duke of Richmond see J. Coutu, *Then and Now: Collecting and Classicism in Eighteenth – century England*, (Montreal and Kingston, 2015), pp. 49–126; for Fox, N. Penny, 'The Whig Cult of Fox in Early Nineteenth-Century Sculpture', *Past and Present* 70 (1976), pp. 94–105.
- 4 M. Bryant, *The Museum by the Park: 14 Queen Anne's Gate from Charles Townley to Axel Johnson* (London, 2017), p. 75.
- 5 V. Coltman, *Classical Sculpture and the Culture of Collecting in Britain since 1760* (Oxford, 2009), pp. 1–6.
- 6 See J. Parker, 1968, 'Patrons of Robert Adam at the Metropolitan Museum', *Metropolitan Museum Journal* 1, pp. 109–124.
- 7 J. Yarker, "'Antique Mad': the Adams as dealers and their stock of antiquities", in C. Thom, *Robert Adam and his Brothers: New Light on Britain's Leading Architectural Family* (Liverpool, 2019), pp. 63–82.
- 8 Section A: Manuscripts 5741 and 5747, referenced in E. Angelicoussis, *Reconstructing the Lansdowne Collection of Classical Marbles* (Munich, 2017), p. 16.
- 9 Anonymous, *A Catalogue of the Lansdowne Marbles* (London, 1810).
- 10 Quoted in A. Bolton, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam* (London, 1922), II, p. 344.
- 11 Angelicoussis, *Lansdowne Collection*, p. 13.
- 12 Quoted in Angelicoussis, *Lansdowne Collection*, p. 39.
- 13 Quoted in Angelicoussis, *Lansdowne Collection*, p. 65.
- 14 B. Cavaceppi, *Raccolta* 1768, pl. 20.
- 15 Quoted by Yarker in C. Thom, *Robert Adam and his Brothers* (2019), p. 75.
- 16 A.T. de Lambert, trans. T. Carter, *Advice of a Mother to her Son and Daughter* (London 1737), p. 25.
- 17 *Catalogue of the Lansdowne Marbles* (1810), p. 6.
- 18 See N. Penny, 'Lord Rockingham's Sculpture Collection and The Judgment of Paris by Nollekens', in *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal*, 19 (1991).
- 19 See for example W. Guthrie, *M. T. Cicero His Offices, Or His Treatise Concerning the Moral Duties of Mankind* (London, 1755), pp. 13, 42.
- 20 E. Burke, *The works of ... Edmund Burke* (1834), I, p. lxx.
- 21 Quoted in Fitzmaurice, *Life of William, Earl of Shelburne, Afterwards First Marquess of Lansdowne* (London, 1876), II, p. 359.
- 22 N. Aston & C. Campbell Orr, *An Enlightenment Statesman in Whig Britain: Lord Shelburne in Context, 1737–1805* (Woodbridge, 2011).