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## FREDERICK PRINCE OF WALES: A PATRON OF THE ROCOCO

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Frederick Prince of Wales's patronage of the arts parallels closely the development of the rococo style in England. The degree to which he was consciously a propagator of the style provides an interesting area for speculation. The cognisance he took of the burgeoning new school may be examined by analysing his associates in the alternative court created in the late 1720s and through the 1730s, and by reference to the individual artists he employed.

The Prince's first documented encounter with an exponent of the rococo occurred during his childhood, which was passed at the Electoral palace of Herrenhausen, at Hanover.<sup>1</sup> When his grandfather, George I, removed the rest of the family to England following his accession to the English throne, Frederick was left behind, to act as a figurehead of government. Philip Mercier had been born at Berlin, where he trained under Antoine Pesne, a pupil of Watteau.<sup>2</sup> Coming from this strongly rococo training ground, Mercier, on his arrival at Hanover, would have been the first contact the young Prince Frederick had with the new style. However, at this early date the association was of course involuntary. George Vertue records the artist's subsequent visit to England thus:

'Merciere's first arrival in England was with a picture of this Prince (Frederick) which he brought to Court about 1711 whereby he expected then to be employ'd as he was recommended from the court at Hanover.'<sup>3</sup>

The date 1711 is an interpolation by Vertue in his notebooks, and the date of 1716, given by other authorities, certainly seems more

1. George Vertue, Notebooks, vol. III, *Walpole Society*, XXII, 1934, p. 37 (hereafter cited as Vertue).

2. *Ibid.*

3. *Ibid.*

probable. It would coincide well with the age at which Frederick is represented in a portrait, now at St David's School, Middlesex, which has been attributed by John Ingamells to Mercier.<sup>4</sup>

Mercier's master, Antoine Pesne, is also credited by Vertue with having portrayed the Prince. The picture was brought by Pesne to the court of St James in 1724, and the visit led to commissions from the King for portraits of the royal princesses. These were,

'very well like. & well painted, but after the french manner (not so pleasing to the tast of this Nation) he would have sold y<sup>e</sup> picture of P. Fredrick. but his Royal Highness would not give him money enough for it. at the same time. he painted a picture of Colonel Guise. much more approvd on than those other pictures.'<sup>5</sup>

Although Pesne's picture, and that by Mercier, provide evidence of the presence of rococo influences in Frederick's early life, they do not provide evidence, *post hoc ergo propter hoc*, for volition in Frederick's association with the style. At the latest, in 1716, Frederick was only nine when painted by Mercier; and in 1724, when Pesne arrived in England, Frederick was seventeen. The evidence is most cogent in confirming the presence at Herrenhausen of familiarity with the fashionable French style. It may be inferred therefore that when, in 1729, he was summarily removed to England, Frederick's mind was better adapted to continental taste than that of the average English courtier.

Vertue's note on Pesne introduces an interesting figure into our analysis of Frederick's motivation as a patron. Colonel Guise seems to have met Frederick soon after his arrival in London. Vertue writes that he was,

'a great Lover of painting & Connoisseur. as by his fine collection may be seen he seems to have an excellent Taste collecting those pieces of the greatest Italian masters only'.<sup>6</sup>

He was also an early connoisseur of rococo art if his commission to Pesne is characteristic. He collected such masters as Salvator Rosa, Claude, Poussin and Rubens,<sup>7</sup> and may therefore have been

4. J. Ingamells and R. Raines, 'A Catalogue of the paintings, drawings and etchings of Philip Mercier', *Walpole Society*, XLVI, 1977, p. 20.

5. Vertue, p. 20.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 17.

7. *Ibid.*

well placed to encourage the Prince in the interest in sixteenth and seventeenth-century masters which led to his conscious emulation of Charles I as a collector. Another figure recorded by Vertue as a significant adviser is Sir Luke Schaubé, whose advice he used 'in most of the purchases of pictures, with Gen. Guise'.<sup>8</sup> Schaubé had served with distinction as a diplomat at Vienna and later at Paris, where he was ambassador from 1721 to 1724. His acquaintance with rococo art was therefore likely to be good and his outlook cosmopolitan. Frederick was fortunate in having such able ciceroni.

However, it is to English artists we must turn, if we are to see the Prince's early patronage at work. Mercier benefitted from his early association with the Prince, being appointed on 17 February 1729 Principal Painter.<sup>9</sup> Aside from this appointment Frederick was obliged initially to establish his independence before he could become an effective patron. His father, George II, had not brought his self-willed son to England in order that he should have a separate establishment. It took some time for the diametrically opposed views of Prince and King to cause an open rift. Meanwhile the only significant features of the first volume of household accounts for the Duchy of Cornwall are payments to John Kipling for operas presented,<sup>10</sup> and one tantalisingly undetailed account for 'Collection of Pictures';<sup>11</sup> this clearly is only for the service of removing or bringing them, as it is only for 6d. One can only speculate on what the pictures were.

The twenty-two volumes of household accounts are the best guide to Prince Frederick's buying activities. They also provide important evidence for Frederick's habit of retaining artists and agents on a long term basis. The character of the Prince was wayward and feckless but also charming, insofar as he would take up an artist as much for the delight of his company as his talent. Thus the first payment to William Kent speaks of 'our trusty and wellbeloved William Kent our architect'.<sup>12</sup> Kent was certainly an important choice for Frederick. In associating himself with the architect, decorator and designer he was tapping a rich vein of

8. *Ibid.*, p. 152.

9. Warrant: 24.399.f.7.

10. Duchy of Cornwall, vol. I.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 540.

12. *Ibid.*, vol. II, 7 September 1732, p. 251.

creativity and acquiring the services of one of the most fashionable figures of the day. The small remaining evidence for Kent's work at Kew indicates that the interiors there were grandly Palladian in effect. The portrait of Frederick with the Knights of the Round Table, painted by Charles Philips, shows the only certain view of a room in the palace.<sup>13</sup> It also provides incidental evidence for Frederick's dangerous associations with Jacobitism, a subject to which reference will be made below.

Kent's major contribution, other than Kew, to Frederick's growing patronage in the early 1730s was of course to design the famous barge, which still survives at Greenwich. Kent's design is rococo fantasy at its grandest, allying the fragility of the barque boarded by the lovers in Watteau's *Isle of Cythera*, to a robust architectural framework. Its chief splendour is the carving, which parallels stylistically the work of another figure who first appears in the ledgers for 1732, Paul Petit.<sup>14</sup> Petit, like Kent, appears in accounts for the third quarter of the year, and again in October.<sup>15</sup> It is tempting, though no documented link is established, to link the virtuoso work of the frame-carver to some of the splendid detailing of the barge. It is certainly the case that Petit was later employed in recarving and regilding the barge.<sup>16</sup> However, it is at least clear evidence of consistency in Frederick's taste that he should have had work carried on in tandem on the grand status symbol of the boat and elaborate work by Petit for his new palace.

Kew provides the setting for the most famous of the images to emerge from Frederick's patronage of the arts. In 1733 Mercier painted the first of three images of Frederick with his sisters, apparently engaged in concert. The Princess Royal plays the harpsichord, Princess Caroline the mandora, while Princess Amelia listens, a volume of Milton in her lap. The iconography of the picture is obscure, though the existence of three versions, implying a general circulation for the image, and the paradoxical fact that it was painted at a point anything but harmonious in Frederick's relations with his family, have led at least one critic to propose a satirical intent. This would not be beyond the bounds

13. See Oliver Millar, *Tudor, Stuart and Early Georgian Pictures in the Royal Collection*, 1963, p. 177, cat. 533.

14. Duchy of Cornwall, vol. II, 7 September 1732, p. 251.

15. *Ibid.*, p. 272-3.

16. *Ibid.*, vol. XII, 4 October 1743, p. 137.

of possibility. Frederick's quarrel with his sister Anne centred around their support for rival opera companies. The painting is most useful as a barometer of Frederick's interest in the rococo, and may indeed be regarded as a highwater mark in his patronage of Mercier. In 1733 Frederick employed for the first time the artist Joseph Goupy,<sup>17</sup> who acted as painter, buying agent, copyist and general factotum to the Prince for the rest of his life. Interestingly, Goupy was the nephew of Lewis Goupy, who had been drawing master to Lord Burlington on his Grand Tour. Mercier, who seems always, and with good reason, to have been fearful of the fickleness of Frederick's benevolence, resented Goupy's appearance in the Prince's circle. Numerous altercations over precedence between the Principal Painter and his rivals occurred. Despite the fact that Mercier was in many respects the most completely rococo stylist in the inner circle, he found himself increasingly set aside until Vertue records his dismissal in 1737.<sup>18</sup> Frederick was clearly easily swayed by novelty in his patronage. Among the few English artists whom he consistently supported were the designer George Wickes, whose magnificent plate for the Prince remains a standing tribute to his taste, and Petit, whose frames were commissioned throughout Frederick's life.

These frames formed an important part of the decoration which Frederick installed in Norfolk House, the third London residence that he leased, and the main focus for his opposition court during the years of his marriage to Augusta of Saxe-Gotha. Charles Phillips's somewhat stilted portrait of the Princess gives little clue to the grace, wisdom, diplomacy and statesmanship which this woman exercised over her husband in his relations with the King and Queen. She was greatly prized by Frederick, to his father's annoyance, since the marriage was one only of political convenience. Frederick clearly intended that she should be delighted by her surroundings at Norfolk House, and one of the few architectural and decorative schemes there which it is possible to reconstruct with any degree of accuracy is that for the Princess's dressing-room.

17. *Ibid.*, vol. V, pp. 235-6.

18. Vertue, p. 82.

Between 1738 and 1739 the fitting out of this room was carried on under Goupy's guidance. Accounts exist for his paintings of *Aurora, Bacchus and Ariadne, Apollo and Daphne* and *Galatea*.<sup>19</sup> At their previous residence the Princess's dressing-room had been lined with copies after old masters by Goupy.<sup>20</sup> At Norfolk House, a compliment is clearly intended; the classical allegories all relate to the power of beautiful women over men. Petit provided frames for these works to the value of £51.16s.6d.<sup>21</sup> The ensemble must have been a splendidly florid exercise in rococo taste.

Complementary in date and manner to that bower for the Princess is the three-quarter length portrait by Jacopo Amigoni. This artist, best known as a decorative muralist, was used by Frederick to produce several state portraits, which Oliver Millar identifies as having been painted from the *ad vivum* study of Frederick in this picture.<sup>22</sup> It conveys most aptly Frederick's conception of himself as a patron, with the arts and sciences descending in the form of putti to crown him. The Prince rests against a very Kentian side-table, but the overall effect is continental rather than English. Amigoni, a native of Venice, had trained in Italy, worked at the Bavarian court, and arrived in England, according to Vertue, with one of the singers of the Italian opera.<sup>23</sup> He was probably discovered by the Prince through his association with the theatre. The portrait gives an image of the maturer Prince. However it is clear from the evidence that Frederick did not benefit greatly from the lesson of his stormy political experiences. The Jacobite associations mentioned above in connection with Kew remained a dangerous aspect of his independent career. A man who, in the 1740s, allowed as attendant to his wife Catherine Walkinshaw, sister of Clementina, the mistress of Charles Edward Stuart, the Young Pretender, was not a cautious figure politically.

In the context of his patronage one interesting fact emerges about the Prince's advisers. Joseph Goupy, who travelled extensively for the Prince on the Continent, received payments from, among others, both Schaubé and Guise, neither of these cases

19. Duchy of Cornwall, vol. VIII, p. 362 and vol. IX, p. 243.

20. *Ibid.*, vol. XVI, 16 July 1744, vol. XVII, 19 May 1748, pp. 530-31.

21. *Ibid.*, vol. XIX, vouchers for 4 January, 27 February, 3 July 1738-9, p. 322.

22. Millar, *op. cit.*, p. 175, cat. 526.

23. Vertue, p. 45.

being related to artistic commissions. As yet the connections cannot entirely be explained, but the evidence points to political machination. If therefore we must add to our consideration of Frederick's patronage of the arts a covert Jacobite network, then the already complex motivation of his artistic activities will become more dense. The innocent Jacobitism of emulating, in collecting old masters, Charles I, takes on more significant and relevant connotations. Significantly it was Guise and Schaube who had formed the Prince's taste in this area. This, too, must be taken into account in relating Frederick to the phenomenon of the rococo style in England. It is clear already that the Prince's commitment to the rococo was never exclusive, and was dictated by fashion as much as personal interest. However, certain works of art remain as evidence of his involvement in the field, and certain others may be reconstructed in part from the accounts; a complete analysis of Frederick, Prince of Wales will undoubtedly synthesise these achievements within a broader context.