



# High Art and High Stakes: The 3rd Duke of Dorset's Gamble on Reynolds

Article by John Chu



## Abstract

This article explores the art-collecting practices of John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset (1745–1799), focusing on his remarkable investment in the experimental paintings of Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792). In the 1770s and 80s, Sackville sunk significant funds into works by Reynolds that were of mixed critical standing, of unpredictable future value, and notoriously susceptible to rapid physical deterioration. What motivated such risky, idiosyncratic purchases? This article argues that Sackville's patronage can usefully be characterized as a form of high-stakes gamble with the potential to advance his social, cultural, and political circumstances and agendas. It is argued that such a "Reynoldsian lottery" was as much about interior competition in the uppermost reaches of eighteenth-century society as it was about an outward-looking desire to be distinguished from the ranks below. As well as shedding light on an important instance of British art patronage therefore, the article also seeks to expose the tactical advantage of devil-may-care forms of luxury consumption for those born to rank, fortune, and influence in this period.

The bold experimentalism of Joshua Reynolds's painting practice has sprung vibrantly back to life in recent years. Conservation of several key holdings of works, scholarly publications, and an important exhibition have, collectively, returned the tireless technical and aesthetic curiosity of this eighteenth-century artist to both specialist and public attention.<sup>1</sup> Reynolds the quintessential innovator has been restored to view: a painter who, at the top of his profession, continually questioned the foundations of his technical training—the stuff of pigments, oils, varnishes, and glazes—but who also worked to quiz and energize the compositional and generic conventions of his age. Thanks in particular to the Wallace Collection exhibition *Joshua Reynolds: Experiments in Paint* in 2015, we now have a stronger sense than ever of how exciting his unfolding body of works must have appeared to contemporary eyes. In this display we saw how Reynolds returned repeatedly to his most charismatic sitters, restlessly trying out poses, scenarios, and formats to probe the facets of an individual character, all the while putting the excellence of his own artistry—and the potential of the medium itself—to the test. Infrared and X-radiographic imagery placed alongside original works of art allowed us to glimpse how, over

several campaigns on a single canvas, old ideas would inspire (and were as often as not obliterated by) fresh schemes in a concentrated flow of invention and innovation.

But if all this scholarly and curatorial activity has allowed us to step once more into the daring moment of Reynoldsian creation, it has also brought back into focus the considerable cost that this risky approach could exact on the works of art themselves. While some pictures have responded well to technical treatment (and revealed that Reynolds's experimentalism often had no part to play in a painting's diminished appearance) in other pictures, fugitive colours, overworked paint layers, and stews of incompatible media have indeed been to blame for their degradation. If Reynolds the quintessential innovator has been restored to us, it seems that the old spectre of the reprobate technician is nonetheless very much here to stay—and quite rightly so, if we are to see this artist's achievement through eighteenth-century eyes. After all, even at the height of his success, for every commentator who marvelled at Reynolds's glamorous, painterly effects, there was always another to bemoan their all-too-frequent evanescence. "If Sir Joshua is satisfied with his own departed pictures," Horace Walpole wryly observed, "it is more than the possessors or posterity will be. I think he ought to be paid in annuities for so long as his pictures last."<sup>2</sup>

This article addresses the pressing but rarely considered question of patronage which this risk-taking experimentalism raises. For did not the material burden of risk ultimately lie with the "possessors" of such volatile and expensive luxuries? There can be no doubt, after all, that Reynolds's patrons were aware at an early stage of the questionable longevity of their acquisitions. Yet surprisingly, prior to the nineteenth-century biographies, little or no documentation has survived to tell us how the buyers of these painting conceived of their risk in these transactions, or why they overcame such scruples as must surely have arisen.<sup>3</sup> In the face of this general silence, recent scholarship has nonetheless begun to speculate intriguingly, if fleetingly, on what may have motivated this risk-taking behaviour. The most interesting of these hunches involves the idea of patronage as a kind of gamble. In 1999, economic historian Neil De Marchi and art historian Hans J. Van Miegroet suggested that these purchases took place in a wider context of increasingly calculated capital risks, observing that even "if only 10 or 20 percent of Reynolds's pictures cracked badly, lost paint or faded . . . would-be buyers were necessarily entering into a wager when purchasing a picture by him."<sup>4</sup> Although the term "wager" seems to be used loosely here to indicate an ambitious but ultimately "rational" investment, Matthew Hunter has carried this idea further to suggest that, analogously with high-stakes gambles, the obvious risk inherent in a Reynolds purchase may itself have been attractive. With distinctly social motivations in mind, Hunter suggests that a wealthy patron with a faded Reynolds was distinguished "from a patron of the ascendant 'middling sort' by his or her willingness to take a chance on greatness".<sup>5</sup>

What follows is an attempt to develop Hunter's hypothesis into a roundly argued case for a connection between the often substantial risk embraced by Reynolds's patrons and the class imperatives of cultural distinction. To achieve this aim, this article focuses on a case study where the "stakes" can be said to have been at their highest: the collection of John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset. In addition to that fact that Sackville amassed one of the period's most extensive and famous holdings of Reynolds's works, numbering at least twenty by the end of his life, it can also be observed that eight of the earliest of these acquisitions were examples of the rare and innovative narrative works and fanciful character studies (today known collectively as subject pictures) for which the artist charged a significant premium.<sup>6</sup> Essentially a new development of the 1770s, the subject pictures owned by Sackville are the main focus here,

since, for various reasons explored below, they represented an additional aesthetic and critical gamble in a way that even the most materially unstable portrait did not.

When Sir Joshua Reynolds's name is linked with that of the Duke of Dorset, the image of the ancestral family seat of Knole may well come to mind in the first instance, and in particular the Reynolds Room that stands at the heart of the house's ancient state apartments.<sup>7</sup> Although several of the Sackville Reynoldses had indeed come to rest in that chamber by the Duke's death in 1799, this article concentrates on the 1770s when these pictures, as fresh creations and purchases, were in a far more mobile physical and critical state, and just as likely to be recorded as hanging in his voguishly appointed townhouse in Grosvenor Square at the heart of fashionable London life. By taking a close look at the physical, economic, and thematic constitution of the collection, and by situating the acquisition within the 3rd Duke's high-living, cosmopolitan, and extremely powerful milieu—known throughout the eighteenth century as the "beau monde"—it is hoped that a richer and more detailed social profile of the participants in this Reynoldsian lottery will be attained, as well as a more informed point of view on what, besides the beauties of this or that work of art, was to be won and lost in this extravagant, risky, and highly performative game.

## The Sackville Reynoldses

Notwithstanding some very bold purchases over the course of the 1770s, the 3rd Duke of Dorset's patronage of Reynolds commenced and, in certain respects, continued within patterns set by the conventions of his class and by the traditions of his family. The stately full-length portrait which he commissioned from the artist in 1769, for example, heralded his entry into the apex of the aristocratic hierarchy in an entirely conventional form (fig. 1).<sup>8</sup> Painted soon after Sackville's inheritance of the dukedom, the portrait was on a format that Reynolds had coined for the ceremonial depiction of the greatest noblemen over a decade previously. Typically, the picture is achieved with the colouristic and tonal drama of a *seicento* altarpiece, posing its twenty-four-year-old subject in full ducal robes amidst rich drapery and classical architecture.<sup>9</sup> At this time, a state portrait by Reynolds, like a resignation from the Commons and a comprehensive Grand Tour, was just one part of a standard rite of passage into the peerage, and the work soon hung in the Knole Ballroom side by side with the most imposing of the earlier Sackville portraits.<sup>10</sup>



Figure 1

Joshua Reynolds, *John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset*, 1769, oil on canvas, 244.5 × 153 cm. Digital image courtesy of Knole, National Trust.

The brooding grandeur of this image is entirely apt to the extraordinary power and consequence of an eighteenth-century English duke. Such men were not simply wealthy aristocrats but second only to royalty in the social hierarchy. The Sackvilles had been one of the very few families to enjoy this supreme rank in the peerage since their elevation in 1720, although previous generations of the family had made themselves extremely useful to successive Tudor and Stuart monarchs, resulting in titles, honours, and vast additions to the estate in agricultural land, great houses, and other kinds of property.<sup>11</sup> As was customary to their rank, the Sackvilles had kept their titles and assets together over the centuries by passing them down to the eldest male heir. Remarkably, given the profuse spending which is the one of the main themes of this study, the first phase of the 3rd Duke's succession was a period of retrenchment for the estate after its severe mismanagement by John Frederick's uncle, Charles, the 2nd Duke of Dorset, which only serves to emphasize the sheer depth of resources available to such ducal dynasties.<sup>12</sup> In fact, the presence in the Reynolds portrait of large and important-looking tomes at John Frederick's side, so reminiscent of venerable estate documentation, may be something of a visual manifesto of his intention (which was ultimately fulfilled) to restore the substance and standing of the family to its full might.

As his first decade as duke unfolded, the 3rd Duke soon found other ways to take his place amongst his illustrious ancestors through the acquisition of art. Having filled up the old house with the spoils of his Continental travels—primarily in the form of canonical Italian and Netherlandish old masters—he now began to collect new pictures for display in the ground-floor Dining Parlour.<sup>13</sup> There, in a move that served to update and rival the collection of great seventeenth-century literati portraits begun by the rake-poet Charles Sackville, 6th Earl of Dorset, he hung likenesses of the day's celebrated talents.<sup>14</sup> Heading up this fresh influx of great men were Reynolds's self-portrait in doctoral robes along with his depictions of Samuel Johnson,

Oliver Goldsmith, David Garrick, and the composer Antonio Sacchini.<sup>15</sup> The 3rd Duke's irreverent spin on this family tradition was his bevy of portraits of charismatic women of the contemporary stage who seem, as often as not, to have doubled as his mistresses. With his famous dark good-looks, athleticism, and courtly bearing, Sackville was, at this time, cutting a swathe through the beauties of his own rank (Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, singled him out as "the most dangerous of men") although it was the likenesses of his "demi-rep" intimates that he seems most to have preferred.<sup>16</sup> Notable among these was a full-length Reynolds of the comedienne Frances Abington (which the sitter presented as a gift to the Duke) and an intimate portrait *en bacchante* of the opera dancer Giovanna Baccelli, who bore him a son and who lived for several years with Sackville at Knole.<sup>17</sup>



Figure 2

Joshua Reynolds, *Count Ugolino and his Sons in the Dungeon*, circa 1770-73, oil on canvas, 125.7 × 176.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of Knole, National Trust.

It was in the midst of these, in some ways rather predictable, forms of portrait-collecting that Sackville's bold move into the uncharted field of the Reynoldsian subject picture took place. With one exception, all eight of these paintings seem to have been acquired in a single burst of enthusiasm between about 1774 and 1778. As Reynolds's first major attempt at serious historical composition—and therefore his biggest technical and intellectual challenge to date—the best known of these purchases was *Count Ugolino and his Sons in the Dungeon*, which had been shown at the Royal Academy in 1773 (fig. 2).<sup>18</sup> Comparable in size and compositional complexity to this major work was *A Fortune Teller* (fig. 3). A kind of witty imitation of the famous Caravaggio (which then formed part of the collection of Louis XVI), this

exhibit of 1777 marked a moment of revival for this kind of large and light-hearted narrative work, which had fallen out of fashion in Britain some thirty or forty years earlier.<sup>19</sup> The remaining six subject pictures were demi-figure depictions of children, mostly boys, in a variety of guises.<sup>20</sup> Some of these, as in *The Calling of Samuel*, depict a named character from a textual source, and others, like *A Beggar Boy and his Sister* or *A Boy with a Drawing in his Hand*, take for their subject anonymous little figures, and were known as fancy pictures (figs. 4, 5, 6). Halfway between the literary subjects and fancy pictures were a highly distinctive pair of mythological "travesties", wherein the iconography of the gods Cupid and Mercury are bawdily applied to the forms of young beggar boys to startling effect (figs. 7, 8).





Figure 3

Joshua Reynolds, *A Fortune Teller*, 1777, oil on canvas, 145 × 123.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of Waddesdon Manor, National Trust.



Figure 4

Joshua Reynolds, *The Calling of Samuel*, circa 1770-1776, oil on canvas, 36.0 × 29.0 cm, National Trust Collections, Knole, Kent. Digital image courtesy of National Trust Images.



Figure 5

Joshua Reynolds, *A Beggar Boy and his Sister*, circa 1774, oil on canvas, 76.2 × 62.8 cm. Digital image courtesy of Faringdon Collection Trust, Buscot Park.



Figure 6

Joshua Reynolds, *A Boy with a Drawing in his Hand*, circa 1776, oil on canvas, 73.7 × 61 cm. Digital image courtesy of Flint Institute of Arts, Michigan.



Figure 7

Joshua Reynolds, *Cupid as a Linkboy*, 1774, oil on canvas, 76 × 63.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.



Figure 8

Joshua Reynolds, *Cupid as a Linkboy*, 1774, oil on canvas, 76 × 63.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of Albright-Knox Art Gallery, Buffalo, NY.

Evident enough from this run-through of the Sackville subject pictures is the prominence granted to children within these works. In both *Ugolino* and *A Fortune Teller*, they are seen reacting to a striking adult presence. In the former piece, the subject of which is derived from Dante's *Inferno*, the treacherous Italian nobleman of the title, having been double-crossed by a rival for despotic control of medieval Pisa, is shown being sealed into his prison cell with his children. Captured in

the moment of ghastly realization, the father is frozen in terror, unable to respond as his sons perish, despair, and beg for a comforting word. In *A Fortune Teller*, by contrast, an archly smiling gypsy is seen reading a young girl's palm as she turns gleefully to the viewer and collapses into the lap of an outraged, lunging boy. The single-figure compositions, lacking the same range of dynamic possibilities, rely more on faces and delicate childish body language to engage the interest, either through the description of some exalting or contemplative expression, as in *The Calling of Samuel* or *Boy with a Drawing in his Hand*, or by fixing the attention with a direct, enigmatic gaze, as in the *Mercury as a Cutpurse* (fig. 7) or the *Beggar Boy and his Sister*. While some themes, such as spirituality in *The Calling of Samuel* and education in *Boy with a Drawing in his Hand*, appear in one-off instances, other themes flow through this corpus of works with some consistency, often played out through a contrast of high and low social status. Thus a sentimental interest in the plight of the street urchin is engaged by the modest, tender form of the *Beggar Boy and his Sister*. Fear and suspicion about the machinations of the poor, by contrast, are raised by the aggressive reaction of the richly dressed young boy to the smirking gypsy in *A Fortune Teller*. *Mercury as a Cutpurse*, meanwhile, has designs on the gold in your pocket.

In several of the Sackville subject pictures, the grown-up themes of sex, love, and flirtation are performed through the representation of the childish body. One contemporary account of *A Fortune Teller*, for example, described the piece as a narrative of courtship with the principle figure of the girl as a foolish ingénue: thus, the “Gipsy is telling a young Girl who is sitting on her Lover's knees, her Fortune, and seems to be saying to her that she will soon be married to him, at which she laughs, and is pleased, without well knowing what it means.”<sup>21</sup> Strikingly, in *Cupid as a Linkboy* (fig. 8) the young god, in the guise of a beggar boy, is rendered darkly brooding, his pretty feathers replaced by bats' wings, and his golden torch replaced by an unmistakably phallic “link”, or torch, of a type used to guide nocturnal revellers through the streets.<sup>22</sup>

It is uncertain whether the kaleidoscopic, sometimes odd and arresting, field of vision presented by this collection of subject pictures—wherein one gets a sense of tastes and interests developing capriciously, dropping off and being modified in the process of acquisition—came about primarily through a process of commission or through the uptake of speculative productions. On the one hand, it is very likely that the Duke had a hand in the *Cupid* and *Mercury* pendants. Though there are, broadly speaking, precedents in eighteenth-century comic art for such elisions of high mythology and low genre, innocence and sexual knowledge, it must be more than a coincidence that the idiosyncratic iconography of *Cupid as a Linkboy* closely mirrors verses penned by the 3rd Duke's great-grandfather in the previous century. For the purposes of a “politely vicious” barb aimed at the mistress of James II, Catherine Sedley, Countess of Dorchester, the 6th Earl of Dorset had conjured exactly this figure of an “obscene” and “violent anti-Eros”:<sup>23</sup>

*DORINDA's sparkling wit and eyes,  
United, cast too fierce a light,  
Which blazes high, but quickly dies,  
Pains not the heart, but hurts the sight.*

*Love is a calmer, gentler joy,  
Smooth are his looks, and soft his pace,*



*Her Cupid is a blackguard boy,  
That rubs his link full in your face.*<sup>24</sup>

But if the *Cupid* strongly suggests the influence of a commissioning patron, we also know that other works, notably the *Ugolino*, were completed several years before they came into Sackville's hands.<sup>25</sup> Furthermore, the fancy pictures form a continuum with the rest of Reynolds's output in that field, which we know had a substantial speculative element. Indeed, the dark-haired boy who appears in no less than half of the Sackville subject pictures—*A Fortune Teller*, *A Beggar Boy and his Sister*, *A Boy with a Drawing in his Hand*, *The Calling of Samuel*—was one of the artist's favourite models and featured in several more fancies in a further range of guises.<sup>26</sup>

The mixed evidence concerning the commissioning or otherwise of the Sackville subject pictures may ultimately reflect the exceptional way in which Reynolds claimed to generate and dispose of his non-portrait output. "When I paint any picture of invention", he told the Liverpoolian amateur Daniel Daulby in 1777, "it is allways [*sic*] engaged before it is half finished."<sup>27</sup> By this account, even speculatively conceived pieces had the potential to be shaped by the desires of a farsighted patron, snapped up as they were (or so we are led to believe) in the exhilarating moment of creation. Neither quite the product of commission nor of speculation, the combination of thematic eclecticism and coherence that runs through the more daring and original end of the 3rd Duke's collection may not have been fully attributable either to master or patron, but to a dynamic association of the two. Of course, one of the most striking things about the letter to Daulby (notwithstanding its hint at the opportunity for patronal influence) is the implication of yet another layer of risk for the purchaser. If the only way to secure a "picture of invention" was to commit to specimens before they were even half-complete, we must assume that this kind of collecting must have involved a large degree of good faith in the quality of the end product. Amassing the Sackville collection of Reynolds subject pictures, in other words, must have involved a good deal of investment in what remained only partially realized figments of the imagination.

## Financial hazards and critical risks

It will be useful at this stage to detail the sheer financial expenditure that the acquisition of the Sackville subject pictures entailed, within what was a rather brief span of time. In total, these works represent the considerable outlay of 1,045 guineas for the Duke, or a little under £1,100.<sup>28</sup> The earliest relevant entry in Reynolds's account books dates to 1772, recording a lump sum of 120 guineas for the *Cupid* and *Mercury* pendants and *A Beggar Boy and his Sister*. This is followed by an entry of 400 guineas received for *Ugolino* in 1775, 100 guineas for *A Boy with a Drawing* and *The Calling of Samuel* in 1776, and 350 guineas for *A Fortune Teller* in 1778.<sup>29</sup> The next entry of 75 guineas dates to 1786 for a fancy picture of a girl playing with a bird.<sup>30</sup> The fact that the *Ugolino* cost Sackville 350 guineas more than his ducal portrait is an indication of the substantial premium commanded by the subject pictures. Similarly, the *Beggar Boy and his Sister* was bought for 50 guineas, as opposed to the 35 guineas spent on each of the identically proportioned portraits of Johnson, Goldsmith, and Sacchini.<sup>31</sup> Reynolds's portraits themselves were highly expensive commodities, but the sums paid for the "pictures of invention" pushed them well into the upper end of luxury consumption, even in a ducal household.<sup>32</sup> As items within a collection, in fact, they are most comparable in price to the diamond sets on which, of all signs of conspicuous consumption, aristocratic society set especial store. Thus, £1,054 was the price to be paid in the eighteenth century for a diamond ring, a gem-encrusted belt-buckle and two pairs of earrings from London's finest jeweller.<sup>33</sup>

Sackville kept careful tabs on his expenditure on art, maintaining separate lists of acquisitions and prices including a slim octavo volume entitled *An Account of the Number and Value of the Pictures, Busts, &c. Purchased by His Grace, John Frederick Sackville, Duke of Dorset*.<sup>34</sup>

Indeed, if he did consult this document prior to the purchase of the *Ugolino* in 1775, he would have seen that only one picture had ever cost him more—a “Capital” depiction of Lucretia by Guido Reni bought for £735—and that the next most costly painting in his collection up to that point had been a Madonna and Child costing £300 by (but presumably after) Raphael.

But if the 3rd Duke was aware of the growing costliness of his Reynolds collection, he must have been no less conscious of the precariousness of its physical condition and value. Not only was the dubious longevity of Sir Joshua’s productions generally known by this stage—in 1771 James Northcote observed his master’s paintings cracking as they left the studio—evidence of decay in the Sackville holdings was clear for all to see.<sup>35</sup> Thus, when Horace Walpole visited Knole in the summer of 1780, he noted admiringly that the ducal portrait was “extremely like” its handsome sitter but also, with regret, that “the colouring [was] much gone already.”<sup>36</sup> Furthermore, the preponderance of fancy pictures in the Sackville collection, which an intimate of the studio such as the Duke would have known to have been the subject of particularly intense technical experimentation, was something of a ticking bomb. Indeed, an entry on *A Beggar Boy and his Sister* is to be found amongst the notes which Reynolds recorded on his particularly bold painterly trials. Typically adopting a learned melange of English, Latin, and Italian, he recorded the picture’s elaborate constitution of pigments and glazes in the spirit of scientific consistency and observation: “White. Asphaltum. Verm. Minio principal e Giallo di Napoli ni nero ni turchino . . . Glaze con Asphaltum & Lacca”.<sup>37</sup> Particularly notable here is the reference to a glaze of “Asphaltum & Lacca”, which combines a medium known for its immediately observable tendency to wrinkle and crack (bitumen) with a delicate pigment (red lake) which, as Reynolds was beginning to understand by this time, rapidly and inexorably fades upon exposure to light.<sup>38</sup>

Quite aside from the concern caused by a collection that, even as it expanded, threatened its own destruction, these pictures posed a risk to the capital that had been invested in them. As players on the international art scene like Sackville were increasingly aware, a long-term trend towards growth in the eighteenth-century market for paintings meant that the works of famous masters presented an excellent opportunity for capital gains. Thus, whether “one buys from taste or speculation”, according to the patter of the contemporary dealer Jean-Baptiste-Pierre Lebrun, “it is comforting to know that during one’s lifetime the pleasures of ownership will not be troubled by the fear of losing money [for the] proprietor has the advantage always desired by a responsible man, of enjoying his wealth and seeing it increase.”<sup>39</sup> Certainly, Sackville seems to have been particularly proud of the leap in market value which *Ugolino* enjoyed after his purchase of the picture; the fact was duly listed in a description of the picture found in the Knole guidebook of 1793: “the Story of Count Ugolino and his Sons, starving in a prison . . . for which the Duke gave 400l and his since refused 1000l.”<sup>40</sup> Taking a chance on a family portrait with little or no resale value was one thing, but the potential deterioration of an even more expensive subject picture with damaging consequences for its status on the secondary market, was quite another. Although comparable to precious jewellery in their costliness, the Sackville Reynoldses, quite unlike diamonds, were all too liable to lose their lustre and could hardly be relied upon to constitute a long-term dynastic asset, or even the temporary capital of an art-loving collector. In addition to the high financial stakes involved in this area of the Duke’s collection, it is worth stressing again that the subject pictures were essentially a new phenomenon of the 1770s.

Although Reynolds had very briefly tried his hand at demi-figure genre painting at the commencement of his career, the large output of fancies which was generated at this later stage of his practice was entirely new in its pace and variety. Similarly, while imaginary personages had occasionally featured in the grander portraits of previous years, full-blown narrative works like *Ugolino* were still very much a fresh addition to Reynolds's art. The implications of this for the potential collector were twofold. One issue was the fact that, in the absence of an established market rate for such works, any price arrived at between painter and patron was essentially a shot in the dark. The other consideration was that, in contemporary critical appraisal, the jury on these "pictures of invention" was still very much out.

The problem of ambiguous artistic merit was particularly acute in the case of *Ugolino and A Fortune Teller*, the large scale of which ensured a good deal of attention for both canvases when they were exhibited at the Royal Academy. Despite Reynolds's concerted campaign to gather support for *Ugolino*, the journalistic responses to this first attempt at a serious narrative picture on the artist's part were, at best, lukewarm. "Count Hugolino and his Children in the Dungeon is, I suppose, the most capital of the History Pieces of this Master", was the somewhat grudging appraisal of *The Public Advertiser*, which, while it affirmed that "this is a good Picture" also suggested that "if the same Excellence had been employed on a pleasing Subject, it would have enchanted, as it may now terrify, the Public."<sup>41</sup> Scenting blood, *The Morning Chronicle* published an open letter to Reynolds, seeking to take the painter down a peg or two, and fiercely exploiting the vulnerability of a prominent figure casting off in an ambitious new direction:

*If you are wise in some parts of conduct as you are in others, let me advise you to keep to your Portrait painting . . . the painting of history is new and strange to you, as appears but too evidently from your unfledged picture last of Venus and Cupid casting up accounts, and the Ugolino and his family now in the present exhibition. Why, Sir, if these pictures were shown even in France and Italy, where you may be ever so little known, everybody would, at first glance, judge them to be the rude disorderly abortions of an unstudied mind, of a portrait painter, who quitting the confined track where he was calculated to move in safety, had ridiculously bewildered himself in unknown regions, unfurnished with either chart or compass . . . Ask some history painter (we have four or five of them) or even some travelled man who has knowledge of those matters, depend upon it; that if he does not flatter you . . . he will inform you that your figures are shockingly out of drawing, and finished in a slobbering-herum-skerum, unartist-like way; that from the first concoction of them, they smell rankly of the portrait, and are totally wide of all true historical character.*<sup>42</sup>

Here, in blow after blow, the very newness of Reynolds's subject pictures is turned against the artist. The paintings are characterized not as an exciting novelty, but as a grotesquely premature imposition on the public eye. Perplexity followed consternation when *A Fortune Teller* went on public show in 1777, wrong-footing critics thanks to its sumptuously grand treatment of such a light-hearted subject. As conflicting press articles emerged, a squabble broke out regarding the pictorial genre to which it most properly belonged, with *The London Chronicle* taking exception to casual contemporary references to the piece as Sir Joshua's latest history painting:

*A Fortune Teller is said by some to be an historical piece, but with what propriety I cannot conceive. An historical piece I always understood to be a representation of some particular feat in ancient or modern, real or fabulous, sacred or profane history. But this is a representation of no such fact, and therefore cannot be called an historical piece any more than a picture of Jonas shuffling the cards would be.*<sup>43</sup>

The key underlying point here is that Sackville was going “all in” on pictures that enjoyed no certain critical standing in the wider public realm. In contrast to the universal acknowledgement of Reynolds’s supremacy as a portraitist, or the blue-chip reputations of the “capital” old masters, these new subject pictures were met with considerable interest, but also with an unmistakable note of caution, bafflement, and even distaste.

The 3rd Duke was thus yoking a prominent part of his formative reputation as a patron and collector to works of no settled merit. When it came to the subject pictures, it seems, Reynolds’s name—though it guaranteed critical attention—was by no means an insurance against critical disapproval; and with at least three of the Sackville subject pictures being exhibited over the course of the 1770s and a further four being published as prints, any perceived failure of style or judgement on Reynolds’s part had the potential to backfire on the young nobleman as an imputation of gullibility, or simple bad taste.<sup>44</sup>

All of this, I would suggest, indicates a situation of mounting and diversifying risk. Year on year, the 3rd Duke was filling his properties with large numbers of paintings which threatened (or had already entered) a process of premature and ruinous decay; not only this, he was also channelling a considerable portion of the Sackville family capital into highly unstable and untried commodities, when much safer alternatives were available. The boldness of the 3rd Duke’s preference for this new dimension of Reynolds’s art, when considered in relation to a climate of general critical ambivalence and sometimes outright ridicule for such pictures, seems remarkable, and encourages us to think anew about the particular motivations, and the historically specific forms of aristocratic performance, that might have underpinned this distinctive model of patronage and consumption.

## Experiments in patronage

Since the earliest years of the eighteenth century and before, patriotic hopes for an imaginative and profound English School of painting (capable of more than importing talents and commissioning portraits) had been laid at the door of aristocratic families like the Sackvilles.<sup>45</sup>

According to specialist advocates like Jonathan Richardson, by failing to build collections of modern works of art the ranks of the “Nobility and Gentry” were missing an opportunity to perform an estimable public good. Thus, in words that reverberated well into the second half of the century, Richardson’s *Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage of the Science of a Connoisseur* of 1719 implored the most privileged in society to consider how beneficial the patronage of contemporary painting could be “to the Publick in the Reformation of our Manner, Improvement of our People, and Increase of our Wealth, all which would bring a proportionable Addition of Honour, and Power to this Brave Nation”.<sup>46</sup>

Yet for all the vaunted importance placed on aristocratic encouragement for the establishment of an ambitious English School, the 3rd Duke of Dorset’s generous and public enthusiasm for Reynolds’s subject pictures in the 1770s remained an extremely rare occurrence. Indeed, even amongst the handful of other pioneering noblemen beginning to forge reputations as patrons of original and inventive subject pictures at that time, Sackville remained highly distinctive. The other lovers of Reynoldsian fancy pictures, for example, were content with just one or two specimens for their collections.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, the contemporary generation of Grand Tourists who, from the late 1750s into the 1770s, tended to patronize British proponents of classical history painting in Rome with large-scale one-off commissions, presented a quite different face to the public.<sup>48</sup> It was presumably this brand of high-minded young peer—the Earl of Northampton, Viscount Palmerston, the Duke of Hamilton, and so on—whom Joshua Reynolds,

newly installed as the Royal Academy's first President, had in mind when he delivered these words at the Academy's inaugural celebration in 1769:

*There are, at this time, a greater number of excellent Artists than were ever known before at one period in this nation; there is a greater desire among our Nobility to be distinguished as lovers and judges of the Arts; there is a greater superfluity of wealth among the people to reward the professors; and, above all, we are patronised by a Monarch, who, knowing the value of science and of elegance, thinks every Art worthy of his notice, that tends to soften and humanise the mind.*<sup>49</sup>

Yet the modern pictures that the Duke of Dorset was amassing over the course of the subsequent decade bore little resemblance to the clear and exemplary Grand Manner compositions which the Academy made central to its civilizing mission throughout the 1770s. Far from dutifully performing the designated role of patron-aristocrat in this patriotic vision of an art-loving state—encouraging the production of elevating and morally instructive works through judicious acquisition—Sackville amassed modern subject pictures in a way that signalled a particular and private taste, seemingly pleased on the whole to follow the meandering fancy of an equally idiosyncratic maker. As I have argued elsewhere, rather than embodying Reynolds's academic injunctions, his sentimental, comic, and sometimes rather odd fancy pictures instead appear to have been produced mischievously to flout them, and to counteract a public persona veering towards a dull and off-putting pomposity.<sup>50</sup> Even the unmistakably serious and ambitious *Ugolino* is far too sumptuous in its manner, too un-classical in its compositional organization, and too gothic in its pettily political backstory to be presented as an unambiguous instance of Grand Manner patronage. Indeed, though the passage of *Inferno* from which the picture draws its subject was well known at the time within a certain circle of connoisseurs, aristocrats, and literary men, its wider obscurity caused it to fail as a piece of public art, leading one journal to answer general perplexity with the publication of an extracted English translation of Dante's text.<sup>51</sup>

The particular character of the modern Sackville pictures of the 1770s suggests that the 3rd Duke was experimenting instead with a model of collecting then taking shape among the French nobility, as recently chronicled by Colin B. Bailey. Pioneered in the 1750s and 1760s by the wealthy courtier Ange-Laurent de La Live de Jully (whose lauded *cabinet françois* was auctioned off in Paris just as Sackville was entering the international art market), this form of patronage was associated with the creation of self-consciously patriotic galleries of modern paintings that were designed to contribute simultaneously to the personal pleasure of the aristocratic collector and to the good of the nation.<sup>52</sup> As the *introduceur des ambassadeurs* at the court of Versailles, La Live de Jully had been well-placed to promote his collection's public function on just these terms, outlining in a widely circulated catalogue publication his intention to embolden contemporary talent to new imaginative feats and to bring the modern French school "to the attention of foreign visitors, who have never truly appreciated its merits".<sup>53</sup> Notable is the extent to which the 3rd Duke's growing collection of works by Reynolds mirrored the preference of the "goût patriotique" for works whose manageable proportions and amusing subjects—quite distinct from the overwhelming "machinery" of classical history painting—also made them suitable for display in a private domestic setting (La Live de Jully's gallery, for example, drew visitors from all over Europe, including Britain, but was housed in his compact *hôtel particulier* on the rue de Richlieu). Key to this formal and thematic link is the importance of fancy pictures of children both to Sackville and to his French counterparts. No patriotic French collector of the third quarter of the eighteenth-century, it seems, could pass muster

without works of this kind, preferably including one or more examples by Jean-Baptiste Greuze (whose fancies were, in turn, an important model for Reynolds).<sup>54</sup> In the same way that the sentimental *Beggar Boy and his Sister* and the other fancy pictures formed the diverting cornerstone of the Sackville subject pictures, so Greuze's *Sleeping Boy* (fig. 9) held a central place in the collection of La Live de Jully, as did the same artist's widely celebrated *Girl with a Dog* (private collection) in the *cabinet françois* of Louis-Gabriel, Marquis de Véri on the fashionable rue des Saints-Pères.<sup>55</sup> Like the 3rd Duke, the state notary Charles-Nicolas Duclos-Dufresnoy showed a predilection for amassing fancies accomplished by a single hand, displaying multiple examples by Greuze at his modern gallery on the rue du Faubourg-Poissonnière, including *Boy with a Dog*, *Innocence* (both London, Wallace Collection), and *The Little Orphans* (Aberdeenshire, Fyvie Castle).<sup>56</sup>



Figure 9

Jean-Baptiste Greuze, *Sleeping Boy*, 1755, oil on canvas, 65 × 54.5 cm. Digital image courtesy of Musée Fabre, Montpellier.

Sackville's collecting activity subsequent to the 1770s suggests that he regarded the experiments in patronage that he had embarked upon in that decade—which might be described as an Englishing of the aristocratic "goût patriotique"—as something of a success. In the last two decades of the century, his holdings of the subject pictures generated by his own nation's school of painting came to parallel the depth and representativeness of the collections amassed by his Parisian equivalents. Thus, as the 1770s gave way to the 80s and 90s, the expanding number of Reynolds's canvases in the Duke's possession came to be joined, *inter alia*, by a George Stubbs horse and groom composition, a grand tragedy by Nathaniel Dance genre pieces by Ozias Humphry and James Northcote and, most notably, examples of Thomas Gainsborough's landscape and fancy picture output.<sup>57</sup>

However, before venturing upon any further analysis of the longer-term character of the 3rd Duke's experiments in aristocratic collecting, I want to keep a focus for a while longer on the formative stages of this behaviour in the 1770s. If we now have a sense of the 3rd Duke



formulating a highly individual response to long-standing calls for men of his class to patronize more boldly, we need to take a broader perspective on what, besides a sense of patriotic duty, may have motivated him to take up the mantle in this peculiar form at this particular stage of his life. What was it about the world in which the Duke operated that might have encouraged the collecting of Reynolds's expensive, physically unstable, and critically doubtful art works, on such a conspicuous scale? Who were such risky and extravagant acquisitive practices designed to impress? And how could they advance the interests of one already so manifestly blessed in fortune and influence?

### **The art of the “beau monde”**

The manuscript *Account of the Number and Value of the Pictures, Busts, &c. Purchased by His Grace, John Frederick Sackville, Duke of Dorset* informs us that in 1778, six of the Sackville Reynoldses—of which five were subject pictures—hung in the 3rd Duke's London house at 33 (now 38) Grosvenor Square, in the expensive residential enclave of Mayfair. These pictures were *A Fortune Teller*, *Cupid as a Linkboy*, *Mercury as a Cutpurse*, *The Calling of Samuel*, *A Boy with a Drawing in his Hand* and a bust-length portrait of the soprano Catherine Schindlerin dressed in the very pink of the fashion.<sup>58</sup> The house had been fitted up especially for the Duke, probably in 1776, and, with its elaborately plastered ceilings, shining mahogany furniture, and gilded decoration, must have provided a lavish and modish setting for this important cache of Reynolds's subject pictures (the grand stone and iron-work staircase, for example, was carpeted with an eye-catching green and white stripe).<sup>59</sup> Unlike the remaining Sackville Reynoldses, which were mixed in with the 3rd Duke's old master collection at Knole, and which were available to be looked at not only by friends and family, but by the many tourists who visited the Duke's seat, the audience for the works which hung in Mayfair would have, consisted almost exclusively of his private guests.

As the townhouse of a rich, handsome, and popular young duke, 33 Grosvenor Square was a central site of convergence for that supremely powerful social, political, and cultural entity known variously in the eighteenth century as the “great world”, “haute ton”, and most frequently, “beau monde”.<sup>60</sup> As visible as it was highly exclusive, this phenomenon was made up of just a few hundred families at any one time, drawn together in the capital city by the shared interests of wealth, rank, and, above all, influence in matters of state. Undisguisedly political in character, this “beau monde” had at its core the major landowning peers amongst whom the great places of the royal court, including the governing Cabinet and Treasury, were typically divided. Indeed, it is no coincidence that the fashionable London “season” took place during the annual sittings of the Houses of Parliament, during which time great peers like the Duke of Dorset held sway in the Upper Chamber by hereditary right, and in the Lower Chamber through the liberal distribution of cash and patronage. Defining itself as a body decidedly aloof from the mercantile commerce of the City, and demonstrably independent of the Crown in its magnificence, the metropolitan habitat of the English aristocracy became the rapidly expanding complex of squares, boulevards, and crescents in the north-western quarter of the city, where the best new houses and fashionable places of entertainment were to be found.

As Hannah Greig has recently demonstrated, in a small, socially exclusive world in which spending power was a direct indicator of one's ability to exert national influence, leisure activities and the consumption of luxury goods rapidly grew in conspicuousness and political significance in the precincts of the “beau monde”. In her monograph on this subject, Greig has suggested that the primary role of art and culture in these circles was to exclude and consolidate.

Members of this society spent at a rate which few, if any, could emulate and in ways that worked to reinforce internal networks. Thus, those who set the fashionable “ton” (the anglophone application of the French for “tone”) would gift and lend each other diamond garnitures and other valuable and glamorous appurtenances whose compressed provenances read as veritable “maps of marriages promised, political allegiances made, and new relationships emerging”.<sup>61</sup> In locating the physically volatile and potentially evanescent Sackville Reynoldses within this theatre of conspicuous consumption, it is tempting to attempt an analogy between the mass burning of costly beeswax candles at the balls and assemblies of the metropolitan aristocracy (so often the subject of the admiring letters and journals) and the slow, self-consuming beauty of Reynolds’s expensive experiments in paint.<sup>62</sup> But I want, instead, to emphasize the importance of intense *competition* in this “brilliant vortex” for understanding the particular kind of spending represented by the Duke’s patronage of the artist. Rather than thinking of the Duke of Dorset’s investment in risky subject pictures as a potlatch-like demonstration of status through the destruction of rare goods—in the glow of which the “great world” could bask in the warmth of self-recognition—I would like to return to Hunter’s idea of Reynoldsian patronage as a high-stakes wager, and situate it more firmly at this uppermost apex of the social hierarchy, where close competition for the highest and rarest of positions could sometimes be settled only by a bold throw of the dice. For while great privilege and a whole raft of prestigious “places” came with the inheritance of a peerage—Sackville became Lord-Lieutenant of Kent and Colonel of the West Kent Militia as a matter of course—men in this rank were keen to win more personal honours.<sup>63</sup> The big positions at court, which showed the special favour of the King and his First Minister, were easily outnumbered by the totality of major peerages; consequently, the 3rd Duke had to beat considerable competition to become Captain of the Yeomen of the Guard and Master of the Horse.<sup>64</sup> Indeed, his correspondence with William Pitt reveals that admission into the Order of the Garter (the personal gift of the monarch) was an ambition cherished by the 3rd Duke with particular ardour.<sup>65</sup>

Despite the fact that the “beau monde” was a new and highly specific development of eighteenth-century Britain, as a social grouping where hereditary rank was an important qualification to entry, it also shared many of the values and behaviours of earlier court cultures, and of the aristocratic milieus of absolutist Europe. High-stakes gambling—particularly for large sums of money—was one such area of common ground between the British and Continental aristocracies, for whom such practices, as Thomas Kavanagh has explained, constituted nothing less than a performance of noble quality.<sup>66</sup> For a well-born man to raise the stakes on a wager with a nonchalant air was to demonstrate a disdain for money (and the low business of money-making) in a way that reinforced a landowning, seigneurial identity. Moreover, the steely nerve that such an enactment required betrayed the inner valour of a primeval warrior caste to which each aristocratic elite harked back as a justification for present privileges. Indeed, the inherent competitiveness of an eye-watering wager allowed the tranquillity with which such odds were faced down to distinguish like from like amongst the illustrious in birth and fortune. There can be no doubt that Sackville cultivated just this image of great bravura in the face of high-stakes gambles in the high-living 1770s, especially in his capacity as an active, first-rate cricketer. Like horseracing, cricket in these early years of the game was a sport intimately bound up with wagers, and never more so than when noblemen clashed. Thus, for example, in the high summer of 1777, big news was made when it was announced that the County of Hampshire, led by Sackville, was to meet All England, led by the other great cricketing peer, Charles Bennet, 4th Earl of Tankerville, at Chertsey for a wager of 1,000 guineas.<sup>67</sup>

The underlying point revealed by these observations is that even if Sackville did not necessarily conceptualize his large-scale acquisition of Reynoldses as a form of gambling, this conspicuous and highly original behaviour certainly took place in a world that rewarded courageous risk-taking with real social and political advancement. Indeed, in the earliest days of his dukedom, Sackville would have had to look no further than his own famous uncle, Lord George, to see the real fruits of a glorious aleatory gesture. Having lost his reputation during a bungled action in the Seven Years' War, Lord George laboured under the ignominious epithet the "Coward of Minden", and it was only after a display of exceptional composure during a 1770 Hyde Park pistol duel that he regained his honour.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, such was the extent of his rehabilitation that the key imperial post of Secretary of State for the American Department was soon forthcoming from the Government. If, therefore, the Sackville collection of Reynoldsian subject pictures was bold and risky in its metropolitanism, conspicuousness, and expense, it nonetheless embodied those qualities on terms that were culturally recognizable to an intensely competitive and status-conscious "beau monde".

As the young Duke began to make his mark on the various Sackville properties in his twenties and early thirties therefore, I want to suggest that his large-scale investment in new works by the art world's riskiest and most expensive purveyor had a strongly performative dimension. After all, at this early stage, he had not only posterity and the family assets to consider, but his reputation as a leading peer, charged with cutting a bold, fine figure that set him apart not only from the common crowd, but from men of comparably plentiful means and lofty standing. Just as his highly successful career as a seducer identified in him those highly desirable qualities in a courtier—"softness and persuasion"—so his high-stakes exploits as a gambling sportsman, but also—as I have argued—as a gambling patron, fed into an equally important seigneurial reputation for valour and insouciance in the face of potentially massive losses.<sup>69</sup> A pricey and growing holding of Reynoldses might very easily crack and fade, its critical fortunes rise or diminish, its value soar or plummet; precisely because of this, this form of collecting gave young Sackville a prominent platform on which to stand tall within the aristocratic "beau monde" as he dashingly faced down the odds.

## Conclusion

This article has sought to substantiate the link proposed by Matthew Hunter between the riskiness involved in buying a Reynolds and the motivations of social distinction. But it has also suggested that the aristocracy's evermore perilous "willingness to take a chance on greatness" was generated less by a desire to distance itself, en bloc, from an ascendant but uncomprehending "middling sort" than it was by processes of internal competition. As the Reynolds likeness became increasingly entrenched and familiar as a marker of eighteenth-century aristocracy, so the immensely powerful leaders of metropolitan fashion began to look to the artist's far rarer and even more experimental subject pictures to test and demonstrate their financial and critical mettle.

More than any other of these oligarchic patrons, the 3rd Duke of Dorset underwrote these experiments in paint, and in so doing, launched his very own experiment in patronage. As we have seen, the Reynoldses that Sackville acquired in the 1770s formed the kernel of a collection of modern British subject pictures that came, ironically, to resemble the self-consciously patriotic cabinet collections of the progressive French elite. Looking forward to the later stages of the eighteenth century and even the first decades of the nineteenth, it is remarkable to observe how profoundly the 3rd Duke's translation of the "goût patriotique" seems to have influenced the subsequent generation of aristocratic patrons of the British School. Largely displacing the high-

mindful brand of noble patronage handed down in academic theory, the vivacious eclecticism of the 3rd Duke's collection and its inventive responsiveness to the fashion and fancy of the day's established talents can be seen being duplicated, on an even grander scale, in the collections of George O'Brien Wyndham, 3rd Earl of Egremont at Petworth House in Sussex and of John Leicester, 1st Baron de Tabley at Hill Street in Berkeley Square and Tabley House in Cheshire.<sup>70</sup> Indeed, putting further paid to the longed-for union of noble virtue and modern *virtù*, these men, like Sackville, also lived for long stretches of their unmarried lives surrounded by substantial holdings of British art and by their favourite mistresses.

But if Sackville's gamble on Reynolds substantially contributed to a highly influential formula for British collecting, to what extent did this conspicuous acquisition of volatile art works play into his own hands? Though we need to bear in mind the fact that this gambit, at least when it began, may have been rather speculative and open-ended in character, it is nonetheless noteworthy that the 3rd Duke's single most significant victory in the "beau monde" competition for places and honours should be foreshadowed in so many ways by his gutsy spin in the 1770s of the Reynoldsian roulette. Surely it must be more than a coincidence, after all, that a nobleman whose collection most resembled the famed patriotic gallery of the French *introduceur des ambassadeurs*, whose holding of fancy pictures were inspired by the famous French master Greuze, who owned a picture modelled directly on a king of France's Caravaggio, and whose risky acquisitions allowed him to stand tall in a "beau monde" that borrowed its fashions, manners, and linguistic idioms from the Parisian elite, should be appointed George III's Ambassador to the Court of Versailles in the early 1780s.



Figure 10

Joshua Reynolds, *Venus and the Piping Boy*, oil on canvas, 127 × 104.2 cm. Digital image courtesy of Polesden Lacey, National Trust

Even if it is unlikely that Sackville anticipated a single outcome from this artistic throw of the dice, the distinctive mixture of metropolitanism, cosmopolitanism, and patriotism which this behaviour bestowed upon him must surely have provided a strong recommendation to place-

makers in need of a smooth, aristocratic presence at the post-American war French court: the one seat of European power that rivalled London's "beau monde" in gallant aristocratic extravagance.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, far from ending with the establishment of the embassy, the 3rd Duke's gamble on Reynolds, if anything, gained a whole new lease of life in this new phase of Sackville's career. Thus on 13 July 1786, Reynolds was compelled to turn down an offer from Charles Manners, 3rd Duke of Rutland, to buy a version of *Venus and the Piping Boy*, because "the Duke of Dorset is to have it" for 400 guineas, "not for himself but for a French Marquis whose name I have forgot". Five months later, furthermore, *The Morning Herald* reported that Sackville was buying the piece for no lesser collector than Louis XVI (fig. 10).<sup>72</sup> If there was an apogee to the 3rd Duke's dashing gamble on Reynolds therefore, it was surely on the production of a king in his winning hand. Encapsulating the dilettantish, devil-may-care persona that had carried him to even greater eminence than his considerable birthright could provide, *The World* wrote of this acquisition:

*Sir Joshua's delicious Venus—is gone the way of all flesh—she is sold—and gone to Paris ... None of Sir Joshua's women ever made themselves cheap—though this was such as to be cheap at any price. The Duke had her for four hundred—Others he has had, lost him infinitely more.*<sup>73</sup>

## Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful to Lord Sackville, Juliet Carey of Waddesdon Manor and Emma Slocombe of Knole for encouraging my research into the 3rd Duke of Dorset and the parts of his collection now in their care. An earlier version of this article was delivered at the Wallace Collection conference *Challenging Materials: Joshua Reynolds and Artistic Experiment in the Eighteenth Century* in 2015. I wish to thank the organizers for including me in the programme, and the other participants for their comments. I offer particular thanks to the anonymous reviewers of the text, Mark Hallett, and the editorial team of *British Art Studies*.

## About the author

John Chu is Assistant Curator of Pictures and Sculpture for the National Trust and has taught at the Courtauld Institute of Art and the University of Reading. He has published on the art of Thomas Gainsborough, Joshua Reynolds and French artists working in eighteenth-century Britain, as well as on various dimensions of the National Trust's picture collections. He read English literature at the University of Cambridge before pursuing postgraduate studies in the history of art at the Courtauld. Having specialised in eighteenth-century British and French art during his masters' degree, he gained his doctorate in 2015 for 'The Fortunes of Fancy Painting in Eighteenth-Century England'. He is currently writing a book on the same subject with a Postdoctoral Fellowship from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art.

## Footnotes

1. The hub of recent activity around this subject was the Reynolds Research Project launched by the Wallace Collection in collaboration with the National Gallery, London, with funding from

- the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. The exhibition *Joshua Reynolds: Experiments in Paint* at the Wallace Collection (12 March–7 June 2015) was staged to present and consider conservation work on the Reynoldses in the Wallace Collection, the National Gallery, and the Yale Center for British Art. See Lucy Davis and Mark Hallett, eds., *Joshua Reynolds: Experiments in Paint* (London: The Wallace Collection, 2015) and the *National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, vol. 35: *Joshua Reynolds in the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection* (London: National Gallery, 2015). See also Matthew Hunter, “Joshua Reynolds’s ‘Nice Chymistry’: Action and Accident in the 1770s”, *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 1 (2015): 58–76.
2. Horace Walpole to the Countess of Upper Ossory, 6 Sept. 1787, in *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole’s Correspondence*, ed. W. S. Lewis, 48 vols. (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1937–83), 34:572.
  3. The often-quoted anecdote recounting Sir George Beaumont’s advice to Oldfield Bowles to have his daughter painted by Reynolds because “even a faded picture from Reynolds will be the finest thing you have”, is first documented in Charles Robert Leslie and Tom Taylor, *The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, 2 vols. (London: John Murray, 1865), 2:134.
  4. Neil De Marchi and Hans J. Van Miegroet, “Ingenuity, Preference, and the Pricing of Paintings: The Smith-Reynolds Connection”, *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999): 401.
  5. Hunter, “Nice Chymistry”, 69.
  6. Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995), 94, 95, 98.
  7. John Coleman, “Reynolds at Knole”, *Apollo* 143, no. 410 (1996): 24–30.
  8. David Mannings and Martin Postle, *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*, 2 vols. (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 1:403, no. 1568.
  9. For Reynolds’s coinage of this patrician imagery and an explanation of its success, see David H. Solkin, “Great Pictures or Great Men? Reynolds, Male Portraiture, and the Power of Art”, *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 2 (1986): 42–49.
  10. The painting was in the Ballroom at Knole by 1771. Other large Sackville portraits hanging there in the 1770s included *Edward, 4th Earl of Dorset* by Anthony van Dyke and *Charles, 6th Earl of Dorset* and *Lionel, 1st Duke of Dorset* by Godfrey Kneller. R. A. Onely, *General Account of Tunbridge Wells and its Environs* (London, 1771), 47, and J. Sprange, *The Tunbridge Wells Guide* (Tunbridge Wells: J. Sprange, 1780), vi. In the 1780 guide, the pictures are listed in an appendix inserted between pp. 98 and 99 and paginated with Roman numerals.
  11. Robert Sackville-West, *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles* (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), 1–126.
  12. Sackville-West, *Inheritance*, 125.
  13. For details of Sackville’s old master acquisitions, mostly acquired through specialist agents in Rome and Venice, see Ann Bramley, “A Duke on the Grand Tour: John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset”, *British Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (2006): 75–81.
  14. Sprange, *Tunbridge Wells*, ix.
  15. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:280, 281, no. 1012; 1:220, no. 736; 1:211, no. 705; 1:401, no. 1563.
  16. Quoted in Brian Masters, *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire* (London: Hamilton, 1981), 136. The Duke’s good looks excited the jealousy of Christian VII of Denmark during his visit to London in 1768. “He is jealous of Sackville,” recorded Horace Walpole, “and says, *ce gros*



*noir n'est pas beau*: which implies that he thinks his own whiteness and pertness charming.” Walpole to Henrietta Seymour Conway, 25 Aug. 1768, in *Walpole's Correspondence*, 39:108, 109.

17. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:55, no. 28; 1:68, no. 90.
18. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:568–70, no. 2172.
19. John Chu, “Joshua Reynolds and Fancy Painting in the 1770s”, in *Experiments in Paint*, ed. Davis and Hallett, 94.
20. In addition to the five listed below, Sackville also bought a demi-figure of a girl in white drapery with a bird titled *Lesbia*; Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*: 1:543, no. 2101.
21. *St James's Chronicle*, 17–19 April 1777.
22. For the history of linkboys and the deceptions of eighteenth-century street urchins, see Tim Hitchcock, *Down and Out in Eighteenth-century London* (London: Hambledon, 2004), 60, 98, 117.
23. James Grantham Turner, *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics and Literary Culture, 1630–1685* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002), 249.
24. Samuel Johnson, *The Works of the English Poets with Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, Volume the Eleventh* (London: E. Cox, 1779), 208, 209.
25. The *Ugolino* picture was begun five years before the first record of sale to Sackville and exhibited two years before; see Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:569.
26. For Reynolds's use of this model, see Postle, *Subject Pictures*, 95–98.
27. Joshua Reynolds to Daniel Daulby, 9 Sept. 1777, in *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds*, ed. John Ingamells and John Edgcumbe (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000), 69, 70.
28. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:524, no. 2060; 1:544, no. 2104; 1:510, no. 2016.
29. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:569, no. 2172; 1:513, no. 2027; 1:560, no. 2150; 1:529, no. 2069.
30. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:543, no. 2101.
31. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:220, no. 736; 1:281, no. 1012; 1:410, no. 1563.
32. For the price of commodities necessary for genteel living, see Woodruff D. Smith, *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800* (New York and London: Routledge, 2002), 25–62.
33. Hannah Greig, *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013), 53, 54.
34. Sackville Archive, Kent History and Library Centre, MSS U269 E416, unpaginated.
35. James Northcote to Samuel Northcote, 23 Aug. 1771, Royal Academy of Arts Archive, NOR/4.
36. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:403, 1568.
37. Quoted in Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:510, no. 2016. For the parallels between contemporary empirical experimentation and Reynolds's studio practices and documentation, see Matthew Hunter, “Reynolds's Science of Experiment in Practice and Theory”, in *Experiments in Paint*, ed. Davis and Hallett, 100–111.
38. Alexandra Gent, “Reynolds, Paint and Painting: A Technical Analysis”, in *Experiments in Paint*, ed. Davis and Hallett, 48, 49.
39. Quoted and translated in Colin B. Bailey, *Patriotic Taste: Collecting Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Paris* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2002), 17.
40. *Ambulator; or, A Pocket Companion in a Tour Round London* (London: Jane Bew, 1793), 159.

41. *The Public Advertiser*, 28 April 1773.
42. *The Morning Chronicle*, 30 April 1773.
43. *The London Chronicle*, 29 April–1 May 1777.
44. The Sackville subject pictures exhibited at the Royal Academy were *Ugolino* (1773), *Beggar Boy and his Sister* (1775), and *A Fortune Teller* (1777). A version of *Calling of Samuel* was exhibited in 1776 although it may not have been the Sackville picture. The pictures engraved in the 1770s were *Ugolino* (1774), *Cupid as a Linkboy* (1777), *Mercury as a Cutpurse* (1777), and *Boy with a Drawing in his Hand* (1777).
45. See the dedications in William Aglionby, *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues* (London, 1685) and Roger de Piles, *The Art of Painting . . . Essay towards an English School*, trans. Bainbrigg Buckeridge (London, 1706).
46. Jonathan Richardson, *A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage of the Science of a Connoisseur* (London: W. Churchill, 1719), 62.
47. Chu, "Fancy Painting", 88.
48. Martin Myrone, *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art, 1750–1810* (New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2005), 55.
49. Joshua Reynolds, *Discourses on Art*, ed. Robert R. Wark (San Marino: Huntington Library, 1959), 14.
50. Chu, "Fancy Painting", 97, 98.
51. *The Annual Register*, Dec. 1773, 194. For the currency of Dante and the Ugolino episode in elite circles, see Postle, *Subject Pictures*, 148–50.
52. The sale of the La Live de Jully collection was held in 1770; see Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*, 60. The 3rd Duke's presence in Paris prior to his 1784–89 embassy has yet to be fully charted although he was certainly there in 1777/8, as attested to by tailors' bills and paperwork for other luxury purchases deposited in the Kent History and Library Centre; U269 A243/8.
53. Quoted and translated in Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*, 57.
54. Chu, "Fancy Painting", 91, 92.
55. Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*, 101–30.
56. Bailey, *Patriotic Taste*, 142, 143.
57. *Account of the Number and Value of the Pictures*.
58. Mannings and Postle, *Reynolds*, 1:40, no. 1578.
59. For the houses and historic residents of Grosvenor Square, see F. H. W. Sheppard, ed., *Survey of London*, vol. 40, *The Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair, Part 2 (The Buildings)* (London: London County Council, 1980), 117–66.
60. Greig, *Beau Monde*, 243–58.
61. Greig, *Beau Monde*, 62.
62. Greig, *Beau Monde*, 42, 43.
63. Gerald M. D. Howat, "Sackville, John Frederick, third duke of Dorset (1745–1799)", *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004); online ed., Jan. 2008: doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/24445.
64. Howat, "Sackville".
65. The National Archives, PRO 30/8.
66. Thomas M. Kavanagh, *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-century France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993), 29–66. In histories of gambling in the eighteenth-century English context the emphasis has tended to be placed on the universality of the practice; see, for example, Jessica Anne

- Richard, *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-century British Novel* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011). Distinctly aristocratic forms of gaming were nonetheless widely recognized and commented upon in the later part of the period; see Gillian Russell, "'Faro's Daughters': Female Gamesters, Politics, and the Discourse of Finance in 1790s Britain", *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 4 (2000): 481–504.
67. *The Morning Post and Daily Advertiser*, 4 July 1777.
68. Sackville-West, *Inheritance*, 122–24.
69. Masters, *Georgiana*, 136.
70. For the collection at Petworth see Christopher Rowell, Ian Warrell, and David Blayney Brown, *Turner at Petworth* (London: Tate Britain, 2002). For Baron de Tabley's collections in Berkeley Square and Tabley, see Dongho Chun, "Public Display, Private Glory: Sir John Fleming Leicester's Gallery of British Art in Early Nineteenth-century England", *Journal of the History of Collections* 13, no. 2 (2001): 175–89.
71. For an example of how a gamble on a new and unusual form of cultural patronage could pay dividends at the French court in a way analogous to the argument proposed in the present article, see Katie Scott, "Playing Games with Otherness: Watteau's Chinese Cabinet at the Château de La Muette", *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 66 (2003): 231–44.
72. Quoted in Postle, *Subject Pictures*, 203, 205.
73. *The World*, 3 Feb. 1787.

## Bibliography

- Aglionby, William. *Painting Illustrated in Three Dialogues*. London, 1685.
- Ambulator; or, A Pocket Companion in a Tour Round London*. London: Jane Bew, 1793.
- Bailey, Colin B. *Patriotic Taste: Collecting Modern Art in Pre-Revolutionary Paris*. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2002.
- Bramley, Ann. "A Duke on the Grand Tour: John Frederick Sackville, 3rd Duke of Dorset." *British Art Journal* 7, no. 2 (2006): 75–81.
- Chu, John. "Joshua Reynolds and Fancy Painting in the 1770s." In *Experiments in Paint*. Ed. Davis and Hallett, 86–99.
- Chun, Dongho. "Public Display, Private Glory: Sir John Fleming Leicester's Gallery of British Art in Early Nineteenth-century England." *Journal of the History of Collections* 13, no. 2 (2001): 175–89.
- Coleman, John. "Reynolds at Knole." *Apollo* 143, no. 410 (1996): 24–30.
- Davis, Lucy, and Mark Hallett, eds. *Joshua Reynolds: Experiments in Paint*. London: The Wallace Collection, 2015.
- De Marchi, Neil, and Hans J. Van Miegroet. "Ingenuity, Preference, and the Pricing of Paintings: The Smith-Reynolds Connection." *History of Political Economy* 31 (1999): 397–412.
- De Piles, Roger. *The Art of Painting . . . Essay towards an English School*. Trans. Bainbrigg Buckeridge. London, 1706.
- Gent, Alexandra. "Reynolds, Paint and Painting: A Technical Analysis." In *Experiments in Paint*. Ed. Davis and Hallett, 42–69.
- Greig, Hannah. *The Beau Monde: Fashionable Society in Georgian London*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2013.
- Hitchcock, Tim. *Down and Out in Eighteenth-century London*. London: Hambledon, 2004.
- Howat, Gerald M. D. "Sackville, John Frederick, third duke of Dorset (1745–1799)." In *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2004; online ed., Jan. 2008:

doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/24445.

Hunter, Matthew. "Joshua Reynolds's 'Nice Chymistry': Action and Accident in the 1770s." *The Art Bulletin* 97, no. 1 (2015): 58–76.

— — —. "Reynolds's Science of Experiment in Practice and Theory." In *Experiments in Paint*. Ed. Davis and Hallett, 70–85.

Johnson, Samuel. *The Works of the English Poets with Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, Volume the Eleventh*. London: E. Cox, 1779.

Kavanagh, Thomas M. *Enlightenment and the Shadows of Chance: The Novel and the Culture of Gambling in Eighteenth-century France*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1993).

Leslie, Charles Robert, and Tom Taylor. *The Life and Times of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. 2 vols. London: John Murray, 1865.

Mannings, David, and Martin Postle. *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings*. 2 vols. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000.

Masters, Brian. *Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire*. London: Hamilton, 1981.

Myrone, Martin. *Bodybuilding: Reforming Masculinities in British Art, 1750–1810*. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2005.

*National Gallery Technical Bulletin*, vol. 35: *Joshua Reynolds in the National Gallery and the Wallace Collection*. London: National Gallery, 2015.

Onely, R. A. *General Account of Tunbridge Wells and its Environs*. London, 1771.

Postle, Martin. *Sir Joshua Reynolds: The Subject Pictures*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1995.

Reynolds, Sir Joshua. *Discourses on Art*. Ed. Robert R. Wark. San Marino: Huntington Library, 1959.

— — —. *The Letters of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. Ed. John Ingamells and John Edgcumbe. New Haven and London: Yale Univ. Press, 2000.

Richard, Jessica Anne. *The Romance of Gambling in the Eighteenth-century British Novel*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

Richardson, Jonathan. *A Discourse on the Dignity, Certainty, Pleasure and Advantage of the Science of a Connoisseur*. London: W. Churchill, 1719.

Rowell, Christopher, Ian Warrell, and David Blayney Brown. *Turner at Petworth*. London: Tate Britain, 2002.

Russell, Gillian. "'Faro's Daughters': Female Gamesters, Politics, and the Discourse of Finance in 1790s Britain." *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 33, no. 4 (2000): 481–504.

Sackville-West, Robert. *Inheritance: The Story of Knole and the Sackvilles*. London: Bloomsbury, 2010.

Scott, Katie. "Playing Games with Otherness: Watteau's Chinese Cabinet at the Château de La Muette." *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 66 (2003): 189–248.

Sheppard, F. H. W., ed. *Survey of London*, vol. 40, *The Grosvenor Estate in Mayfair, Part 2 (The Buildings)*. London: London County Council, 1980.

Smith, Woodruff D. *Consumption and the Making of Respectability, 1600–1800*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Solkin, David H. "Great Pictures or Great Men? Reynolds, Male Portraiture, and the Power of Art." *Oxford Art Journal* 9, no. 2 (1986): 42–49.

Sprange, J. *The Tunbridge Wells Guide*. Tunbridge Wells: J. Sprange, 1780.

Turner, James Grantham. *Libertines and Radicals in Early Modern London: Sexuality, Politics and Literary Culture, 1630–1685*. Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2002.

Walpole, Horace. *The Yale Edition of Horace Walpole's Correspondence*. Ed. W. S. Lewis. 48 vols. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1937–83.

## Imprint

<b>Author</b>	John Chu
<b>Date</b>	1 December 2022
<b>Category</b>	<a href="#">Article</a>
<b>Review status</b>	Peer Reviewed (Double Blind)
<b>License</b>	<a href="#">Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International (CC BY-NC 4.0)</a>
<b>Downloads</b>	PDF format
<b>Article DOI</b>	<a href="https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/jchu">https://doi.org/10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-02/jchu</a>
<b>Cite as</b>	Chu, John. “High Art and High Stakes: The 3rd Duke of Dorset’s Gamble on Reynolds.” In <i>British Art Studies</i> . London and New Haven: Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art and Yale Center for British Art, 2022. <a href="https://britishartstudies-02.netlify.app/high-art-high-stakes/">https://britishartstudies-02.netlify.app/high-art-high-stakes/</a> .