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## CHECKLIST

Pompeo Batoni, Italian, 1708–1787

*William Legge, 2nd Earl of Dartmouth (1731–1801)*, 1753–56, oil on canvas  
*Purchased through gifts from Jane and W. David Dance, Class of 1940; Jonathan L. Cohen, Class of 1960, Tuck 1961; Frederick B. Whittemore, Class of 1953, Tuck 1954; Barbara Dau Southwell, Class of 1978 and David Southwell, Tuck 1988; Parnassus Foundation/Jane and Raphael Bernstein; and an anonymous donor; 2007.34*

Henry Hudson, British, 1728–1793, after Joshua Reynolds, British, 1723–1792

*Sir William Hamilton*, 1787, mezzotint  
*Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.961.44*

John Raphael Smith, British, 1751–1812, after George Romney, British, 1734–1802

*Portrait of Mary "Perdita" Robinson*, 1781, mezzotint  
*Gift of Katherine Hart in honor of Angela Rosenthal, Associate Professor of Art History, Dartmouth College, 1997–2010; 2011.24*

Elisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun and Studio, French, 1755–1842

*Portrait of the Vicomtesse of Vaudreuil*, after 1785, oil on canvas  
*Gift of Timotheus Pohl; 2005.18*

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## THE ILLUSIONS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY EUROPEAN PORTRAITURE



Henry Hudson, after Joshua Reynolds, *Sir William Hamilton*, 1787, mezzotint. Purchased through the Guernsey Center Moore 1904 Memorial Fund; PR.961.44

From ancient times to the present day, portraiture has been a medium in which individuals could create an illusion of themselves in a very selective and prescribed manner. Through devices like gaze, demeanor, dress, and accessories, sitters might reveal something specific about their character, social status, and profession. The painter would contribute something as well; though a portrait contains the likeness of an individual, it does not necessarily depict the “truth” about him or her. It is healthy human nature to overlook one’s own faults, so the image represented in a portrait might well reflect an individual’s perception of him- or herself, whether honest or false or both, often aided by the painter (if he or she expected to succeed at the trade). Portraiture in the

eighteenth century in Europe also provided a means for aristocratic gentlemen and ladies to affirm their bloodlines, while at the same time allowing those of common background to imitate the nobility without raising troublesome issues related to their origins or claims. Given all of this, then, how are we to read the portrait? Is this form of representation “real” or simply an illusion? How would we know?

A portrait’s medium supplies one clue as to how the contemporary viewer was meant to receive it. The intention behind prints (versus paintings) was very specific; prints could be reproduced en masse for the public, whereas for the most part paintings were unique and meant for

a specific, generally private audience. Of course, the media overlapped, in content and in intent: most portrait prints were based on paintings by popular artists of the day. In the mid-eighteenth century, English painters favored mezzotints to popularize their works and increase their business. Sir Joshua Reynolds authorized over four hundred prints after his paintings, leading one critic to exclaim, “Sir Joshua has been more indebted to [printmaking] than any other artist past or present.” Of course, printed reproductions of paintings benefited the artist and the sitter, as both often craved publicity. In this way the verity of the representation became a public matter rather than simply a private vanity.

In eighteenth-century England, wealthy men and women who wanted to construct a particular image of themselves for the public frequently used the popular and affordable mezzotint. The *Portrait of Sir William Hamilton* by Henry Hudson after Sir Joshua Reynolds’s painting shows Hamilton as the British Envoy Extraordinary to the Spanish court at Naples (he served in this position from 1764 to 1800). Purposefully surrounded by his collection of Greek, Etruscan, and Roman pottery, he appears to be a man who wants to impress upon people the wide scope of his accomplishments and intellect. The mezzotint’s ease of replication allowed a wide range of individuals in both Naples and his native England to appreciate this obviously successful intellectual literally immersed in his work.

The *Portrait of Mary “Perdita” Robinson*, a mezzotint by John Raphael Smith after the painting by George Romney, shows the actress and novelist stylishly dressed for the early 1780s, wearing a silk taffeta cape and holding a fur muff. These fashionable accessories highlight Robinson’s physical beauty and glamour as a socialite but also blatantly evoke noble stature, even though she was of common birth. The simple composition of this readily reproduced portrait was also intended to attract the male voyeur and his admiration for her physical attributes rather than her literary accomplishments. Like Hamilton’s portrait, this likeness is meant to communicate the serenity that accompanies personal accomplishment.

Pompeo Batoni’s portrait of William Legge, Second Earl of Dartmouth, differs in its purpose from the previous two. Begun in 1753, the painting shows Lord Dartmouth in his second year of a “grand tour” of Europe, a rite of passage for aristocratic young men of the time. The rendering’s emphasis on a book and landscape likely means that the portrait was a personal souvenir of his experience in Italy rather than a public gesture of some sort. The informal quality of Lord Dartmouth’s dress, especially his buttonless coat and solitaire untied at the neck, further

suggests the intimacy of the intended audience, which perhaps consisted of fellow noblemen and alumni of this formidable adventure.

Elizabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun’s painted portrait of Victoire Pauline de Riquet de Caraman (1764–1834), Vicomtesse of Vaudreuil, is an image of the ideal, sophisticated French woman. The vicomtesse leans easily on a grassy ledge. She wears a fashionable turquoise silk taffeta dress, and her bosom is modestly covered by a light silk fichu that matches some of the fabric on her hat and her sleeve ruffles. Like Lord Dartmouth, she marks a spot in a book with her thumb, suggesting her intellectualism, though it is of a different stripe: the vicomtesse is an example of the Rococo reader, a frivolous consumer of literature rather than an earnest scholar. Because reading was a favorite pastime for women of means at this time, this portrait would have represented a private reminder that the wife of the viscount of Vaudreuil was a proper and elegant French woman who possessed the perfect combination of intelligence and modesty. Likely intended for a private dwelling, and to be seen only by family and acquaintances, this painting would have communicated the legitimacy of its sitter’s status only to those of equal or higher standing. It was not intended for lower-class audiences.

All four portraits, whether reproduced in mezzotint or not, are the result of the combined efforts of artist and sitter to fashion a timeless and compelling identity on canvas. Famous portrait painters like Reynolds, Romney, Vigée Le Brun, and Batoni were known by their previous work, so sitters could be confident of a complimentary realization of their self-images and, more importantly, their personal priorities. As these four works would appear to indicate, portraits are always a construction of some sort, though the attentive viewer can uncover their secrets.

Courtney Chapel ’11, The Homma Family Intern



John Raphael Smith, after George Romney, *Portrait of Mary “Perdita” Robinson*, 1781, mezzotint on laid paper. Gift of Katherine Hart in honor of Angela Rosenthal, Associate Professor of Art History, Dartmouth College, 1997–2010; 2011.24