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## Mr. Devis and Mr. Bull

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**M**r. and Mrs. Richard Bull (Figure 1), painted in 1747, is a typical example of the then modern genre called a “conversation piece,” an informal group portrait showing its subjects either conversing or engaged in some genteel pastime. The painter, Arthur Devis (1712–1787), was a well-known and successful practitioner of the genre. In the 1930s and 1940s, when the conversation piece and Devis himself were subjects of increasing interest, this canvas, then a recent discovery, was widely exhibited and published, but it then disappeared from view.<sup>1</sup> It is now on exhibition at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, a long-term loan from the Conservation Center of the Institute of Fine Arts at New York University.

Richard Bull was the second son of Sir John Bull and his wife, Elizabeth, of London and Ongar, Essex, a village to the north of London. His father was a merchant in the Turkey trade. The younger Bull lived first in Ongar and later on the Isle of Wight at Northcourt, a Jacobean mansion on the outskirts of the village of Shorwell that he bought in 1795. In 1747, the year this portrait was painted, Richard Bull married the widow Mary (Ash) Bennet. According to the Ongar parish registers, she was baptized in March 1718, and as he was born in London in 1721, she was several years older.<sup>2</sup> Both were from prosperous landed families. Her parents, Benjamin and Cordelia Ash, and her first husband, Bennet Alexander Bennet, were all from Ongar, and they and the Bulls must have known each other well. Mrs. Bull had a daughter and a son, Richard, from her first marriage, and she and Bull had two daughters, one of whom, Elizabeth, survived them. Arthur Devis’s portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Bull was owned by their descendants until 1926, remaining at Northcourt, where it is presumed to have been at the time of Bull’s death in 1805.<sup>3</sup>

Although Richard Bull served as a Member of Parliament for Newport, Cornwall, from 1756 until 1780, he is described as having been politically disinterested in the extreme. He was a convivial person and enjoyed both entertaining and travel.<sup>4</sup> He was (and is still) known as a print and book collector and as a correspondent and friend of the antiquarian, writer, and publisher Horace Walpole (1717–1797). Bull’s modest claim to fame arises from his later activities as an extra-illustrator. The genteel practice of extra-illustration, or embellishing printed books with additional prints, drawings, letters, and the like, occupied him during the second and presumably more leisurely half of his life. His pursuit was evidently given impetus by the publication in 1769 of the Reverend James Granger’s two-volume *Biographical History of England*.<sup>5</sup> Granger (1723–1776) had formed a very large collection of prints of persons of historical interest, and these in turn inspired his history, which he organized chronologically by reign, providing biographies of the same personages organized in accordance with their precedence or relative importance. Although Granger was a print collector, his *Biographical History* was not illustrated, and Bull was apparently the first to remedy this defect. By 1774 Bull had completed and sold an expanded, nineteen-volume “Granger” illustrated with prints pasted into blank pages, and he carried this work forward into his own time in an additional sixteen volumes of pasted-up images of personalities dating from the Glorious Revolution of 1688 to the early reign of George III.

Horace Walpole’s *Anecdotes of Painting in England* (1762–71), based on the notebooks of antiquary George Vertue (1684–1756), afforded Bull a further opportunity.<sup>6</sup> With the assistance of his daughters, Bull expanded the *Anecdotes* to fourteen volumes embellished with both engravings and watercolors. Walpole’s account of his house, Strawberry Hill, published in 1784 under the title *A Description of the Villa of Mr. Horace Walpole*, was given



1. Arthur Devis (English, 1712–1787). *Mr. and Mrs. Richard Bull*, 1747. Oil on canvas, 42¼ x 34¼ in. (107.3 x 87 cm). Signed and dated on baseboard at right: *ADevis [initials joined] fe 1747*-. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Lent by New York University, Institute of Fine Arts, Conservation Center (L.2009.54)

this treatment both by the author himself and by Bull.<sup>7</sup> Extrillustration was considered to be a thought-provoking pursuit for those with private means and time at their disposal, yielding fruitful associations and the exchange, through gift and loan, of privately printed and privately expanded books among a circle of the like-minded. The appetite of such collectors as Bull, Granger, and Walpole was so insatiable that with their enthusiasm they may actually have driven up the prices of books and prints.

Given Richard Bull's later fascination with portraits, it is perhaps not surprising that on the celebratory occasion of his marriage, he commissioned one. It also seems likely that he and the precise and literal-minded Arthur Devis would have been a match.<sup>8</sup> Devis, born at Preston, Lancashire, on February 19, 1712, belonged to a family of artists of which he would eventually be judged the most prominent. Such training as he received was in the early 1730s with Peter Tillemans (ca. 1684–1734), a Flemish-born painter active until 1733 in London and elsewhere in England. Little else is known of Devis until 1742, when he married and when he was described in the Preston guild rolls as living in the capital. He was exclusively a painter of the *conversazione* from that time on. While in his later work he—or his patrons—showed a marked preference for landscape backgrounds for his conversation pieces, at first he favored interiors. Devis's earliest dated work is from 1735, and he began signing and dating portraits no later than 1741.

Devis cannot have entered Tillemans's shop much before 1730, by which time the older artist's landscapes with figures, house portraits, and hunting scenes were outdated. The young genre painter may have known but would not have aspired to the elaboration, even splendor, of the florid group portraits and genre scenes that William Hogarth (1697–1764) was painting at the time. The style of the little-known Scottish artist Gawen Hamilton (ca. 1697–1737) is on the other hand quite similar, and if he did not influence Devis, then certainly the two of them emerged from the same sort of ambience and found their patrons in similar circles. For comparative purposes, Hamilton's *Rawson Conversation Piece* (Figure 2), probably of about 1730, is a good example: a quite empty and strictly ordered paneled interior with a chimneypiece, a portrait over the mantel, board flooring, and a Turkey carpet, in the midst of which the principal couple is seated composedly at a pedestal tea table.

Devis portrayed the recently married Mr. and Mrs. Bull alone in a sparsely furnished interior. The composition, not unstudied, is slightly asymmetrical, in the details of the room itself and also in the arrangement of the figures and furnishings. A straight edge rigorously defines the main verticals and horizontals of the room and (around the carpet) the diagonals of the wide floorboards, but the mantel is not centered with respect to the picture space, nor is the carpet



centered with respect to the mantel. Above the chimneypiece is a landscape inhabited by a single draped figure and with a castle in the distance, and above the door is a mountain landscape. Both are in the style of the Venetian painter Francesco Zuccarelli (1702–1788). It was quite common for young English painters to make copies after the Italians in their student days, but Zuccarelli did not come to England until 1755, and 1747 would have been an early date to find such a work in London. The rococo framing of the pictures, with shells, a mask, and plant forms, seems to be applied to the wall and en suite with the surrounding woodwork.<sup>9</sup> On the mantel two green porcelain parrots and four pairs of small blue and white vessels flank a figurine; on the hearth sits a large lidded blue and white jar.

It had once been thought that the Bulls were shown in their own house, but Mr. and Mrs. Robert Dashwood, who sat for Devis in 1750 (Figure 3),<sup>10</sup> are pictured in an interior that is to all intents and purposes identical. The spaces are the same, and the decoration (the pictures and the busts on brackets) nearly so. Both men wear their hair unpowdered, but Mr. Dashwood's simple coat is more typical for Devis's

2. Gawen Hamilton (Scottish, ca. 1697–1737). *The Rawson Conversation Piece*, ca. 1730. Oil on canvas, 31½ x 29⅜ in. (80 x 74.6 cm). Pallant House Gallery, Chichester, Purchased with support of the V&A Purchase Grant Fund, The Art Fund, and an anonymous donor, 1994



3. Arthur Devis. *Mr. and Mrs. Robert Dashwood*, signed and dated 1750. Oil on canvas, 44 x 38 in. (111.8 x 96.5 cm). Location unknown



4. Arthur Devis. *A Lady and Three Gentlemen Gathered around a Harpsichord*, early 1750s. Oil on canvas, 50½ x 40½ in. (128.2 x 102.9 cm). Location unknown

sitters, while Mr. Bull's is elaborately brocaded. Mrs. Dashwood's underskirt is quilted in squares, and her cap is wider than Mrs. Bull's, but the sewing basket on her tea table is the same as Mrs. Bull's.<sup>11</sup> In a further variation of this interior, in which two men and a woman surround a man seated at a harpsichord (Figure 4), Devis rendered the room symmetrical in shape and decoration, with a companion (albeit closed) door and overdoor to the right, and placed the figures at the center of the bare floor, in front of the chimneypiece.<sup>12</sup> A portion of a similar interior appears in his portrait of Lady Juliana Penn (Figure 5), but with an oval landscape over the mantel and a different arrangement of blue and white porcelains on the shelf, and in this case the jar on the hearth contains a flower arrangement. The walls and chairs are upholstered in green figured damask similar to the fabric on the chairs in which the Bulls are seated.

Very few specific settings, whether inside or out, have been identified in Devis's entire oeuvre. It must be understood, then, that Devis's sitters in the late 1740s and early 1750s were not overly concerned with the particulars of the rooms they appear to inhabit, so long as they were portrayed in an environment whose appointments were

up-to-date and appropriate in style and decoration to their understanding of their position in society. The sitters' attributes, insofar as there are any, performed a similarly generalized function.

English group portraits nearly always illustrate the occupations of leisure. In Devis's work, a gentleman seated indoors may have a book at hand, or a lady may be shown with gloves, a fan, or, as here, the components of lace-making. Both Mrs. Bull and Mrs. Dashwood hold a silver thimble: instead of being heavy with meaning, a thimble was simply an opportunity for painting bright highlights. Devis preferred soft, even illumination, and the absence of fires, screens, and shawls suggests a temperate season. What is particular to Devis's interiors is that the rooms he shows are high and airy (the more so because they have very little furniture, even by the standards of that time, when chairs were often lined up against the rail if not in use), and embellished with great restraint.<sup>13</sup> This saves the onlooker from being distracted and encourages close observation of the sitters, who were drawn and then painted with a high degree of specificity.

If, as seems likely, this painting and others of its type may be taken as entirely contemporary, the daytime dress of a



5. Arthur Devis. *Lady Juliana Penn*, signed and dated 1752. Oil on canvas, 36 $\frac{1}{8}$  x 31 $\frac{1}{8}$  in. (91.8 x 79.1 cm). Philadelphia Museum of Art, Gift of Susanne Strassburger Anderson, Valerie Anderson Story, and Veronica Anderson Macdonald from the estate of Mae Bourne and Ralph Beaver Strassburger, 2004 (2004-201-2)

gentleman of property in the late 1740s comprised a coat with very wide cuffs and falling to just below the knee; a waistcoat, usually white, with pocket flaps and numerous small buttons; buckled knee britches; white hose; and black shoes with large square buckles. While the muslin shirt had wide ruffles, only a slight ruff was worn at the neck. Coat collars seem to have been coming in, while powdered wigs for younger men were going out. In the matter of the decoration of the coat or waistcoat there was some choice, and Richard Bull opted for elaborate gold embroidery around the buttonholes and on the collar and cuffs of his coat.

If he was born in 1721, Bull would have been about twenty-six when Devis painted him. He has a cleft chin and is broader in the shoulder than most of Devis's sitters, giving him some individuality.<sup>14</sup> Typically, he is well proportioned (in Devis's paintings older men are sometimes distinguished by thicker waists), and his britches and stockings are smooth and unwrinkled. His wife Mary was approaching her thirtieth birthday in 1747, but does not look it. Her hair is arranged close to her head and covered by a cap with a pink ribbon. She sits straight, on the edge of her chair to accommodate the panniers that hold the skirt of her robe out over her hips. A seam in her satin skirt is slightly puckered. Her

bodice fits tightly over her corseted torso and is pleated at either side of a V-shaped stomacher decorated with wavy bands of ruching and rosettes of the same fabric as her embroidered petticoat. Her lace-trimmed ruffles and apron are (impossibly) transparent. She sits forward of her husband and is a little larger and nearly frontal, a polite illustration of the felicity of the newly married.<sup>15</sup>

#### ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This picture was brought to my attention by Dianne Dwyer Modestini, Paintings Conservator, Kress Program in Paintings Conservation, Institute of Fine Arts, New York University. It has been lent to the Museum through the good offices of the Acting Chairman of the Conservation Center for 2008–11, Hannelore Roemich, Professor of Conservation Science. As Arthur Devis is not represented in this collection, I am very grateful to both of them for their help and for agreeing to the long-term loan of this work, which fits well into our installation of English painting and enlarges our presentation of the development of the group portrait.

## NOTES

- The painting was included in the exhibitions *English Conversation Pieces* (1930), no. 86 (lent by Jesse Isidor Straus, reportedly reproduced in a separate pamphlet); *Hogarth and His Tradition* (1935), no. 13 (lent by Straus); *French and English Art Treasures* (1942), no. 376 (lent by Mrs. Jesse Isidor Straus); *Old and New England* (1945), no. 68 (lent by Mrs. Straus); and *The Conversation Piece: Arthur Devis and His Contemporaries* (1980), no. 19 (see D'Oench 1980). It was published in *Creative Art* 6 (May 1930), ill. p. 315; Williamson 1931, p. 12, pl. 29 (left); Janet Rosenwald, "Knoedler Holds Loan Exhibition of Hogarth's Art," *Art News* 34 (November 16, 1935), p. 4; Pavière 1936–37, p. 120, no. 2, p. 130; Sitwell 1937, pp. 50–51, fig. 58; *Museum Notes* (Museum of Art, Rhode Island School of Design, Providence) 3, no. 1 (January 1945), cover ill.; *Art News* 43 (January 15–31, 1945), frontis.; E. P. Richardson, "Old and New England," *Art Quarterly* 8, no. 1 (Winter 1945), p. 6, fig. 8; Pavière 1950, pp. 34, 38, no. 16; Collins Baker 1955, p. 43, ill. p. 44; Hilda F. Finberg, "'With Mr. Turner in 1797,'" *Burlington Magazine* 99, no. 647 (February 1957), p. 51n4; D'Oench 1980, pp. 52–54, no. 19, pl. 19; Sartin 1983, p. 48; Saumarez Smith 1993, pp. 126, 191, nos. 184, 195 (color); Thornton 2000, p. 120, colorpl. 146; and Retford 2007, pp. 291ff., fig. 1 (color).
- Much biographical information about Bull and his pastime may be found in Pinkerton 1978. See also *The Parish Registers of Ongar, Essex* (privately printed for Frederick Arthur Crisp, 1886), p. 60. Bull's obituary was published in *The Gentleman's Magazine* 76, part 1 (January–June 1806), p. 289.
- The subsequent owners were Elizabeth Bull, London and Northcourt, Shorwell, Isle of Wight (1805 until her death in 1809); Richard Henry Alexander Bennet, Beckenham, Kent and Northcourt (1809–d. 1815); General Sir James Willoughby Gordon, 1st Baronet, and Lady Gordon, Northcourt (1815–his d. 1851); Sir Henry Percy Gordon, 2nd Baronet, Northcourt (1851–d. 1876); General and Mrs. Robert William Disney Leith, Northcourt (1876–his d. 1892); Alexander Henry Leith, 5th Lord Burgh, Northcourt (1892–d. 1926; his estate sale, Christie's, London, July 9, 1926, lot 22, as Portrait of Mr. and Mrs. Bull, of Northcourt by A. W. Devis, signed and dated 1747, for £346.10 to Gooden & Fox); [Gooden & Fox, London, from 1926]; [?Scott & Fowles, New York]; Jesse Isidor Straus, New York (by 1930–d. 1936); Mrs. Jesse Isidor Straus (1936–d. 1970); Institute of Fine Arts, New York University (from 1970).
- Pinkerton 1978, pp. 45–46; Namier and Brooke 1964, vol. 2, p. 131. See also Pointon 1993, pp. 58–59, 70–72, 250n88; Wark 1993, pp. 154–55; Peltz 2004, pp. 1–3, 14–17; and Peltz 2007, pp. 36–46.
- Wark 1993. Bull's extra-illustrated copy of Granger now belongs to the Huntington Library, San Marino, California.
- See Peltz 2007, pp. 42, 48n62, and Pinkerton 1978, p. 58, no. 23. Bull's fourteen-volume "grangerized" *Anecdotes of Painting* was broken up (it was sold at Sotheby's, London, in 1880; see sale, Sotheby's, London, February 9, 1973, under lot 1).
- Both Walpole's and Bull's extra-illustrated *Strawberry Hill* catalogues are at the Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University. See Peltz 1996 and Mack 2009, pp. 107–15, 280, no. 20, figs. 20, 133.
- On Devis, see principally Sartin 1983 and D'Oench 1980.
- Peter Thornton (2000, p. 120) suggests that the frame is drawn from William De La Cour's *Fifth Book, of Ornaments Useful for All Manner of Furniture and All Other Things* (1743), the publication of which was timely, but Devis's design is much looser.
- Dashwood belonged to an Oxfordshire family, and his wife was heir to property in Stanford, Nottinghamshire.

- The basket can also be seen on a similar tea table in Devis's portrait of Lucy Watson (Sartin 1983, p. 51, no. 24, fig. 24).
- Sale, Christie's, London, June 8, 2006, lot 5, color ill. The sitters are unidentified and the painting is undated.
- On this, and on the development and broader implications of Georgian interior design, see Saumarez Smith 1993 and Retford 2007.
- Ellen D'Oench (1980, pp. 52–53, no. 18, fig. 18) catalogues a portrait that bears on the reverse a typewritten label dating not earlier than the mid-nineteenth century that identifies the sitter as Richard Bull. She finds "some resemblance" to the sitter here. The identification seems improbable to me.
- The signature, in white, can be read only with the aid of a microscope. The picture is in very good state, with wear in the most thinly painted passages. There are numerous adjustments to the contours, where the ground color shows through, especially along the chimneypiece to the right and around Mary Bull's cap and the toes of Richard Bull's shoes. The figures and the carpet are more heavily impasted. I examined the work with Dorothy Mahon, Paintings Conservator, MMA, and I thank her for her helpful comments.

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