



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: ARLENE LEIS

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“Ladys and Virtusae” in the portrait print collection of Samuel Pepys’

Circa 1689, soon after his retirement from the Admiralty, Samuel Pepys began arranging and cataloguing his extensive paper collections into cabinets and portfolios. Pepys predominately accumulated books and manuscripts, but his collection also consists of ballads, music, maps, trade cards, frontispieces, and numerous prints and drawings, including portrait prints. Pepys was precise about the systemization of his collections. His portrait prints were carefully divided into three separate volumes, and each volume contained ‘classes’ that were labelled into subjects; altogether there were a total of 14 classes over three volumes. In volume two, Pepys follows the subject heading ‘Gentleman, Virtuosi, Men of Letters and Merchants’ with a more unusual descriptor: ‘Ladys and Virtusae’. How were virtusae defined in seventeenth-century England? Much contemporaneous literature exists about the virtuoso in this period, the figure of a well-rounded gentleman inspired by Castiglione’s *Courtier* and popularized by Henry Peacham’s *The Compleat Gentleman* in 1634. Recent scholarship more specifically defines the English virtuoso as a polymath with an appreciation for the arts, solid education in the classics, and curiosity about the natural world. Often, virtuosi amassed extensive cabinets, including natural and artificialia. The word for the female virtuoso (‘virtuosa’) and its plural (‘virtusae’) are not found in English sources of this time, nor does the concept appear to have been adopted into the English context from Italian renaissance texts. Was there a female counterpart to the virtuoso in seventeenth-century England, or was this Pepys’s own term? If so, how did he define a virtuosa? This paper will consider whether Pepys defined the virtuosa according to the same attributes as her male counterpart or whether these women shared characteristics that suggest other unique criteria.