



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

ABSTRACT: SARAH MOULDEN

Sarah Moulden (University of East Anglia)

‘Turning turk: Andrea Soldi’s portraits of Levant Company merchants, c.1730-36’

In 1736, the portraitist Andrea Soldi arrived in England from Aleppo as part of a retinue of several ‘Turkey merchants’. Apprentice-members of the English Levant Company, these young merchants had been based in Syria's largest city for several years, where they learnt to trade English broadcloth for Levantine silk and partook of the group identity established for Company employees. Located within the large commercial souk in the centre of Aleppo, these merchants formed a significant patronage base for Soldi during his travels in the Mediterranean.

This paper will discuss Soldi’s portraits of these sitters as innovative pictorial constructions – in their compositions, poses and sartorial character – of the Levant Company merchant’s ideal identity. These images will therefore be situated within the context of their sitters’ lives in Aleppo and the strategies and skills these noviciates were expected to have acquired before returning to their mercantile families in England. As such, Soldi's images will be considered as examples of a highly purposeful cross-dressing in which the trappings of another culture were marshalled less in the interests of masquerade or generalised cultural oppression than towards the articulation of a specific professional and mercantile identity.