



HISTORIES OF BRITISH ART

1660-1735 RECONSTRUCTION AND TRANSFORMATION

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'Connoisseurial Conversations: Gawen Hamilton's *Sir James Thornhill Showing his Poussin to his Friends*'.

A key development towards the end of the period covered by the 'Court, Country, City' project was the establishment of the conversation piece. As David Solkin has shown, this new form of modestly scaled portraiture, with its emphasis on elaborated settings and narrative devices, originated in 'a stuttering sequence of false starts and dead ends' in the 1710s and 1720s, but achieved its fully fledged heyday in the 1730s.

On a number of occasions, the term 'conversation piece' has been conflated with 'family piece', but, from the outset, a good number of these 'pictures in little' featured groups of friends, often homosocial gatherings, frequently focused on some artistic and/or connoisseurial activity. Early examples led both to Grand Tour 'conversations' by Nathaniel Dance, and institutional Groups in the idiom, such as Zoffany's 'Royal Academicians'. In this paper, I will focus on two works by Gawen Hamilton: the National Portrait Gallery's 'A Conversation of Virtuosis..at the King's Arms' (1735) and, more particularly, 'Sir James Thornhill showing his Poussin to his Friends' (pre 1734). This latter picture was presumably commissioned by Thornhill himself, and it shows him proudly displaying the 'Tancred and Erminia' which he had purchased in France in 1717. One of the interested parties depicted by Hamilton is probably Jonathan Richardson sr, who had commemorated and celebrated his friend's acquisition with a lengthy discussion of the Poussin, its formal qualities and its relationship to Tasso's story, in his 'Essay on the Whole Art of Criticism' (1719). Concentrating on this related painting and text, the paper will explore the role and significance of 'conversation' in the conduct of connoisseurship and, from there, the role and significance of 'conversation' in the 'conversation piece'.