

James Bowdoin III's Collection in Context: On Historical Roots and Their Legacies

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Destined by the accident of birth to live through the American Revolution during the early years of his adulthood, James Bowdoin was born into one world and matured in another. This transition from a political and intellectual order initially governed by aristocratic ideals to one favoring democratic principles, as exemplified by Bowdoin's remarkable decision to bequeath his substantial art collection to the institution with which he had endowed his family fortune and his family name, raises complex questions. Important work by Susan Wegner and Richard Saunders has already explored the influence on Bowdoin of his residence in post-revolutionary France during his tenure as Minister Plenipotentiary to Spain in 1805.¹ However, little attention has yet been focused on Bowdoin's formative exposure to British social and intellectual culture and its importance in shaping his values and practices as a collector of fine art.

This essay, then, will explore the impact of time spent by Bowdoin during his youth in England. While at university and on his Grand Tour, he spent time in circles that were grounded in the culture of aristocracy and country house living in Britain, and he was influenced by their

of the public or academic museum was fully formed in the public consciousness, it would become the nucleus of the Bowdoin College Museum of Art. But Bowdoin's decision to bequeath his collection to the College that bore his family name also represented a performance of his elite status and a way to cement his legacy as a member of one of New England's most affluent families. Bowdoin's generous bequest to Bowdoin College reinforced, even as it sought to expand, the culture of privilege that it represented, setting into play important questions about access and serving the "common good" that continue to resonate today.

James Bowdoin III was born in Boston, Massachusetts in 1752 to a prominent political family (FIGURE 1). His father, James Bowdoin II, would go on to be a leader in the American Revolution, the governor of Massachusetts, and a founder of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, among many other accomplishments and offices. Young James Bowdoin III would live a life seemingly more inclined toward pleasure than toward serious study. He was raised in a grand house in Boston furnished in a "princely manner."² He abandoned his studies at Harvard after two years in 1769, due to poor health. He sailed to London and began to study law at Christ Church, Oxford, in June 1771, but by November had left Oxford for the King's Riding School.³ He wrote to his father of the shift, "I have just begun to learn French, likewise Dancing and Fencing, all which I expect to be perfect master of before my return."⁴ His father was not altogether pleased with his choice of an aristocratic education, and brought him home in April 1772. The next year, Bowdoin departed for his Grand Tour, accompanied by Ward Nich³ (e)⁴ bRnO(he)⁴ (d i)-2

Europe, and distinguished him from many of his American peers. In her essay on James Bowdoin's drawings, Sarah Cantor parses through Bowdoin's journey in detail. As she explains, over the course of his two year journey, Bowdoin visited Naples, Pompeii, Herculaneum, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Lyons, England, and likely other towns and cities along the way. While in Naples, Bowdoin became acquainted with Sir William Hamilton, the British ambassador to Naples and one of the most widely known and celebrated British collectors of antiquities (FIGURE 2).⁵ This relationship suggests that Bowdoin would have likely interacted with many of the most prominent British collectors and traveling aristocrats of his time.

After his Grand Tour, Bowdoin spent nearly a year, from the late fall of 1774 through the late summer of 1775, in England. His sister, Lady Elizabeth Temple, lived there with her

few decades, and created a true golden age of collecting, particularly of antiquities purchased (or stolen) from the Mediterranean region. This golden age created an intellectual community among the elite, but did not trickle down into the masses.¹¹ As Iain Pears writes of British aristocrats or oligarchs at this moment, “they increasingly saw themselves as the cultural, social, and political core of the nation, ‘citizens’ in the Greek sense with the other ranks of society scarcely figuring in their understanding of the ‘nation.’”¹²

At the same time, elite society also experienced a shift in discourse and understanding of a sense of the public. Jürgen Habermas proposes the introduction of the concept of the “public sphere” in the eighteenth century, particularly in England. Habermas conceives of the public sphere as characteristic of a historical epoch in which a public discourse began to broadly exist. In it, class and identity distinctions are set aside and educated individuals are able to converse on universally concerning topics, specifically through a focus on literature. This sphere exists within capitalist and democratic or democratizing states, and is a construction that was utilized by the “educated strata” as a tool of control of the state.¹³

decapitation in 1649. Aristocrats, as a class, maintained their power and art collections through the political turmoil of the monarchy through the centuries. The National Gallery in London, the first national art gallery in Britain, was not founded until 1824, and even then it did not have a royal collection as its founding collection. Aristocrats ruled England and its private art collections in the eighteenth century, and they had little interest in republican values or a central national identity. For them, “art collections were prominent artifacts in a ritual that marked the boundary between polite and vulgar society, which is to say, the boundary of legitimated power.”¹⁸ Thus the culture surrounding art collecting among the British landed classes was as much if not more performative than it was educational or for personal pleasure. Thus the uncertain distinction between these high brow collections and emerging public collections became more pronounced through the nineteenth century.

In the American colonies and early United States, the concept of a public museum as we think of it today was in its infancy, when it was articulated at all. Wealthy men, like James Bowdoin, or more famously, Thomas Jefferson, amassed impressive collections of art in their estates, and artists displayed their own work to the public, but these rarely translated into museums. Around the country in the second half of the eighteenth century, there were many spaces that were called museums, but these functioned mostly as sensations and entertainment spaces, often hosting performances as well as featuring art and natural history objects.¹⁹ One early museum, the Philadelphia Museum, was started by Charles Willson Peale in 1786. It began as a space for Peale to display his own paintings of military and political leaders, in the tradition of a hall of worthies, and evolved into a space of entertainment and spectacle that focused on

¹⁸ Duncan, *Civilizing Rituals*, 38.

¹⁹ Edward P. Alexander, *Museum Masters: Their Museums and Their Influence* (Nashville, TN: The American Association for State and Local History, 1983), 65-65.

collection at Chatsworth are excellent examples of the remarkable collections of Italian drawings being amassed in the eighteenth century.²²

At least four works in the collection are closely related to or copies of works in British country house collections, and are worth examining as points of comparison. The first of these is *A Pope in Michelangelo's Studio*, by Pietro Antonio de Pietri (1811.22) (FIGURE 5). This work corresponds with an almost identical sketch located at Holkham Hall.²³ These drawings are thought to be related to a painting, but according to Holkham, no such painting is known. The Bowdoin drawing is less finished than that at Holkham, and features a verso image that is a design for ceiling decoration. The recto image depicts Michelangelo kneeling before Pope Julius II, with his own statue of *Moses* in the background.²⁴ This statue was intended for the pope's tomb, and creates an interesting reflection on mortality. Despite the sketchiness of the drawing, the figures are recognizable and distinct, and carefully placed. The Museum and Holkham both date these drawings to between 1663 and 1716. Another Bowdoin drawing is also related to a work at Holkham, though this time to a painting. *Landscape with Washwomen*, a copy of a Jan Frans van Bloemen work executed between 1662-1749, is likely a preliminary sketch for a painting at Holkham (FIGURE 6). No catalogue currently exists of the paintings at Holkham, but it is known that there are six by van Bloemen.²⁵

²² See the *Catalogue of Italian Drawings at Windsor Castle* by AE Popham and Johannes Wilde and *Drawings by Leonardo Da Vinci at Windsor Castle* by Kenneth Clarke; see also Michael Jaffé's four volume catalogue of the *Devonshire Collection of Italian Drawings*.

²³ Number 200 in A.E. Popham, *Old Master Drawings at Holkham Hall*, ed. Christopher Lloyd (n.p.: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 89. (*Michelangelo Kneeling before Pope Julius II*, by Pietro de'Pietri)

²⁴ *Ibid.*

²⁵ Object file, 1811.66, Bowdoin College Museum of Art. Art Collections of Holkham Hall, Wikipedia, see bibliography.

Bowdoin's most famous drawing, to this day, remains *Alpine Landscape (View of Waltensburg)*, formerly attributed to Pieter Bruegel the Elder, and since 1991 attributed to the Master of the Mountain Landscapes (FIGURE 7). This drawing is considered part of the "alpine suite." Other

Robert Walpole and hung at Houghton Hall, and then at Strawberry Hill.²⁷ Bowdoin's many

choice. James Bowdoin III was a New World aristocrat without issue who had spent his life in environments defined by semi-private, semi-public hereditary institutions. The country houses and ancient families with whom he fraternized in Europe lived within an ancient system of inheritance and legacy. Within this aristocratic world

Oxford college had a picture collection at this time, and Bowdoin's exposure to this excellent collection likely demonstrated to him the possibilities of an art collection in an educational institution. When Bowdoin left his collection to the college, he created a legacy of wealth and culture for himself, and he helped create an environment for cultivating the future leaders of a republic. As an institution founded to educate the young elite of Maine as a ruling class, Bowdoin College, like Christ Church, was more than a performance of wealth, though still an institution that catered to men of privilege. Bowdoin's decision to bequeath his collection and library to the college set a precedent for American institutions of higher education, and also set a precedent for the gentlemanly or upper class values and behaviors that became expected at elite institutions like Bowdoin College. As the 1817 laws of Bowdoin College stated, "it is incumbent on every Student to be not only a *Christian* and a *scholar*, but a *gentleman*."³³

Steeped through his education as well as through bonds of family and friendship in the aristocratic culture of Europe, particularly Britain, James Bowdoin III operated within a social and intellectual sphere premised upon inherited wealth, intellectual ideals, and traditions. He acquired works that reflected these values, forming the corpus of work he would bequeath to the College that bears his family name. What might the implication of this backdrop to the formation of his collection be today? While the importance of positioning fine art in a liberal arts education is rightly celebrated, the class-based structure that defined James Bowdoin's own upbringing and education and, hence, his proclivity for collecting art, has been under-examined. Without diminishing the generosity reflected by his bequest of his holdings to Bowdoin, it is worth considering how this body of art may embody questions concerning the relationship between privilege and pursuit of knowledge that remain as relevant today as they were in the eighteenth

³³ Laws of Bowdoin College, 1817, p. 19. George J. Mitchell Special Collections.

century. How might further engagement with this collection, informed by the circumstances behind its development, enable us to develop even more effective tools and critical frameworks for examining persistent concerns regarding status and access? Perhaps it is precisely questions such as these that will continue to ensure the collection remains as meaningful today and in the future as it was over two centuries ago for Bowdoin himself, who, by donating these works to an institution of higher learning, ensured that they would stimulate lively and engaged discussion for many generations to come.

FIGURES



Figure 1. Unknown Artist. *Portrait of James Bowdoin III*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1770-75.

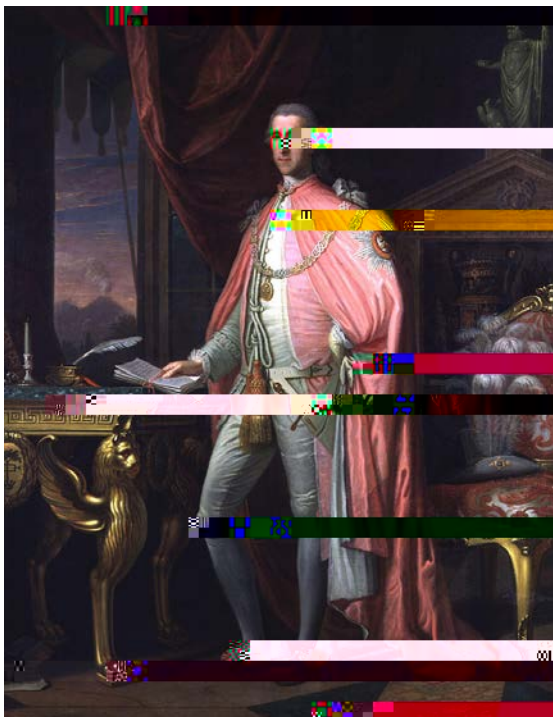


Figure 2. David Allan. *Sir William Hamilton*. Oil on canvas, 1775. National Gallery, London.

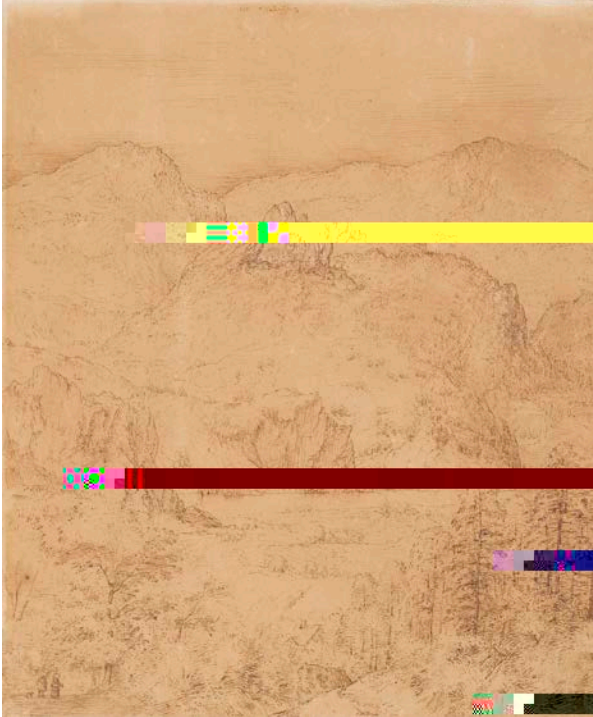


Figure 7. Master of the Mountain Landscapes. *Alpine Landscape (View of Waltensburg)*. Pen and brown ink on paper, 1580-1630.



Figure 8. Attributed to John Smibert. *The Continnence of Scipio*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1719-1722.



Figure 9. Possibly John G. Brown. *Bowdoin College Campus*. Oil on canvas, ca. 1823.