

The Shudi Family

The Conversation Piece

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Burkat Shudi (1702–73), a young craftsman, emigrated to London from Switzerland aged sixteen and was apprenticed to a harpsichord maker. In 1728, when setting up his own workshop, Shudi married Catherine Wild (1704–58?). She was the daughter of a timber merchant, who had also moved to London from the same Swiss province as Shudi. The couple are shown in this portrait with their two sons: six-year-old Joshua and Burkat, aged five, teasing the family tabby.

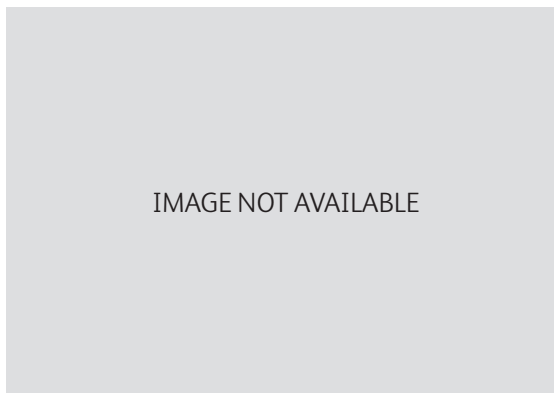
Another child, Barbara, was born after this portrait was painted when Shudi was firmly established as Britain's leading harpsichord maker. She went on to marry her father's employee, John Broadwood, in 1769. After Shudi's death the firm passed to Barbara and John. Broadwoods remain a leading name in piano manufacture to this day.

The Shudi Family

by Marcus Tuscher, c.1742

NPG 5776

Patronage and Prestige



The Shudi Family was probably painted in 1742 to celebrate Shudi's recent business successes. It shows him tuning an ornate harpsichord in the front-room of his fashionable new Soho town-house. On the wall a pair of mezzotint prints of Frederick, Prince of Wales and his wife Augusta, reveal the identity of Shudi's most important clients. This elegant double-keyboard harpsichord, now at Kew Palace, is the one Shudi made for the Prince in 1740. Given that Shudi's business sign outside his house was 'Ye Plume of Feathers' – the Prince of Wales's crest – we can see what powerful publicity such royal patronage provided.

Two-manual Harpsichord

by Burkat Shudi, 1740

The Royal Collection © 2006. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Domestic Life



The portrait may also mark a key family event. Jakob Wild, Catherine's father, died in 1741 leaving his money to the Shudis. The document that Catherine holds is thought to be a copy of his will. This is just one of the props that tells us about the family's 'middling' status, which we might now call 'middle class'. While their possessions are fashionable they are moderate rather than flashy. Although Catherine's silk dress is the latest style she wears it with a more traditional linen morning cap. Five-year-old Burkat wears a 'breeches dress' of fine red wool, a costume little boys wore before they were put into trousers. The furniture and china indicate their taste for exotic and fashionable drinks like tea and chocolate which had just been introduced from abroad.

The Shudi Family (detail)

by Marcus Tuscher, c.1742

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The 'Middling Sort'

After a financial crash in 1720, Britain entered a long period of economic and political stability. With prosperity came increased social mobility and the rise of a new 'middling sort' – provincial gentry, urban entrepreneurs and wealthy merchants. Confident and moneyed, this 'middling sort' was keen to commission paintings and was attracted to a new style – the conversation piece – with which they could identify. Described at the time as 'pictures in little', conversation pieces tended to be modest in size and scale, suited to hanging in town houses rather than vast country mansions.

The Importance of Conversation

Conversation – the exchange of ideas between people, whatever their social standing or connections – was at the heart of the eighteenth-century concept of civilized behaviour. In an age that saw the growth of newspapers, the birth of the novel and the rise of English art, conversation placed culture centre stage and was viewed as a means of spreading social refinement. This was reflected in portraiture where the conversation piece was all the rage. Consequently, these modest group pictures are just as likely to depict social gatherings as extended family groupings.

Meaningful Things



This conversation piece, painted by Francis Hayman in 1740, shows the entrepreneur Jonathan Tyers – who turned Vauxhall Gardens into London's favourite place of entertainment – with his family in a modest domestic interior. The painting is typical of the 'conversation piece' as it represents a family or group of friends engaged in informal activities: playing cards, drinking tea or making music. A fashionable setting, indoors or outdoors, and a fine array of props were also important. Artists paid special attention to the family's possessions – here porcelain tea things and fine furniture – to illustrate their taste and wealth. Relationships between people – indicated by composition and gesture – were also important, as these suggested relaxed confidence and family harmony.

Jonathan Tyers and his Family

by Francis Hayman, 1740

NPG 5588

A Conversation of Virtuosis



The engraver George Vertue, included here at the far left, called this painting a 'Conversation of Virtuosis that usually met at the Kings Armes, New Bond Street a noted tavern'. They were 'men of the highest Character in Arts & Gentlemen Lovers of Art'. As the exchanges between the figures suggest, a shared interest in art was what brought these professionals, amateurs and connoisseurs together.

This painting also shows how social life and patronage were influenced by political loyalties and professional interests. Most of the group were Catholics and Tory sympathisers, whose mutual concerns prompted this conversation piece. The Catholic artist Hamilton was paid by the sitters' collective subscription. The completed picture was raffled and won by the painter Joseph Goupy, who is standing near the middle of the back row wearing dark brown.

A Conversation of Virtuosis

by Gawan Hamilton, 1735

NPG 1384