

# The Talman Family

## Foreign Artists in England

### 'Small piece very curious'



People have been intrigued by this unusual allegorical conversation piece since the eighteenth century. When James West – an art lover and collector – visited the Talmans' house around 1733, he recorded seeing 'some drawing of... Mr Talman father and son with two ladies small piece very curious'. Unfortunately all of the people in the portrait had died by then, so there was no one to explain the symbolism of the painting.

#### The Talman Family

by Giuseppe Grisoni, c.1718–19

NPG 5781

### A Painting of Two Halves



After research, we believe that this picture shows the Gods blessing the marriage of John Talman (1677–1726), the collector and first director of the Society of Antiquaries, to Frances Cockayne in 1718. They are the younger couple depicted in the middle of the group. It also shows the second marriage of John's father, William Talman (c.1650–1719), the leading country house architect of the late seventeenth century. He married Hannah Piggott, standing at the far right, in 1717. These people are in the foreground – the space of mortals.

The background is the heavenly sphere where the Gods – Jupiter, Minerva, Hercules and Apollo – look down on the Talmans from billowing clouds. Mercury – messenger of the Gods – bridges the worldly and mythological zones to convey the Gods' blessing. He points up to the heavens and down to Cupid, who has come down to earth and holds a large serpent ring which symbolises eternity. The chain of communication is complete as Cupid makes eye-contact with John Talman.

### Objects of Interest

IMAGE NOT AVAILABLE

On the table in front of William Talman are architect's dividers and a scroll of paper that indicate his profession as an architect. But the most noteworthy objects on this table relate to the Talmans' collection of antiquities and the decorative arts. William Talman points to a statuette of the *Wrestlers*, the ancient Greek original of which was in Florence, and to other antiquarian objects seen by his son on his Italian tours. On one of these trips John Talman met the Italian artist Giuseppe Grisoni (1699–1769), whom he invited to return to England with him. Grisoni worked in England between 1715 and 1728. He painted *The Talman Family*, but few other portraits by him are known.

#### The Wrestlers

Copy of Greek sculpture, late 3rd century B.C.  
Marble

© Galleria degli Uffizi, Florence, Italy / The Bridgeman Art Library

# The Talman Family

## Baroque Influence from Abroad

### Continental Style



**The Talman Family**  
by Giuseppe Grisoni, c.1718–19  
NPG 5781

Giuseppe Grisoni's portrait of the Talman family is a strange combination of old and new styles. The foreground is like a conversation piece, which became fashionable in group portraiture from the 1730s. The background, however, with its allegorical subtext and mythological characters, is typically baroque – a continental style that was rarely used in British portraits in the eighteenth century.

### The Baroque



**The Taylor Family**  
by John Closterman,  
1696?  
NPG 5320

The word 'baroque' probably comes from a Portuguese term for a misshapen pearl and originally meant 'irregular or grotesque'. It has come to signify the main architectural and artistic style of the seventeenth century. It originated in Rome in the 1620s and, as a result of the flow of people and prints from Italy, the style quickly spread all over Europe. John Closterman's portrait *The Family of John Taylor of Bifrons* (1696?), in the Saloon, shows what 'baroque' can mean in painting – opulent colours, a strong sense of movement and the use of dramatic or allegorical themes.

### Foreign Competition

**The Apotheosis of Charles II**  
by Antonio Verrio, 1674–5?  
The Royal Collection © 2006,  
Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

IMAGE NOT AVAILABLE

In the early eighteenth century the mansions of the rich still had ceilings and walls decorated with vast baroque murals like this *Apotheosis of Charles II* (1674–5?) at Hampton Court. Lacking the training or experience to undertake large-scale decorative schemes, two generations of British painters watched grudgingly as the Italian Antonio Verrio (c.1639–1707) was hired to work at Windsor Castle and Hampton Court, the Frenchman Louis Laguerre (1663–1721) worked at Chatsworth and Blenheim, and other foreigners seduced patrons with their continental glamour.



**Sir James Thornhill**  
(1675–1734)  
by Sir James Thornhill,  
c.1710–25  
NPG 5339

The lack of support for home-grown talent angered many of Britain's artists. In 1715, Sir James Thornhill began to redress the balance when, with patriotic determination, he won the prestigious commission to decorate the dome of St Paul's Cathedral in London. In this self-portrait, which hangs upstairs, Thornhill celebrated his success by employing a baroque device – the female 'Allegory of Painting' – to assert his own superiority as an artist.