

Turning Heads

A Pantheon of Worthies

IMAGE NOT AVAILABLE

The portrait bust was rarely an intimate art form. As the poet Lord Byron observed, ‘a bust ... smacks something of a hankering for public fame rather than private remembrance.’ The public role of the portrait bust is underlined further by the custom of displaying several together in groups or ‘pantheons of worthies’. Libraries were among the most important settings for busts in the eighteenth century; here the physical presence of celebrated authors and thinkers was believed to encourage readers ‘to follow their track’. This was the uplifting idea behind the 1743 decision to furnish the Library at Trinity College, Dublin with a set of fourteen marble busts of ‘ancient and modern worthies’, including Homer and Plato, Shakespeare and Milton.

Trinity College Library, Dublin

By permission of the Board,
Trinity College, Dublin

Mass-Produced Celebrity Busts

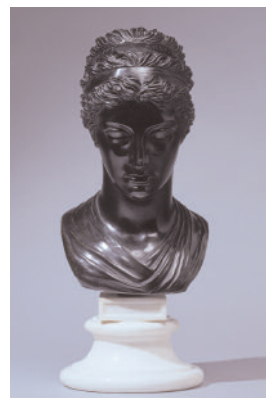


During the eighteenth century there was also a fashion for erecting private ‘temples’ of friendship or political allegiance. This was one reason why Joseph Nollekens had such success with busts of the rival politicians William Pitt and Charles James Fox in the late eighteenth century. This portrait shows him, with modelling tools in hand, working on the terracotta model of Fox. When Fox sat for his portrait, Nollekens explained that ‘while working in clay he could alter every part as it might be required but that could not be done in Marble; whatever was chipped off could not be restored.’ But Nollekens played very little part in the mass-production of his busts of this celebrity politician. After the clay sketch was completed, he put no more than the finishing touches to over thirty marble replicas and hundreds of plaster copies prepared by his studio assistants.

Joseph Nollekens (1737–1823)

by Lemuel Francis Abbott, c.1797
NPG 30

The Female Bust



Relatively few portrait busts of women were made during the eighteenth century. This is partly due to the limited opportunity women had to make a public mark at the time. Anne Seymour Damer (1749–1828) did make busts of her fellow women, often dressed in generalised Roman costume with classical hair-styles. This bronze portrait of the writer Mary Berry was cast using a wax mould made from a terracotta model that Damer presented to their mutual friend, the writer Horace Walpole.

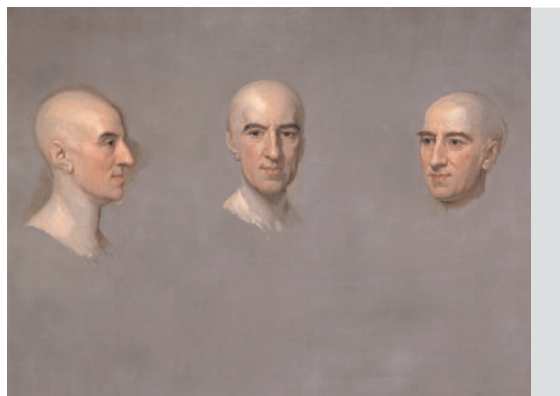
Mary Berry (1763–1852)

by Anne Seymour Damer, c.1793
Bronze
NPG 6395

Turning Heads

Men in Togas

Working for the 'Human Spark'



The portrait bust is one of the most common forms of sculpture, frequently found in public institutions, libraries and country houses. Despite being everywhere, the bust is now the most neglected type of portraiture. Kneller's painted study of Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham and 7th Earl of Winchilsea, which may have been made as a preparatory sketch for a sculptor, reminds us of the key challenge that busts present. A two-dimensional painting is easy to enjoy, using colour and shape to convey character and individuality. A monochrome portrait bust with blank eyes can feel rather unnerving. But if busts seem to lack what William Hogarth called 'the human spark', their three dimensionality makes them more physically lifelike – a fascinating fragment that lets us come face to face with the sitter.

Daniel Finch, 2nd Earl of Nottingham and 7th Earl of Winchilsea (1647–1730)

by Sir Godfrey Kneller, c.1720?

NPG 3910

The Rise of the Portrait Bust



In the first decades of the eighteenth century there was little demand for portraits sculpted from life; most sculptors were engaged in producing funeral monuments. From the 1720s, Rysbrack and Roubiliac – both immigrant artists – began to supply the new demand for portrait busts in marble, terracotta and plaster. By 1747, a directory of London trades could assert: 'The taste for Busts ... prevails much of late years, and in some measure interferes with Portrait Painting: The Nobility now affect to have their Busts ... rather than sit for their Pictures, and the Fashion is to have their Apartments adorned with Bronzes and Figures in Plaister and Wax.'

John Michael Rysbrack (1694–1770)

by John Vanderbank, c.1728

NPG 1802

Men in Togas



The majority of portrait busts were carved in marble or cast in bronze. The durability of these materials, and the association with ancient Roman busts, were central to the appeal of portrait sculpture. With an increasing number of people making the Grand Tour to Italy, came a rise in the taste for portrait busts. This marble of the First Earl of Egmont (1707) (Ground Floor, Great Staircase), showing the sitter in Roman tunic and military breast-plate, was commissioned in Rome during the final year of his Grand Tour. Along with the 'Three Men in Togas' this reflects the early eighteenth-century view that Britain was heir to classical civilisation, especially in politics and literature.

John Perceval, 1st Earl of Egmont

(1683–1748)

by Vincenzo Felici, 1707

Marble

NPG 1956