

Positions of power

Portraiture | After his death in 1789, the work of an eminent painter of the aristocracy had slipped from the spotlight – until now. By *Rachel Spence*

Liotard's likenesses were as exact as possible, and too like . . . Freckles, marks of the small-pox, every thing found its place . . . Truth prevailed in all his works, grace in very few."

Horace Walpole, man of letters and an assiduous art collector, had these reservations about Jean-Etienne Liotard but that did not stop the Geneva-born painter from becoming one of the most fashionable portraitists in Europe, with patrons who included leading intellectuals and the British, French and Austrian royal families. His cosmopolitan network of clients acts as a visual diary of the Age of Enlightenment at its most glamorous and exotic.

So why, after his death in 1789, did Liotard slip out of the spotlight? As a portrait painter, many of his best works have remained in private collections and out of the public eye. Secondly, he was a nomad. Born in 1702, he travelled through Paris, Constantinople, Moldavia, Vienna and London before returning to his Swiss homeland just a few years before his death. As a result, although he has been the subject of exhibitions – in Zurich (1978), Paris (1985), Geneva (2002) and New York (2006) – no country has taken it upon itself to celebrate him as a national treasure. Now, however, Liotard is the subject of an exhibition at the Scottish National Gallery that will go on to London's Royal Academy in the autumn. Between them the shows should win him the acclaim he deserves.

The Edinburgh exhibition opens with a room devoted to self-portraits and paintings of his immediate family. It's a wise move, for one of Liotard's strengths was in creating a mood of intimacy between artist and sitter. Nowhere is this clearer than in his 1775 painting of his little daughter Marie-Anne. Holding one finger up to silence her Papa lest he wake up the doll sleeping in her arms, the blue-eyed charmer gazes sideways with heart-melting candour.

The painting demonstrates the gift for painting textiles that made Liotard renowned in his era. A lustrous white sheen echoes through Marie-Anne's

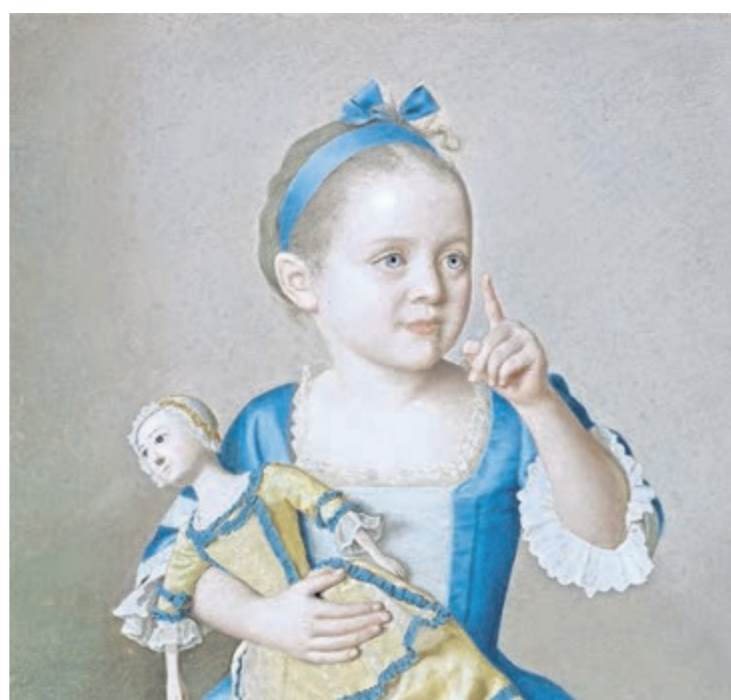


cobalt gown, her matching hair-ribbon and the light in her crystalline eyes. Deep shadows flicker in the white ruffles of her sleeve; a watery gleam slides over the yellow silk dress of her doll.

This skill in depicting fabric was honed during Liotard's years in the Orient. He arrived in Constantinople in 1738 after a chance meeting in a coffee shop in Rome with two British aristocrats, William Ponsonby, later Lord Bessborough, and John Montagu, the Earl of Sandwich, both of whom were on the Grand Tour.

Apparently, the pair admired Liotard's miniature of the Venus de Medici. Liotard, who originally trained as an enamellist in Geneva, had learnt the technique of painting miniatures during his apprenticeship in Paris with Jean-Baptiste Massé. While in the French capital, he had tried to set himself up as an oil painter but when a work was rejected by the Royal Academy in 1735, he turned to pastel. The medium was winning favour in France because of its soft yet radiant luminosity. But it also had many detractors. One French connoisseur dismissed Liotard's colours as "dry and laborious [. . .] tending to that of gingerbread".

For a painter struggling to establish himself, the opportunity to discover a new world was precious. Liotard was to spend four years in Constantinople and



Clockwise from main picture: 'Laura Tarsi, "a Grecian lady"' (1745-49); 'Marie-Anne Françoise Liotard with a Doll' (c1744); the self-portrait 'Liotard Laughing' (c1770)

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge; Schönbrunn Palace, Vienna; Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva

Their pale complexions exposed against empty backgrounds, his high-born sitters have a vulnerability

the works he made there laid the ground for his mature style. A series of black-and-red chalk drawings – including one of British ambassador Everard Fawkener in Turkish dress and slippers, and another of a maid serving tea to her mistress as she reclines on a divan – shows how impeccably he could evoke every shade and line of the intricate contrasting patterns that made up eastern dress and design.

In Constantinople, many westerners adopted the native costumes. In Edinburgh, a bust-length 1738 portrait of James Nelthorpe shows the young man in an extravagant white-and-scarlet turban and robe lavishly trimmed with black fur. Rippling through furrows of darkness and ridges of shimmering colour, this tour de force of stroke-making testifies to how effortlessly pastel can lend itself to opulent surfaces.

Back in Europe in 1743, Liotard rapidly established a clientele among the royal courts of Austria, France and Britain. Unlike other pastellists who preferred a feathery fluidity, Liotard would

compress his crayons in order to intensify the hard brilliance of his surfaces. That, allied to his remarkable cleverness at blending skin tones, allowed him to conjure faces as subtly as if he were using oil. Their pale complexions exposed against empty mushroom-brown backgrounds, his high-born sitters possess a vulnerability quite missing in portraits by, say, Joshua Reynolds, who gave his noble clients a veneer of distant self-confidence and posed them against grandiose backdrops.

His genius for conveying corporeal frailty suggests that the painter had somehow intuited the fate of many of his models. The daughter of the Prince and Princess of Wales, for example, Princess Louisa Anne, who was the subject of a particularly ethereal likeness, would die of tuberculosis at the age of 19. And of the young Austrian archduchesses captured in a series of delicate chalk drawings by Liotard in the 1760s, Maria Josepha died of smallpox, the same illness disfigured Maria Elizabeth, Maria Anna had a spinal defect and Marie Antoinette – who gazes out at us with arch self-possession – ended up at the guillotine.

Unlike his sickly royal patrons, Liotard's more worldly sitters enjoy a joie de vivre that probably mirrored the artist's own. On his return from the east, Liotard had maintained his taste for the local costume. In his 1753 enamel "Self-Portrait in Profile", he depicts himself in a crimson silk cap and gown with a long grey beard, each wisp perfectly delineated, like an Ottoman sage. His appearance didn't always win favour. In London, where Liotard was known as "The Turk", Reynolds derided him as the "essence of imposture".

The decision to dress à la turque chimed with western Europe's growing orientalism. In an age where old certainties – religious, scientific, political, social – were crumbling, it was a sign of status to have travelled widely. Rightly assuming that his more Bohemian clients would enjoy a little cross-cultural role-play, Liotard brought back trunkfuls of clothes from his travels. One of the highlights of this exhibition is his 1755 portrait of Lady Anne Somerset, the wife of the Earl of Northampton who would become ambassador extraordinary to Venice. Though she would ultimately also fall victim to tuberculosis, in her low-cut embroidered Turkish dress, its lace décolleté provocatively close to revealing her nipple, with her long, russet curls falling over one shoulder, she looks the picture of sensuous, enlightened womanhood.

In the 1780s, settled for good in his native Switzerland, Liotard turned his attention to still life. Painted in 1786, the variegated skins of a basket of apples shift and glow through a kaleidoscope of hues – leaf, lemony-green, white, copper – against a shadowy background with a subtlety of which Chardin would be proud. Whether painting apples or princesses, Liotard saw clearly but he never painted cruelly. It's a joy to make his acquaintance at last.

'Jean-Etienne Liotard', Scottish National Gallery, Edinburgh, to September 13. nationalgalleries.org