

**JEAN-ÉTIENNE LIOTARD**  
1702–1789

**WILLIAM PONSONBY, 2<sup>ND</sup> EARL OF BESSBOROUGH**

Pastel on vellum  
24  $\frac{3}{8}$  x 19  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches; 620 x 495 mm  
Drawn 1754  
In the original frame



- Collections: Commissioned by the sitter;  
Princess Amelia (1711-1786), a gift from the sitter;  
William Henry Cavendish Bentinck, 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Portland, bequeathed by the above, 1786 (inscribed on a label on the original backboard, now lost: *When H.R.H. The Princess Amelia Dyes, this Picture is to be given to the Duke of Portland*);  
By descent at Welbeck Abbey to 2017.
- Literature: Charles Fairfax Murray, *Catalogue of the pictures belonging to His Grace The Duke of Portland, at Welbeck Abbey, and in London*, 1894, no. 366;  
Edouard Humbert, Alphonse Revilliod, Jan Willem Tilanus, *La Vie et les Oeuvres de Jean Étienne Liotard*, Amsterdam, 1897, no. 27;  
François Fosca, *Liotard*, Paris, 1928, p.151;  
Numa Trivias, unpublished ms. monograph and catalogue of Liotard's works, 1936, Musée d'art et d'histoire, Geneva no 78a;  
Richard W. Goulding and C.K. Adams, *Catalogue of the Pictures Belonging to His Grace the Duke of Portland, K.G. at Welbeck Abbey, 17 Hill Street, London, and Langwell House*, 1936, no. 366;  
Renée Loche and Marcel Roethlisberger, *L'opera completa di Liotard*, Milan, 1978, no. 169, repr.;  
Renée Loche and Marcel Roethlisberger, *Liotard, Catalogue Sources et Correspondence*, Doornspijk, 2008, vol. I, pp. 446-447, no. 274, vol. II, fig. 406.

This powerful portrait was made by Jean-Étienne Liotard whilst he was in London in 1754, it depicts Liotard's most significant British client, the collector and politician, William Ponsonby, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bessborough. Conceived in a distinctive, classical style, Liotard shows Bessborough in profile wearing a toga, perhaps as an allusion to his activities as a major collector of antiquities and antique gems. Apparently commissioned by Bessborough who gave it to Princess Amelia, daughter of George II; she in turn left it to William Henry Cavendish Bentinck, 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Portland. It has remained at Welbeck Abbey ever since. Executed in pastel on vellum, this portrait is one of the most striking and remarkable produced by Liotard during his first visit to London. Its unusual conception points to the intimacy between the artist and sitter and raises important questions about Liotard's portrait practice during the 1750s.

An advertisement appeared in a London newspaper in March 1753 announcing that:

'This Week a Turkish Gentleman, lately arrived here, who is very eminent in Portrait Painting, and known to Sir Everard Faulkner [sic.] in Turkey, was introduced to his Royal Highness the Duke of Cumberland, and very graciously received. This gentleman is dressed in the Habit of his Country, and remarkable by his Beard being long, curiously shaped and curled.'<sup>1</sup>

The 'Turkish Gentleman' was in fact Liotard, who had adopted Turkish costume and grown a beard following four years spent in Constantinople. Liotard had visited Turkey first in the company of Bessborough and John Montagu, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Sandwich whom he had met in Italy in 1738. Liotard's adoption of beard and Turkish costume had become a powerful advertising gimmick and resulted in productive and financial successful stints in Moldavia and Vienna, where he worked for the Empress Maria Theresa. It has long been assumed that it was Bessborough who persuaded Liotard to visit London in 1753, although it now seems likely to have been Sir Everard Fawkener who had become secretary to the Duke of Cumberland on his return from Constantinople.

In London Liotard renewed his friendship with Bessborough. In 1739 Bessborough – then Viscount Duncannon – had married Lady Caroline Cavendish, eldest daughter of the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke of Devonshire. Devonshire was Lord Lieutenant of Ireland and his son-in-law acted as his advisor. With an Irish peerage and Irish estates, Bessborough was initially active principally in Irish politics but from 1742 he was MP for Derby and through Devonshire attained a series of key political appointments: commissioner of the Admiralty and admiral of Munster, Lord of the Treasury and from 1758, following his father's death, joint postmaster-general. Bessborough combined politics with artistic patronage assembling a large and notable collection of antiquities and antique gems.

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<sup>1</sup> *Old England's Journal*, 31 March, 1753, quoted in: William Hauptman, 'British Royal and Society Portraits', *Jean-Étienne Liotard*, exh. cat., London (Royal Academy of Arts), 2015, p.93, n.18.

It is in the dual context of Whig politics and collecting that Liotard's remarkable pastel portrait should be read. Bessborough's interest in antique gems possibly stemmed from his relationship with the Devonshires. The 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke's father, William Cavendish, 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Devonshire was a hugely celebrated collector of gems and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke showed evident interest in the collection.<sup>2</sup> Around 1754 Bessborough acquired sixty gems from Philip Dormer Stanhope, 4<sup>th</sup> Earl of Chesterfield, who had, in turn, been bequeathed them by his brother John Stanhope. This group contained some very considerable gems, including a remarkable intaglio depicting Sirius now in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.<sup>3</sup> At the same date Bessborough is recorded acquiring gems from the collections of the physician Richard Mead, including a large cameo of the head of Medusa (collection: National Museums, Liverpool) and George Montagu, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Halifax.<sup>4</sup> Bessborough had also become acquainted with the gem engraver and antiquarian Lorenz Natter who compiled a catalogue of both the Devonshire collection of gems at Chatsworth and Bessborough's collection, which was eventually published in 1761.<sup>5</sup> Bessborough sold his gems shortly afterwards to George Spencer, 4<sup>th</sup> Duke of Marlborough for the considerable sum of £5,000.

It was therefore natural for Liotard in 1759 to depict Bessborough in the guise of an antique cameo, shown bust-length in profile. At around the same date Liotard played a similar antiquarian game with his portrait of Sir Everard Fawkener, where, in a pastel portrait on vellum, dated 1754, he shows Fawkener in profile, as if carved in relief. But for the celebrated collector Bessborough, Liotard goes further, showing him in a toga, in conscious emulation of one of his own gems. This was a mode which contemporaries would readily have understood and appreciated. Indeed, Liotard may in fact have known a cameo portrait of Bessborough carved in around 1750 by Lorenz Natter, and now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York which shows Bessborough in precisely the same guise: wearing cropped hair, in a neo-Roman style.

The portrait suggests that Liotard had spent time with Bessborough's gems. He shows Bessborough's features carefully modulated in shadow, a sophisticated compositional device which recalls careful examination of a cameo. The relief of Bessborough's profile is also shown

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<sup>2</sup> The 3<sup>rd</sup> Duke commissioned Lorenz Natter to complete a catalogue of the gems at Chatsworth see Julia Kagan and Oleg Neverov, 'Lorenz Natter's Museum Britannicum': gem collecting in mid-Eighteenth-Century England' *Apollo*, vol.120, 1984, p.116.

<sup>3</sup> John Boardman, *The Marlborough Gems*, Oxford, 2009, cat.no.293, p.137.

<sup>4</sup> John Boardman, *The Marlborough Gems*, Oxford, 2009, cat.no.361, p.165.

<sup>5</sup> Julia Kagan and Oleg Neverov, 'Lorenz Natter's Museum Britannicum': gem collecting in mid-Eighteenth-Century England' *Apollo*, vol.120, 1984, pp.116-121.

casting a subtle shadow on the dark background, in precisely the way shadow falls on the ground stratum of a carved gem.

Bessborough was to go on to become Liotard's most important patron, acquiring more than seventy of his works during his lifetime, including the famous *Déjeuner Lavergne* of 1754 (Private collection) for which he paid the enormous sum of 200 guineas.<sup>6</sup> Amongst Bessborough's commissions was a portrait of Princess Amelia. The pastel portrait, which remains with Bessborough's descendants, was possibly conceived as a pendant to the present portrait. Princess Amelia is shown unconventionally in stark profile, with a rope of pearls threaded through her hair, a pose again suggestive of antique gems.<sup>7</sup> Bessborough was close to Princess Amelia, in 1762 he acted as her trustee in the purchase of the Gunnersbury estate and eventually acted as one of her executors when she died. It is not clear at what date Bessborough gave the present portrait to Princess Amelia, but it was evidently in her possession at her death in 1786.

Liotard remained in contact with Bessborough throughout his career. He produced a replica of his profile portrait of Bessborough, which he retained and which descended through his family, before entering the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam in 1873.<sup>8</sup> Executed on paper rather than vellum, the Rijksmuseum version is cruder and less subtle in its execution than the present portrait. A rare letter from Liotard to Bessborough preserved amongst the Bessborough family papers, gives an insight into their relationship. Liotard writes ostensibly to introduce another Genevan artist, M. Jurine, who he advertised as an expert at fixing pastels.<sup>9</sup> It is therefore likely that the present portrait was unfixed and Liotard relied on glazing to protect the surface. Indeed Bessborough's pastel is preserved in its original carved, English frame, a variation on a Carlo Maratta type, which Liotard seems to have preferred for portraits from his first British period.

An exceptional image of Liotard's outstanding patron, made during his highly productive first sojourn in London, this pastel is a remarkable survival. The portrait commemorates not only Liotard's most consistent supporter, but one of the most important collectors of antique gems

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<sup>6</sup> Renée Loche and Marcel Roethlisberger, *Liotard, Catalogue Sources et Correspondence*, Doornspijk, 2008, I. cat. no.299, pp.464-467.

<sup>7</sup> Renée Loche and Marcel Roethlisberger, *Liotard, Catalogue Sources et Correspondence*, Doornspijk, 2008, I. cat. no. 276, pp.447-448.

<sup>8</sup> Renée Loche and Marcel Roethlisberger, *Liotard, Catalogue Sources et Correspondence*, Doornspijk, 2008, cat. no.275, p.447.

<sup>9</sup> Jaynie Anderson, 'A Letter from Liotard to the 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bessborough in 1763', *The Burlington Magazine*, vol.136, no.1090, January 1994, pp.23-25.

in the middle of the eighteenth century. Conceptualised as a carved gem, Liotard's portrait of Bessborough can be viewed as remarkable piece of proto-neoclassicism.



Jean-Étienne Liotard  
*William Ponsonby, Viscount Duncannon,  
later 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bessborough, 1750-60*  
Pastel on paper  
23 7/8 x 18 7/8 inches; 600 x 480 mm  
Inscribed: 'Milord Besborough ami de & peint par Liotard'  
Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam, bequeathed by Miss Marie-Anne Liotard



Jean-Étienne Liotard  
*Sir Everard Fawkener, 1754*  
Pastel on vellum  
15 1/2 x 13 1/4 inches; 392 x 336 mm  
© Victoria and Albert Museum, London



Johann Lorenz Natter  
*William Ponsonby, Viscount Duncannon,*  
*future 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bessborough, 1750*  
 Onyx, mounted as a gold pendant  
 1 x 7/8 inches; 26 x 23 mm, overall  
 The Milton Weil Collection, 1939  
 © 2017 The Metropolitan Museum of Art/  
 Art Resource Scala, Florence



Jean-Étienne Liotard  
*Princess Amelia of Hanover, 1754*  
 Pastel on paper  
 24 1/2 x 21 inches; 622 x 534 mm  
 Stansted Park Foundation



John Singleton Copley  
*William Ponsonby, 2<sup>nd</sup> Earl of Bessborough*  
 Oil on canvas  
 23 1/4 x 19 1/4 inches; 591 x 489 mm  
 Signed and dated 1790  
 Harvard Art Museums/Fogg Museum,  
 Bequest of Grenville L. Winthrop, 1943.129  
 Photo: Imaging Department © President and Fellows of Harvard College