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IRISH PAINTER IN PORTUGAL -
THOMAS HICKEY'S STAY 1780 - 1783
by George Breeze

By 1760 the three Indian Presidencies of Calcutta, Madras and Bombay had, through trade, become flourishing British communities. Money seemed plentiful and extremes of climate and precariousness of life led to an imprudence and lavishness much more exaggerated than at home. Those who would have led quiet middle-class existences in England, lived ostentatiously in India. It was not surprising that artists of the second rank in Britain might hope that Fortune would be kinder to them there than in the overcrowded home markets, and might expect India to be a land of unlimited opportunity. America, which could also be regarded as a land of opportunity, would not have been a safe place to go at this time due to the battle for independence being waged there.

A letter from a Mr. Bruce of Calcutta, regarding the painter Catherine Read, who was in Madras in 1777, exemplifies the attraction of going out to India. He declares:

I am clear for her coming round to this Settlement immediately, where she will find such employment as she chuses, and of course, if not increase, prevent the diminution of her fortune. We have had one tolerable good painter here named (Tilly) Kettle, who acquired a good independency in three years. We have now another nam'd Paxton, but he is a very indifferent hand, and yet gets employment (1).

Thomas Hickey, born in Dublin, and trained there as a painter and draughtsman, had essayed his fortune first in London (1771-1776) and then in Bath (1777-1780) before deciding to go to India. He petitioned the Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company for permission to go and on 26 April 1780 the Court had the following Minute prepared:

a report from the Committee of Correspondence dated this day being read, (it is) ordered that Mr. Thomas Hickey be permitted

(1). Quoted in A.F. Stewart: "Miss Katherine Read, Court Paintress", in *Scottish Historical Review*, Part ii, Glasgow, 1905, pp. 38 - 46.

to proceed to the East Indies in order to provide for himself as a Portrait Painter (2).

Hickey sailed from Portsmouth on 27 July 1780 aboard the *Royal George* along with four other East Indiamen. He embarked for Calcutta, the chief of the three Presidencies in India, and thus the most likely to be a source of commissions. But, in his own words, off the Iberian peninsula he

was captured along with the East and West Indies fleets by the combined ones of France and Spain (3).

He goes on to say:

On board a Spanish Man of War, the Galicia, I was soon transferred, and there detained at sea, cruising in the combined fleets, for three weeks; I found on board a Spanish grammar, by the aid of which, and my knowledge of Italian I made some progress in the attainment of Spanish so as to become soon the interpreter for several of my countrymen, who like myself, were prisoners in the ship but whose want of language, to communicate their grievances, made them apply to me, and I was often happy enough to obtain their redress.

From the Ships we were conveyed to Xeres in Spain, where residing for three weeks more, I attended further to cultivate in Spanish what I had already learned.

At the end of a month we were escorted to the frontiers of Spain and Portugal, where continuing my way from the Guadiana through the country to Lisbon, I was here induced to resume the practice of my art . . . (4).

William Hickey corroborates much of this information in his *Memoirs* for February 1782, adding some further information:

Upon our arrival at Lisbon one of our first visitors was Mr. Thomas Hickey, a portrait painter, with whom my family had been acquainted and done him some service in his profession, but I had never before seen or heard of him. After introducing himself and mentioning the obligations he lay under to my father and brother, he told me that he had been taken prisoner . . . on board an . . . East Indiaman, in which he had embarked with an intention to follow his business in the Company's Settlements; that

(2). *Court Books* (MSS) (Court of Directors of the Honourable East India Company), vol. xcvi, 14 April 1779 - 12 April 1780, p.539, at India Office Records, London.

(3). From a letter to the Rt. Hon. Henry Dundas, London, 1797 (original untraced, copy with National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin).

(4). *Ibid.*



Thomas Hickey: Miss Charlotte Dee, 1781 (untraced).

having obtained permission from the Spanish Government to return to England, he had gone from Cadiz to Lisbon by land, in order to proceed from the latter place in a packet but on his reaching Lisbon he had so much employment that he had remained there to very good account, had painted most of the English ladies and gentlemen, and was then engaged upon the portraits of several Portuguese of rank. He occupied four handsome rooms on the ground floor of Mrs. Williams' Hotel (5).

Thomas seems to have become very much involved with the life of Lisbon, painting the portraits of several members of the British community and of the Portuguese nobility, including Queen Maria I.

Thomas says that he was "upward of three years in Lisbon", and that at this time a Portuguese ship bound direct to Bengal from Lisbon renewed in me the wish of visiting the East, and I accordingly took my passage in that ship; which being manned and officered by Portuguese people I profited from that opportunity of practice in their language; and, as the voyage was of seven months duration, without any chance of terrestrial nature, I became tolerably well exercised in Portuguese before the voyage was at an end (6).

The *Bengal Calendar and Register for 1790* says that Thomas Hickey, "portrait painter", arrived at Calcutta in a Portuguese ship in 1784 (7), and the diarist William Hickey wrote:

In March (1784) my namesake, Mr. Thomas Hickey, the portrait painter whom I left in Portugal, arrived in Bengal with an intention of following his profession (8).

William Hickey says that, following his arrival, the artist pursued his calling

with considerable success . . . (and) took a large, handsome house in the most fashionable part of Calcutta (9).

Few of the portraits painted by Hickey in Lisbon remain or at least have their whereabouts known. There is an untraced portrait of Miss Charlotte Dee, afterwards Lady Nugent (90 x 76 cms) signed and dated 1781, and an untraced portrait of an unknown lady with her son and daughter, near a monument (103 x 128 cms) of the same

(5). W. Hickey: *Memoirs*, ed. A. Spencer, vol. ii, London, 1919 - 1925, p.386.

(6). See note 3 above.

(7). *Bengal Calendar and Register for 1790 of the Honourable East India Company's Servants on the Bengal Establishment* . . . , Calcutta, 1790, p.122.

(8). W. Hickey: *Memoirs*, ed. A. Spencer, vol. iii, London, 1919 - 1925, p.202.

(9). *Ibid.*



Thomas Hickey: *An Actor Between the Muses of Tragedy and Comedy, 1781* (National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin; photograph courtesy of the National Gallery of Ireland).



Thomas Hickey: *Unknown Gentleman, 1782* (with Pawsey and Payne, London, 1983; photograph courtesy of Pawsey and Payne).



Thomas Hickey: *Unknown Gentleman, 1782* (with Pawsey and Payne, London, 1983; photograph courtesy of Pawsey and Payne).

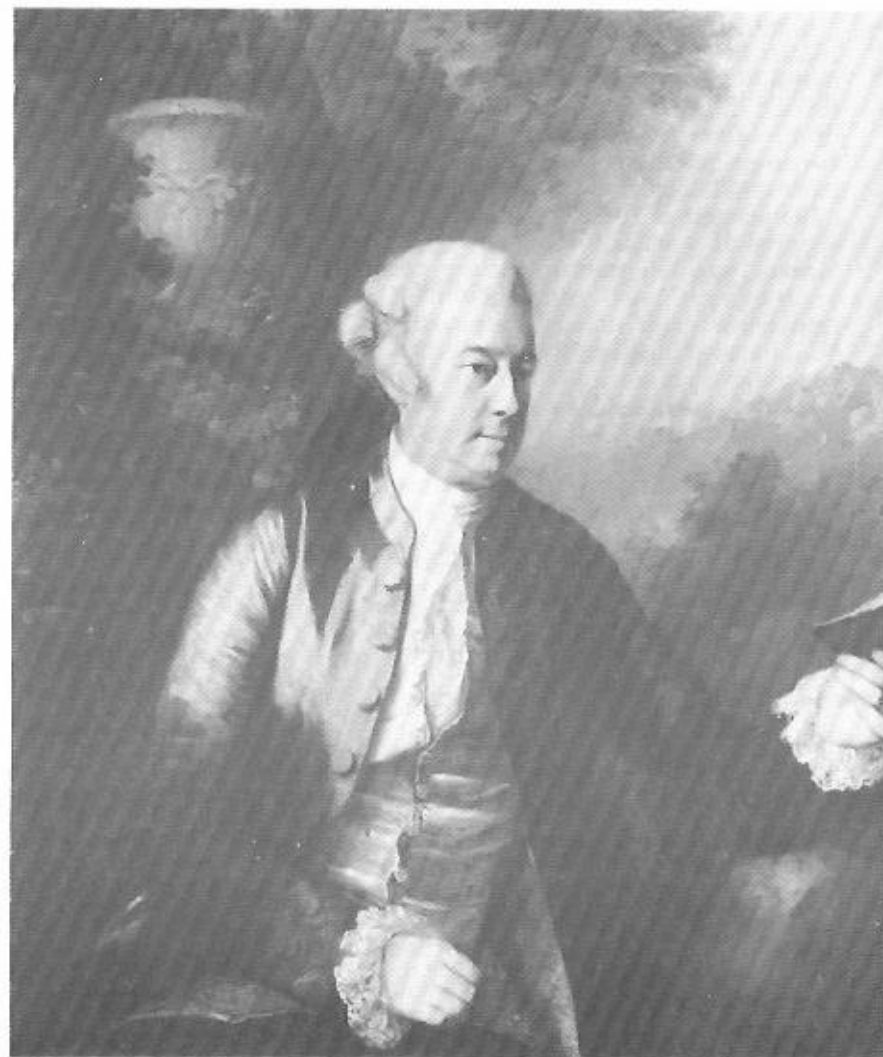
year, that was at one time in Mme. de Falbe's collection. That of Miss Dee is one of the artist's most elegant portraits with its flowing lines. From William Hickey's diary it is known that his namesake painted two portraits of the diarist and one of his intimate friend, Charlotte Barry, prior to 5 May 1782 (10). Gerard de Visme, an eminent member of the British Community in Lisbon, also had his portrait (106 x 92 cms) painted in 1783, but all of these are untraced.

There are only seven signed and dated works known to have survived which, like those mentioned above, are all in oils on canvas. The most curious of these must be *An Actor Between the Muses of Tragedy and Comedy* (102 x 128 cms), now in the National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin. This work, dated 1781, is based on Sir Joshua Reynolds' famous picture of *Garrick Between Comedy and Tragedy* (exhibited Society of Artists, London, 1762) (11). On a rock to the left of the picture is the first line of Milton's *Il Penseroso*: "Hence vain deluding joys". One can only assume that such a work was specially commissioned; the vast majority of Hickey's output was straightforward portraiture.

Three of the seven signed portraits are of sisters, of the Pringle family of Whytbank in Selkirkshire, Scotland. All painted in 1782, they now belong to Lady Mitchell in Switzerland, which came to light as a result of a letter by her to the *Anglo Portuguese News* of 17 September 1975. Two of these portraits are oval of Susan and Mary Pringle, and the third (127 x 101.6 cms) is of Charlotte, who married Mr. Thomas Mayne, a merchant in Lisbon with a house at Sintra, and their daughter Susanna. The castle at Sintra appears in the background of both the oval portraits. Two portraits of gentlemen, each signed and dated 1782, oval, and measuring 26 x 20.3 cms turned up in an American collection and were bought by Pawsey and Payne, the London art dealers, in 1983. They have Hickey's characteristically sketched in background. The faces, Hickey's best point (especially in his drawings), are clearly definable likenesses. On a much larger scale, 127 x 101.5 cms, and painted the following year, is another portrait of a gentleman, in a similar style. This surfaced at Agnew's of London in 1981. It is encouraging that portraits of this period in Hickey's career continue to turn up thus, even if from unlikely places, but sad

(10). *op. cit.*, vol. ii, pp. 386 - 7.

(11). There is little similarity between the central figure in Hickey's painting and the actor David Garrick. Garrick had made an enormous impression on Lisbon society during his brief visit 53 years earlier.



Thomas Hickey: *Unknown Gentleman, 1783* (with Thos. Agnew and Sons, London, 1981; photograph courtesy of Thos. Agnew and Sons).

that none of the sitters is identified (12).

A portrait of a *Girl Leaning Against a Piano* (91 x 71 cms) in the collections of the Tate Gallery, London, is unsigned and undated, but probably comes from Hickey's stay in Lisbon. On the music held by the sitter, the word "Malbr(ook)" is inscribed (the last letters appear to have been repainted). An edition of the song "Malbrook sen va-t-en-guerre" was brought out in Paris c.1780 and was evidently popular in Lisbon at the time.

The pinnacle of Hickey's achievement in Portugal was, however, the winning of a commission from the Queen, Maria I, herself. Her Majesty, who was sadly to become insane after 1788 following the death of her Consort, had the portrait (113 x 83 cms) painted for the Academia das Ciências in Lisbon in 1783, an institution which had been founded in 1779, of which she was patron, and where the portrait still remains.

Thomas Hickey's stay in Portugal was not in the least planned, but seems to have been none the less enjoyable for that. Indeed, had it not been for the lure of India, he might have stayed longer. It is difficult to determine exactly who was competing with Thomas Hickey for commissions, but the appearance of a new artist on the scene tended

(12). In the Seventh Annual Report of the former British Historical Association, Lisbon Branch, the late A.R. Walford, to accompany his article on Gerard de Visme (pp. 430 - 35), reproduced a portrait of his subject. The reproduction (in oval) is clearly the same composition as that of the *Portrait of a Gentleman* now in the possession of Messrs. Thos. Agnew and Sons (Plate 4). Whether it is the same picture or a copy could hardly be determined from the reproduction which is blurred; but it seems to establish the 'Gentleman' portrayed as Gerard de Visme. Walford writes: 'Miss Meta E. Williams has recently favoured us with a photograph of an old oil painting of Gerard de Visme, evidently made during occupation of his palatial residence at Bemfica . . . How she came by the photograph I do not know.'

Walford also quotes from William Hickey's Memoirs to the effect that de Visme was present at the marriage of Commodore George Johnstone, R.N., M.P., to Charlotte Dee (Plate 1), 'a daughter of James and Eleanour Dee . . . Soon afterwards Charlotte fell ill and . . . De Visme lent them a country house about eighteen miles from Lisbon (Monserrate) for her convalescence.' (Ed)

to have a certain social *cachet*. It does not appear that the artist took advantage of his knowledge of Portuguese to seek commissions in Portuguese territories on the Indian Subcontinent. By the time that he arrived, there were no surviving Portuguese enclaves on the eastern side, and, so far as is known, Hickey did not travel to the western side, and visit for example, Goa (13).

(I should particularly like to thank the following for their assistance during my study of Hickey's stay in Portugal: Susan Lowndes Marques, Lady Mitchell, the late C.V. Pilkington, and, especially, Professor S. George West; and the staff of the following institutions in Lisbon: Academia das Ciências, Instituto Britânico em Portugal, Instituto de José de Figueiredo, Museu Nacional de Arte Antigua, and Escola Militar. Generous thanks are also due to John Cobb for enabling this article to come to fruition and to Maureen Potter for secretarial assistance).

(13). I do not believe that the portrait of D. Maria on the retable of the *altar-mór* of the chapel of Nossa Senhora da Conceição in the Palácio da Bemposta (now Escola Militar), Lisbon, is by Hickey, nor any of the other paintings there (see *Guia de Portugal*, vol. i, Lisbon, 1923, p. 263).