

Art of Power Masterpieces from the Butc Collection at Mount Stuart



Art of Power

Masterpieces from
the Bute Collection
at Mount Stuart

Caitlin Blackwell

With contributions by

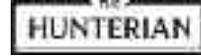
Peter Black

and Oliver Cox

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Front cover Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), *John Stuart, Third Earl of Bute* (cat. 23, detail), 1773,
oil on canvas, 233.7 × 144.8 cm, The Bute Collection, Mount Stuart

Back cover Joos de Momper II (1564–1635) and Jan Brueghel I (1568–1625), *Summer* (cat. 20), ca. 1620,
oil on panel, 54.6 × 81.3 cm, The Bute Collection, Mount Stuart

Frontispiece Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), *John Stuart, Third Earl of Bute*, 1773,
oil on canvas, 233.7 × 144.8 cm, The Bute Collection, Mount Stuart

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CONTENTS

Foreword

Mungo Campbell 6

Acknowledgements 7

Introduction: Bute's Image

Caitlin Blackwell 8

“Beyond expectation, beyond hope”:

The Third Earl of Bute's Picture Collection at Luton Hoo

Caitlin Blackwell 14

Creating a King:

The Third Earl of Bute and George III

Oliver Cox 38

Quality *and* Quantity:

Bute and the Collecting of Dutch Paintings

Peter Black 56

Catalogue

Peter Black and Caitlin Blackwell 72

Bibliography 136

Index 141

Photographic credits 144

MUNGO CAMPBELL

DEPUTY DIRECTOR, THE HUNTERIAN

FOREWORD

It should come as no surprise that two of Scotland's greatest Enlightenment collections were assembled in the south of England by Scots who made their mark on British public life through their close association with the Hanoverian court in London. Evidence is scant surrounding the nature and extent of the relationship between John Stuart, Third Earl of Bute (1713–1792), and Dr William Hunter (1718–1783). Beyond their involvement in the life of the court, particularly during the early 1760s, the two men did share close associates in the worlds represented by the collections now respectively at Mount Stuart on Bute and at The Hunterian, at the University of Glasgow, perhaps most notably in their association with their fellow Scot, the portrait painter Allan Ramsay. Both men studied at Leiden, in the Netherlands. Bute, some five years older than Hunter, graduated in law; a decade later, Hunter was briefly there for medical research. The practice of science, particularly botany in Bute's case, anatomy in Hunter's, drove their collecting to their mutual interests in art. Both gathered impressive libraries which served to support the knowledge pursued in their other collections.

Hunter's art collection was never on the scale of that assembled by Bute, and it was intended to serve very different ends. Both collections are remarkable in the twenty-first century for the extent to which their respective provenances, extending over some two centuries, reflect the specific intentions of their respective collectors; in one, the continuity of lineal family descent; in the other, the continuity of purpose embodied in the public institution for which the collection was gathered. If both collections reflect the material fruits of the exercise of power in Enlightenment London, their subsequent histories both equally reflect the challenges faced by Scots exercising power within orbits of public life current in Hanoverian Britain. While Hunter had every intention that his collection function as a fully public institution after his death, that was not its purpose during his lifetime. By the same token, the astonishing pictures which are at the centre of this exhibition were not intended to act as an overt projection of Bute's public role. They were, and have remained for some two centuries, a reflection of personal taste and a source of private pleasure.

The generosity with which the Bute Collection and the Mount Stuart Trust have approached the prospect of sharing some twenty-five Dutch and Flemish masterpieces with The Hunterian and our visitors is remarkable. Thanks are particularly due to Alice Martin for her indefatigably

creative and pragmatic energy as this project has advanced over the last couple of years. Along with Peter Black at The Hunterian, Alice has offered generously of her experience in supporting and advising Caitlin Blackwell, whose project this has been over the last eighteen months and whose singular abilities are reflected in both exhibition and this publication.

It is almost inevitable that objects become separated from even the greatest and most coherent collections over the course of a couple of centuries. Thanks are due particularly to Tate Britain for agreeing to lend Zoffany's portrait of the Ladies Anne, Caroline and Louisa Stuart, shown in the gardens of Bute's great rural retreat, Luton Hoo, for which many of the pictures in this exhibition were acquired.

This publication has been supported through a generous grant from the Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art. We are grateful to the Scottish Government and the Government Indemnity Scheme for their assistance with our loans.

Both Mount Stuart and The Hunterian are embarking on an exciting period of rediscovery of their Enlightenment collections, encouraging important new scholarship and learning to engage twenty-first-century audiences with our uniquely significant collections. *Art of Power* represents a stimulating collaboration between two collections with strong connections reflected in their mutual histories. We hope that future projects will bring many new visitors, engaged by innovative and compelling displays and exhibitions to Glasgow and to the Isle of Bute.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The texts in this publication have depended heavily on the work of Francis Russell, whose *John, 3rd Earl of Bute: Patron and Collector* (Merrion Press, 2004) remains the standard work for the study of Bute. We are very grateful to Francis for his help in various ways during the preparation of exhibition and publication. Many other people have helped us with our research, and we would like to express our thanks to Richard Bapty, Rhea Sylvia Blok, Elise Boutsen, John Bute, Mungo Campbell, An van Camp, Anthony Crichton-Stuart, Anne Dulau, Samuel Dyer, Gail Egan, Adam Ellis-Jones, Klaus Ertz, Jonathan Franklin, Everhard Korthals Altes, Maud Guichané, Andrew Hansen, Thorsten Heese, Martin Hopkinson, Véronique van de Kerckhof, Elenor Ling, Ger Luijten, Henry Matthews, Alice Martin, Lynda McLeod, Lynsey Nairn, Michiel Plomp, Maggie Reilly, Helen Rosslyn, Frances Sands, F. Carlo Schmid, Laurens Schoemaker, Christian Tico Seifert, Kim Sloan, Sabine van Sprang, Isabelle van Tichelen, Sally Tuckett, Robert Wenley and Aidan Weston-Lewis.

CAITLIN BLACKWELL

INTRODUCTION:

BUTE'S IMAGE

On 12 October 1773, John Stuart, Third Earl of Bute called in at an artist's studio at a fashionable London address in Leicester Fields to sit for his portrait. This would be the first of nearly a dozen sittings for a monumental, eight-foot likeness of the earl, designed to preside over his recently refurbished Bedfordshire estate, Luton Hoo.¹ Mirroring the grandeur of its intended setting, the full-length portrait (cat. 23) depicts the earl sumptuously draped in royal blue velvet Garter robes – a sartorial marker signifying his membership of the ancient Order of the Garter, a rare honour bestowed upon him by his old friend, George III.² The garter itself is prominently displayed on his left calf, emphasising both his elite status and his famously shapely legs of which he was rumoured to have been excessively proud.³ At the advanced age of sixty, in spite of ill health, the earl appears virile, graceful and confident, perhaps even haughty. He would seem to be a man very much at the height of his power.

The artist responsible for this august image was none other than Sir Joshua Reynolds, the president of the newly formed Royal Academy and the most celebrated portraitist of the day. Reynolds was renowned not only for championing a style of art aptly known as the “Grand Manner” (a lofty, idealised aesthetic inspired by classical art) but also for his ability effectively to capture the essence of his subjects. However, it was Reynolds's assistant, James Northcote, who captured a rather different, yet equally evocative image of Bute. This was not in the copy of the portrait that Northcote was tasked with producing for the client's London townhouse, but rather, in a letter written to his brother in December of that year.⁵ He wrote:

“[Lord Bute's] picture by no means gives me an idea of his character; if it be as the world says. He is a very tall genteel figure with a mean Scotch face; his skin very yellow and small blue



eyes, with a smile on his face which gives a look of vast good humour and humility. Sir Joshua has made a most extraordinary fine head of him. He must have found it very different from the time when he was forced to have bruisers behind his coach to protect him, for now he comes in a chair without any servants and often walks on foot on his surtout without any state.”⁶

Here, Northcote attests to the fact that the sitter’s life had changed dramatically since the last time he sat for the artist over a decade earlier – a time when Lord Bute held the dubious distinction of being the most hated man in Britain.

Today, the Third Earl of Bute is best remembered (if he is remembered at all) as being the first Scottish-born Prime Minister and the widely reviled “favourite” of George III. His lasting reputation has hinged on the brief but dramatic period, from 1760 to 1763, in which he rapidly rose in the ranks of political power following the accession of his former pupil George III, only to quickly fall from grace after less than a year in office. During this period, the earl suffered intense scrutiny and criticism, largely stemming from the widespread belief that Bute possessed inordinate powers and wielded a Machiavellian influence over Court and Parliament. He became the target of rampant xenophobic abuse, scurrilous rumours and charges of general corruption, all of which reached a fever pitch in early 1763 at the close of the Seven Years’ War.⁶ Political opponents, the press and the public united in their hatred of this smug Scottish upstart, who was blamed for everything from the unfavourable terms of peace with France to the suspicious influx of Scots in positions of power. As Northcote alludes, he was even followed by angry mobs wherever he went.⁷ Indeed, Bute was arguably the most notorious figure in Britain, his image known to all, though not necessarily through the flattering state portraits that were produced by

1 William Elliott (1727–1766) after Aelbert Cuyp (1620–1691), *A View on the Maese near Maestricht*, 1764, engraving, 41.0 × 60.0 cm, British Museum, 1877,0609.1559. John Boydell’s print album, *The Most Capital Paintings in England*, reproduced five paintings from the Bute collection including his magnificent Cuyp, now in the National Gallery, London (fig. 35).



2 The Drawing Room at Mount Stuart with paintings acquired by the Third Earl.

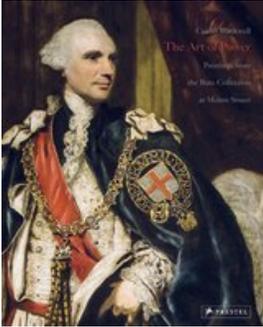
Reynolds and Allan Ramsay but in the scores of scathing satirical prints (fig. 9, 24) that were churned out regularly.⁸ According to his contemporary, Horace Walpole, there were enough “satiric prints to tapestry Westminster-hall.”⁹ In many of these, Bute could be quickly identified not in human form but in the form of a Jack-Boot, a crude visual pun on his name that was, at the time, recognised and understood by virtually all of British society.

But there is still another image of Bute. A less familiar one that was not captured by the scurrilous press, nor even by the skilled and sensitive portraitist, Reynolds, whose stately 1773 portrait of Bute completely belies the fact that, by this point, the sitter had long since retired from political office to pursue a quiet life of studying and collecting. That Reynolds depicted his

subject not as a private man of learning but as a public statesman is confounding given that Bute no longer wielded power in such a role. Indeed, the earl had long been *persona non grata* in political spheres, having been forced to flee London and distance himself from the king a decade earlier, effectively making Reynolds's canvas a rather hollow pictorial statement based on a highly conventional mode of aristocratic portraiture. Yet, Bute's power was now manifest in a different way. Thanks to his immense wealth and new found freedom from the pressures of public life, Bute had both the time and resources to focus his attention on a number of ambitious cultural projects, including amassing one of the largest art collections in Georgian Britain. Years later, the history painter and second president of the Royal Academy, Benjamin West would associate Bute with a rather different sort of image – not a portrait of the earl but rather a particular picture from his illustrious collection (fig. 35) that was widely known through an engraved copy (fig. 1) included in John Boydell's *A Collection of Prints, Engraved after the Most Capital Paintings in England*, which was dedicated to George III in 1769. Ironically, given its benign pastoral subject matter, this Italianate landscape by the Dutch Golden Age master, Aelbert Cuyp, captures the essence of the earl's power much more effectively. According to West, "Lord Bute's picture by Cuyp ... was the first picture by that master known in England. Having been seen, pictures by Cuyp were eagerly sought for and many were introduced and sold to advantage."¹⁰ Apparently, even after his political power was negligible, the earl continued to exercise some form of cultural influence.

The Third Earl of Bute's keen interests in art, literature and natural science were, in fact, lifelong pursuits which preoccupied him even during his hectic time in office. Yet, his identity as a patron and collector has been almost entirely overlooked, obscured by his infamously disastrous political career. As the essays in this volume demonstrate, however, Bute was actually in the vanguard of eighteenth-century cultural life, serving as a significant patron to some of the greatest names in Georgian art, architecture and literature. He provided support for painters like Reynolds and the German expatriate, Johan Zoffany. He introduced his talented countryman, Allan Ramsay to the Royal Family. He set up a government pension for the celebrated man-of-letters, Samuel Johnson. He commissioned homes with the most modern facilities, replete with highly fashionable Neoclassical interiors by Scottish architect, Robert Adam. He even seems to have set trends in taste for previously out-of-fashion Dutch Masters, such as Cuyp. Moreover, in his role as confidant to George III, Bute nurtured the king's interest in art and helped him to acquire some of the world-renowned masterpieces that are still held in the Royal Collection today. Meanwhile, the fruits of Bute's own collecting efforts are preserved in the Bute Collection. His once unrivalled assemblage of art and artefacts has survived even the depredations of substantial sales in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and a remarkable collection remains housed at the family's ancestral home of Mount Stuart on the western Scottish Isle of Bute.

The Third Earl's cultural contributions have gone woefully under-appreciated. In the more than two hundred years since his death, there has been only one serious attempt to recover his forgotten role as a connoisseur – Francis Russell's 2004 biography, *John, 3rd Earl of Bute: Patron and Collector*.¹¹ This oversight can, of course, be partly blamed on the heavily biased sources



Caitlin Blackwell

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Prestel

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This book focuses on the extraordinary Bute Collection at Mount Stuart and its illustrious history.

John Stuart, 3rd Earl of Bute, was one of history's most enthusiastic art collectors. As tutor to Prince George, Bute became indispensable to the royal household. Soon after his accession to the throne, the King made Bute Prime Minister—a career that was cut short after the Peace of Paris in 1763. Forced out of London by an angry mob, Bute retired to an estate at Luton, where he spent the rest of his years in private study and amassing a collection of 500 paintings, including major works by Venetian painters such as Tintoretto, Bordone, and Veronese. Bute had a special interest in Dutch and Flemish pictures, building the greatest collection of its kind in Britain.

This book features over thirty masterpieces, mainly genre paintings and landscapes, and including jewel-like landscapes by Brueghel and Savery. The collection is housed at the Bute family's Scottish seat, Mount Stuart, on the Isle of Bute. Essays by leading scholars delve into the history of Bute's collection, focusing on his relationship with King George III, and his wideranging passions, which resulted in rooms filled floor to ceiling with works of art.

 [Der Titel im Katalog](#)