

Sir William Hamilton and the Royal Academy

Sir William Hamilton was one of the more colourful members of the eighteenth-century aristocracy: Britain's long serving envoy in Naples; a great vulcanologist and passionate collector of antiquities; the long-suffering husband of Emma Hart, who ended his life in a ménage à trois with Lord Nelson. A friend of the first President of the Royal Academy, Sir Joshua Reynolds, he got to know Reynolds when serving in the army, first listed in Reynolds' s sitter books as 'Capt. Ham.' In April 1757. When the Royal Academy of Arts was founded in December 1768, Hamilton was an early supporter, corresponding with Reynolds about its progress and presenting high quality casts to the Royal Academy Schools, which were expected to provide inspiration to the students. In 1775, he donated two prints by Piranesi and in 1803, the last year of his life, he gave the Royal Academy a cast of a boar 'which I had originally intended to present thirty years ago'. When elected a member of the Society of Dilettanti in February 1777, Reynolds painted him sitting at the centre of the great group portrait of the Society, pointing at an open page of the first volume of the catalogue of his collection of vases. In the same year, Reynolds painted him sitting down, again with the catalogue of his vases held open, surrounded by objects from his collection and with Vesuvius in the distance. It is the classic image of an eighteenth-century connoisseur.