

Video transcript

The life and work of James Tassie (1735-1799)

2020

[28:00]

Liz Louis:

Hello, my name is Liz Louis. I am a curator of portraiture with the National Galleries of Scotland and this video is about James Tassie. The National Galleries of Scotland hold the world's largest collection of works by James Tassie and if you have been to visit the Scottish National Portrait Gallery you may have seen his portrait medallions on display in the Library there. But even if you don't recognise the name, you may very well have come across an example of his work before. The portrait of philosopher and economist Adam Smith on the back of the Bank of England's paper £20 note is based on a portrait medallion by James Tassie. Smith was the first Scot to appear on a note issued by the Bank of England when it entered circulation in 2007. Tassie modelled the original on which this portrait is based in 1787, that is 11 years after Smith had published his seminal *Inquiry into the Nature and Causes of the Wealth of Nations*.

In this book, Smith extolled the virtues of the division of labour, argued that offer and demand could balance the market value of objects, and that individuals' self-interested search for profit would lead to overall greater wealth for everyone. Even though Smith is now considered the father of modern economics, it has to be remembered that his writing is steeped in the colonialist discourse of the time. He compares the achievements of what he calls the 'civilised nations', by which he primarily means European nations, to the poverty of what he calls 'savage' nations, by which he mostly means the nations colonised by European countries.

For being arguably one of the most influential Scots, it may be surprising to find out that this portrait by James Tassie is the only 'authentic' portrait of Adam Smith that we know of that is the only likeness which was taken directly from a sitting with Adam Smith himself.

From Pollokshaws to St Petersburg: Tassie's replicas of classical gems

Who, then, is this James Tassie?

James Tassie was born in Pollokshaws near Glasgow in 1735. As the son of a stonemason, he probably originally served an apprenticeship with his father.

But discovering his artistic talents, he joined Foulis Academy, which at that time was the only academy of fine art in Scotland. It had been formed by the brothers and printers Andrew and Robert Foulis in 1753 and it eventually closed in 1775. During his time there, Tassie made important connections for the rest of his lifetime, including most notably his friendship with the painter David Allan.

In 1763 Tassie moves to Dublin and there he meets Dr Henry Quin. Quin was a medical doctor and his hobby is to his study and try to imitate ancient and classical cameos and intaglios. Quin and Tassie developed a vitreous paste that allowed them to reproduce these gems as faithfully as possible. It sets into a hard and lustrous paste with very little shrinkage during the firing process and

it is a type of lead potash glass. With this recipe in hand, and with Quin's blessing, Tassie then moves to London in 1766 and establishes his business.

The two pillars on which Tassie's business really rests were the portrait medallions, of which we have already seen an example, and these reproductions of ancient gems.

Here he is, portrayed by his friend David Allan when he is about 46 years old. His pose and clothing suggest a confident, well-to-do member of the middle classes. It looks as though he's just been interrupted from studying the object in his hand. And that is an example of the kind of gem that Tassie would be producing, in this case it is a head of Medusa.

In ancient Greece and Rome, minuscule images were carved into precious or semi-precious stones, either in cameo, which means that the image rises from the background in relief or as intaglio, which means that the image is incised into the stone. While these can definitely be regarded as artworks in their own right, they were also often set into jewellery, such as rings, or they could be used to stamp wax seals. The imagery on them is wide-ranging, from deities to mythological scenes, from animals to mottoes and so on. In the eighteenth century, those who could afford it keenly collected these and often assembled them in specially designed gem cabinets called 'dactyliothecae'.

While some of Tassie's contemporaries rediscovered the art of gem engraving and started producing their own original artworks, Tassie decided to reproduce existing gems. Tassie's work and success here need to be considered in the context of the eighteenth-century's renewed interest in classical antiquity. Herculaneum and Pompeii had been rediscovered earlier in the century and young gentlemen went on Grand Tours across Europe and especially to Italy, where they absorbed Antique influences, and brought back with them a taste for classical art and design. Ancient gems were a great aid in studying classical culture and Tassie's productions really responded directly to the demand of those who wanted to learn about and possess a piece of antiquity, and also those who either had missed the opportunity of buying the original, or who simply could not afford to. Alternatively, the craftsmen around Tassie in London also often used his reproduction gems either to set into jewellery or to decorate the furniture pieces that they produced.

Tassie sourced the originals on which he based these reproductions from collectors across Europe and he reproduced them in three different ways. The first one is a glass paste imitation that matches the original as closely as possible in colour and also in overall appearance of the stone. There is a white 'enamel' variant which is a negative of the original gemstone. Quite often with intaglios in particular it is really hard to read the image, so these help to make the image more visible. And he also reproduced the gemstones as red sulphur casts. It's important to note here that there were unscrupulous dealers who were trying to pass these kinds of gems off as originals, but Tassie never set out to create fakes. Tassie believed that engraving simply could not do justice to these kinds of objects, so in his mind, he was making these available to a much wider audience than ever before, objects that otherwise would quite simply have been locked away in a collector's cabinet.

Tassie's most important and ambitious project was the creation of a set of replica gems for Catherine the Great, Empress of Russia from 1783 onwards. She had a particular interest in collecting engraved gemstones. Tassie's replicas could be used by her as an educational tool but also as a comparative between her own collection of original gems and those of other collectors across Europe.

The stress of tackling this project clearly shines through in some of the letters that Tassie sends to Alexander Wilson. Wilson was the dealer who distributed Tassie's products in Glasgow. There is a letter where Tassie apologises for a delay in processing Wilson's orders, and even for forgetting

some of the things that Wilson had asked for. A catalogue of all of these gems, which eventually ran to 15,800 individual gems, was compiled by Rudolf Erich Raspe and published in 1791. Again, Tassie's is the only portrait that we know of for Raspe, who was also the author of *The Adventures of Baron Munchhausen*, which recounts the unlikely, wild tales of the Baron for instance riding on a cannonball or travelling to the moon. Besides his writing career, Raspe was interested in a wide variety of subjects such as art, history and geology. By the time he started working with Tassie, he had had to escape from Germany because he had an increasing amount of debts and he tried to pay these off by stealing and pawning coins and medals from the collection of Frederick, Landgrave of Hesse-Kassel. The illustrations in the catalogue were provided by Tassie's old friend David Allan, and because of this project The Hermitage in St Petersburg is now one of only three places in the world to have a complete set of reproductions by Tassie. The other two being the Victoria and Albert Museum in London and the National Galleries of Scotland in Edinburgh.

The Portrait Medallions

The other key element of Tassie's output was his portraiture of contemporaries: He produced nearly 500 medallion portraits, most of them in profile, of some of his most notable contemporaries. This is the kind of artwork that he exhibited at the Royal Academy so quite clearly these were not just a way for him to make money, these were where he saw his legacy as an artist.

Tassie's portrait medallions can roughly be split into two categories: those with a coloured background, and those that are all white. The coloured background was achieved by mounting the bust itself onto a piece of oval glass underlaid with coloured paper. All-white portraits are a lot harder to create, they have to be made in one piece, everything is made of the same material and because to their size, they are much likelier to crack during the firing and cooling process. These appear later.

The first example that we know of is this portrait of Sir John English Dolben, 4th Baronet of Finedon. It's dated to 1773 or 1774 and as you can see here, there were problems in the firing process. It is said that this was the 'very first attempt of making large Paste impressions but cracked by not being long enough annealed.'

The longest part of Tassie's career was spent at 20 Leicester Fields, which is now Leicester Square and where he moved in 1778. Either you could go to his workshop to sit for your portrait or he would come out to you. He did also come to Edinburgh and Glasgow every so often to take sittings here in Scotland. He would make a wax model of your head and shoulders which he would then go on cast in his enamel paste.

Much like that other highly fashionable and highly reproducible portrait, the silhouette, Tassie stood out for the speed and ease with which he was able to produce a portrait. One of the people who sat for him described the experience. These are the words of Thomas Walker, depicted here.

'He takes three sittings. The two first about an hour each; the third not half an hour. If preferred, he can take two sittings in one day, if he have some hours betwixt to work at it by himself. It is the same to him whether he goes out to you, or you to him, only the hours from about 12 to 4 he is occupied in attending his shop. During the sitting you may be occupied at almost what you will – eating, writing, &c., as he only needs a few minutes' sitting at finishing particular parts.'

This is particularly important for us to keep in mind. We are now used to being able to take portraits really quickly with a camera, but at the time having a sitting and then being able to walk away with

your image not very long after was quite unusual. If you were sitting for an oil portrait quite often you would have your sittings spread out across several months.

Tassie's portraits offer an insight into a concentrated sample of eighteenth-century society: His sitters were, in his own words, 'the first people in the kingdom'. Besides statesmen and royals, many of his sitters were Scottish. They included politicians, soldiers, merchants, writers and so on and quite often the sitters' wives and families as well. Most of the time these belonged to the upper and middle classes.

'The first people in the kingdom' is a questionable expression to qualify Tassie's sitters. Among his patrons were members of the tight network of wealthy Glasgow West India merchants. For example, Archibald Smith and his wife Isabella Ewing, who is pictured here, sat to Tassie in 1795. Ewing herself came from a Glasgow West India merchant family, and her husband's business, Leitch and Smith, had extensive financial investments in West India plantations, and imported goods produced with slave labour, such as cotton and sugar. The business brought the family wealth and social advancement and enabled Smith to purchase land in Scotland, including the estate and mansion house at Jordanhill, near Glasgow. The couple's sons also went on to become West India merchants. We do not currently know what Tassie's own position on slavery was, and this is something that requires further investigation. He portrayed sitters with opposing views, such as philosopher and poet Dr James Beattie who argued against slavery, but also Henry Dundas, 1st Viscount Melville, who deferred the abolition of slavery. It is fair to say that Tassie produced portraits of and for an elite that was shaped by colonial profits and expansion.

The portrait medallions that Tassie produced can also be considered as society snapshots in terms of fashion. A lot of the time sitters came in with their contemporary dress and their contemporary hair dos and these are now of course very interesting to fashion historians, but a lot of the time they also chose to be represented in an antique fashion, so without a wig and with drapery around them, rather than, say, a contemporary uniform.

This is the case quite fittingly for a portrait of celebrated fellow Scotsman and neoclassical architect Robert Adam who was famous for his neoclassical designs. Among numerous other projects he created the Register House in Edinburgh which now houses the National Records of Scotland, the Royal Infirmary in Glasgow, Culzean Castle in South Ayrshire, and Apsley House in London.

Tassie was working during the Enlightenment, a time that emphasised reason, science and progress. The pseudo-science of physiognomy which claims that a person's face can reveal their true character, fits squarely into the Enlightenment desire to measure and classify everyone and everything. The popularity of this pseudo-science has come in bursts. It was much discussed among ancient Greek philosophers and fell into obscurity until it was revived by the Swiss minister Johann Caspar Lavater in the eighteenth century. Lavater's *Essays on Physiognomy* started to be published in German in the late 1770s and quickly became available in French and then English translations. The books were bestsellers, and physiognomy became almost a fashionable pastime. Although not everyone accepted these theories that Lavater put forward, a lot of people were interested in them and academics did discuss them very seriously at the time. Writers and artists often embraced the vocabulary that this new pseudo-science provided them, because it would be a way of describing characters in a way that their readers would understand. But it's also not difficult to see how physiognomy is an incredibly problematic discipline. Lavater states that he wants physiognomy to 'engage men to study and to love their fellow-creatures', but in effect it formed the basis of a lot of stereotypes and racism. This pseudo-science was largely discredited by the end of the nineteenth century.

Much of Lavater's analysis relied on the appearance of faces in profile. Although he identified the silhouette as the most useful tool and the most trustworthy source for a physiognomist, many of the illustrations in his book look almost like printed reproductions of the types of medallion which Tassie was producing. So Lavater is encouraging the fashion for profile portraits and he is basically furnishing a ready-made argument and free advertising to encourage people to go and sit for a professional like Tassie. Interestingly, the name Tassie, Mr James appears among the subscriber list to the English translation of Lavater's Essays by another fellow Scot living in London, Henry Hunter, the minister of the Scots Church at London-Wall (1789-98).

The man of the hour: Adam Duncan, Viscount Camperdown (1731-1804)

That Tassie was business-savvy is also apparent in his choice of sitters. Viscount Duncan's portrait shows the sitter just a few weeks after his decisive victory at the Battle of Camperdown (Camperduin). Adam Duncan was born in Dundee in 1731 and enjoyed steady progress through the ranks of the Navy. In 1795, when he was 64 years old, he became commander-in-chief of the British North Sea fleet. In the same year, French forces invaded the Dutch Republic and renamed it Batavia. The ships that were stationed off the north coast of the Netherlands, off the Texel, were a direct threat of invasion to Britain, in particular to Ireland. They also threatened the trade route with the Baltic.

Duncan's job was to blockade these ships off the north coast of Holland. In combination with this precarious political situation, a mutiny broke out on the *Nore* in the Thames estuary in May 1797, and most of Duncan's ships joined this mutiny, except for his flagships, the *Venerable* and for the *Adamant*, both of which he managed to retain by appealing personally to their crews' loyalties. The Dutch did not choose this moment to attack and in fact they waited until later that year, in the autumn, and this was at a moment when Duncan had taken most of his fleet back to Yarmouth to get fresh provisions. As soon as he heard that the Dutch had set sail, Duncan returned to the North Sea and engaged the Dutch in battle in difficult shallow waters. This took place on 11th October 1797, off the coast of the small Dutch village of Camperduin after which the battle was named. It ended with the British capture of 11 Dutch ships, and it was a crucial victory for the British in the French Revolutionary Wars. His achievement was fêted across Britain: he was made Viscount on 21st October 1797, just a few days after his victory and received the freedoms of many British cities, including London and Yarmouth but also of course his hometown, Dundee.

In a postscript of a letter to Alexander Wilson, written in London sometime in November 1797, Tassie reports: 'I have just finished Lord Duncan's portrait who did me the honour to sit, so the likeness is much approved of.'

Clearly, Tassie was quick off the mark to capitalise on the success of his countryman. The popularity of this portrait is also proven by the fact that Tassie produced four different versions of it. That is twice as many as Horatio Nelson got from him and of course Nelson's achievements would later overshadow those of Adam Duncan.

Christina Lawrie, Mrs Alexander Wilson (1766-1083)

I would now like to turn to a much more personal portrait that Tassie produced. This is the wife of Tassie's Glasgow dealer, Alexander Wilson. There is a letter of the 16th July 1792, which is addressed not to Mr Alexander Wilson, but to Mrs Wilson.

He says: 'Madam, In answer to your obliging favour of 19th last Month you did me the honour to write. Nothing is more liable to criticism, then [sic] works of Art. I do not wonder that my poor

performance should meet with it. I must own that the features of the Portrait alluded to, are executed rather too strong. [...]'

So clearly, Mrs Wilson was in some way dissatisfied with the first version of the portrait that Tassie created of her, and a second version was done.

Tassie goes on: 'If your goodness will indulge me till I get my present hurry over in finishing the other portraits I took in Glasgow and Edinburgh I shall do another of your in wax and send it for your approbation.'

Although Tassie started off by acknowledging the shortcomings of his work at the start of the letter, he does finish with a little dig at Mrs Wilson's criticism. He says: 'I doubt much if the alteration will please the admirers of the ancient Roman & Greek taste. The Model in its present form. Is much admired by all who sees it.'

This clearly seems to identify the image on the left of your screen as the first attempt and the one on the right as the second attempt. The first having this kind of classical, timeless appeal and the second one being an opportunity for Mrs Wilson to show off her awareness of fashion trends at the time but clearly a lot less timeless. This alternative was sent in October 1792. A few years later, there is a letter from James Tassie's nephew William, who was taking over the business from his uncle. He approaches a new commission from the same sitter with a great deal of caution, clearly having learned from his uncle's experiences. In his first letter to Mr Wilson, William Tassie says: 'I hope the portrait of Mrs Wilson will give satisfaction. I can only say I have taken as much pains as I could on it. In criticising I hope you will make the allowance a beginner is entitled to.'

To finish this video, I'd like to briefly talk about how these portraits may have actually been used. It's important to keep in mind that they really were consumer objects. They were always created to be reproducible and they are not unique objects. They often commemorate or celebrate a hero of the moment, but they are inherently different from objects like a public statue, let's say. And this is really because of their size. They're not very large, a lot of the time the bust is only about 7-9cm high. And because of this you really need to get quite close to them in order to be able to appreciate the amount of detail and artistry that went into the portrait. And also, to decipher the name of the sitter which is often engraved on the truncation at the bottom of the bust.

In a letter of 28th December 1797, just two months after Viscount Duncan's victory at Camperduin, Tassie tells Wilson that he had intended to send the portraits of Duncan sooner but most of the medallions so far had been distributed to Duncan himself and his friends which suggests that a lot of the time these were circulated among a sitter's friends and relatives, again emphasising how personal these objects actually were. The paste's resemblance to marble helps elevate the portrait. Both the similarity to marble and the profile view make a connection between the eighteenth-century sitter and a much earlier classical hero so it doubtlessly elevates the sitter in that regard as well.

Having such a medallion at home would have been an indication of the owner's taste, a sense of their interest in classical culture again. It also could be seen as an ambition for self-improvement because quite a lot of the time in the eighteenth century there was a sense that a portrait, through the physiognomy of its sitter, could give an insight into the true character of the sitter, so in a way, by studying and meditating over a portrait like that, the viewer could try to understand and emulate the sitter that they are looking at.

James Tassie died on 1st June 1799 and left a thriving business to his nephew, William, who had been his apprentice. William continued to create both original portrait medallions and reproduction gems until his retirement in 1840. When William died in 1860, he bequeathed his collection of gems, moulds and portrait medallions to the National Galleries of Scotland, which have since continued to collect portrait medallions by both James and William Tassie.

I hope this video has in some ways helped bring to life or introduce James Tassie. He was an incredibly prolific craftsman who was always keen to experiment with his material. His portraits give a detailed description of a very specific moment in eighteenth-century society, and they are representative of the context in which Tassie lived and worked, not just by immortalising his contemporaries, but also by combining a sense of scientific experimentation with an interest in classical sculpture and a good business sense with true artistic skill. Thank you very much for watching.