Case 11 2012/13: a painting by Johan Zoffany, *Portrait of Claud Alexander with his brother Boyd, attended by an Indian servant*

**Expert adviser’s statement**

Reviewing Committee Secretary’s note: Please note that any illustrations referred to have not been reproduced on the Arts Council England Website

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

1. **Brief Description of item(s)**
   - **What is it?**
     A large, nearly life-size, portrait of Claud Alexander (1752-1809) and his brother Boyd (1758-1825) with an Indian servant
   - **What is it made of?**
     Oil paint on unlined canvas
   - **What are its measurements?**
     89 ½ x 77 ins / 227.5 x 195.5 cms  
     with frame: 99 ½ x 87 ½ ins / 252.7 x 222.2 cms
   - **Who is the artist/maker and what are their dates?**
     Johan Zoffany (1733-1810)
   - **What date is the item?**
     1783-4
   - **What condition is it in?**
     The advisers are of the opinion that it is in very good condition.

2. **Context**
   - **Provenance**
     Commissioned by Claud Alexander (1752-1809); by descent in the Alexander family of Ballochmyle House, Mauchline, Ayrshire; sold Sotheby’s, 8 December 2010, lot 42 (hammer price £769,250)
Key literary and exhibition references

Lady Victoria Manners and Dr GC Williamson John Zoffany, RA: His Life and Works 1735-1810 (London 1920), p.111, 172 (repr)
Mildred Archer India and British Portraiture 1770-1825 (London 1987), pp. 134, 242-3, 456-7 (reproduced as by AW Devis)
BF Tobin Picturing Imperial Britain: Colonial Subjects in Eighteenth-century British Painting (Durham and London 1999), p.262, no 37 (as by A. W. Devis)
Mary Webster Johan Zoffany 1733-1810 (New Haven and London 2011), pp. 478-80 (reproduced in colour)
Viccy Coltman ‘Claud Alexander in Calcutta 1774-86’ in The Scots in India (forthcoming), pp.1-35

3. Waverley criteria

- Which of the Waverley criteria does the item meet? (If it is of ‘outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art learning or history’ which area of art learning or history).
- Very briefly why?

Waverley 1: It is so closely connected with our history and national life that its departure would be a misfortune because:

This is an exceptional example of the work of Johan Zoffany, one of the most important figures in eighteenth-century British art and, as one of the earliest members of the Royal Academy, one of the founding figures of a modern school of British art; as the most monumental of Zoffany's Indian-period pictures it is a testament to the cultural life of the British in eighteenth-century India and the connections between colonial wealth and cultural patronage; and having remained in the family of the commissioning sitter in the portrait until 2010, it is closely tied to Scottish and regional histories.

Waverley 3: It is of outstanding significance for the study of some particular branch of art, learning or history.

The painting is of outstanding significance both for the study of art history and the history of the British Empire, specifically from a Scottish perspective; it is a major example of late eighteenth-century portraiture, which by virtue of being produced for and representing an important Scottish colonial administrator in the process of using his fortune to purchase an estate and business in Scotland, ties together and illuminates local, national (Scottish and British) and imperial histories; and the circumstances of the painting’s commissioning and delivery are unusually well-documented, and throws light on the practicalities of artistic production in the period.
DETAILED CASE

1. Detailed description of item(s) if more than in Executive summary, and any comments.

What does it depict?

The painting shows Claud Alexander (1752-1809), standing at the centre, a pointer dog at his feet and his brother, Boyd Alexander (1758-1825), standing beside him and leaning upon his left shoulder. Claud Alexander holds open and gestures towards a handwritten letter, the covering sheet for which has been dropped at the sitters' feet. To the extreme left of the composition is an Indian servant, holding a black tricorn hat and a malacca cane. The two European sitters and the dog are placed on a stone balcony, a classical column and balustrade behind them. A richly coloured, distant Indian landscape is visible to the left: to the right, palm trees can be seen just beyond the balustrade.

The portrait commemorates Claud Alexander's purchase of a house and estate in Scotland. Alexander was, at the time that this portrait was painted, Military Paymaster-General for the East India Company in Bengal. He was born in Renfrewshire, part of a large family. His siblings also worked in parts of the empire – the West Indies, Jamaica and Maryland. First an assistant in the Account's Office, Calcutta, he was then promoted to assistant to the Commissary-General, before becoming Paymaster-General for the East India Company in Bengal, with thirty writers working under him. He also traded on his own account and by the 1780s had made enough money to plan a return to Scotland, engaging an agent there to find him a country house. Zoffany arrived in Calcutta in September 1783, two months after Alexander had finally received news that he had purchased Ballochmyle, a country house near Mauchline, East Ayrshire, built by John Adam. It had been recently vacated by Sir John Whitefoord, who had been ruined in the Ayr Bank Crash.

Alexander's letters survive in the family collection, the National Archives of Scotland and the British Library (Add MS 45424, ff1-147), and attest to his difficulties in receiving news of the eagerly-awaited purchase. A letter from his mother initially related in late 1782 that his cousin Alex Cunninghame had negotiated the purchase, but the actual letter from Cunningham did not arrive until July 1783. Alexander's letters prior to the arrival of the letter convey his anxiety at the delay, and his letters after the news are full of his pride in purchasing the estate for £27,600, with rents and timber.

Traditionally this painting is said to depict the precise moment at which Claud Alexander finally receives word that he has purchased Ballochmyle. This was reported in 1920 by Manners and Williamson; the Green catalogue entry relates that the actual letter shown in the painting has been located in the family collection. Whether we can be certain about the exact identity of the letter in the picture is open to question (and there have been conflicting accounts of who the letter was from), but the central compositional role given to the letter itself, and the scale and size of the portrait itself, makes it quite
certain that the painting was commissioned to commemorate this momentous purchase, and with a view to decorating Alexander's new home with a reminder of the career in India that enabled him to become a very rich man.

What does it tell us about that period?

The painting is uniquely important in revealing the interconnections between regional, national and colonial life in the 1780s. It tells us about the concerns and ambitions of an East India Company nabob, and the professional ambitions of an artist newly arrived in a foreign country seeking to re-establish his reputation. The commissioning of the work, an ambitious, grand-scale portrait almost life-size, is unusual and suggests both the artist's ambitions and a rare trumpeting of a moment of social climbing on behalf of the patron. Commissioned and painted in India, but destined for a Scottish domestic setting, the painting exposes the profound links between empire and home, colonial wealth and the cultural life of Britain, and public and private life. There are no other works, of which we know, in which the purchase of a British country house through Indian wealth is so eloquently encapsulated.

Additionally, the work provides numerous insights into material history - Alexander wears a brown coat (which Webster suggests may be official garb), the servant carries Alexander's metal-tipped, malacca cane and tricorn hat, and himself wears a rather particular dress, and it shows, quite literally, the centrality of letter-writing in eighteenth-century global culture. The letter takes centre stage as an agent of momentous news.

The painting also illuminates the practicalities of artistic work in a colonial context. The unusually rich documentary evidence points to this painting being created quite specifically between September 1783 (when Zoffany arrived in Calcutta) and February 1784 (when Boyd left for England, and shortly before Zoffany left for a six-month excursion to Lucknow). As recorded in a letter from Alexander, the painting was shipped back to India House by December 1784.

Who made it/painted it/wrote it?

The painting is inscribed ‘Zoffany pinxit’ at bottom right and has been accepted as an important work by Johan Zoffany (1733-1810) by a succession of experts over the last century (Manners and Williamson, Mary Webster, and Martin Postle). The painting is also documented by a letter sent from Alexander to four members of his family, dated 8 December 1784, in which he records that he has sent ‘my picture... ‘a capital painting... painted by Zoffany’ on the ship Southampton to England (‘you will get out of the India House as soon as possible as it is a capital painting. I should be sorry if it got any damage, as it was painted by Zoffany a member of the Academy I imagine it will be exempted from duties’). There are no other works recorded by Zoffany as produced for Alexander. We will, however, note that there has been some confusion in the past, as Mildred Archer gave the work to Arthur
William Devis (1762-1822). This attribution was repeated by Beth Tobin, who seems simply to have followed Archer. The documentary and circumstantial evidence makes this an extremely unlikely scenario, especially as Devis arrived in India only after Boyd Alexander had left (a circumstance which Archer rather ingeniously explained away by proposing that Devis must have worked from a miniature).

Johan Zoffany is now well-established as one of the most significant figures in eighteenth-century British art. Born in Germany, Zoffany was based in Britain from 1760, secured royal patronage and was nominated by George III as one of the first members of the Royal Academy. His portraits, theatrical subject paintings and genre scenes are widely appreciated as among the most artistically and historically important works of the eighteenth century; his long, pioneering sojourn in India (1783-9) makes his career of further, special interest from the perspective of global and imperial history. His time in India has recently become the object of sustained academic attention by Maya Jasanoff and Charles Greig (in Johan Zoffany: Society Observed, pp. 125-39; 141-166).

No. of comparable items by the same artist already in the UK, in both public and private collections?

There are no other portraits by Zoffany of Claud Alexander, and there are no other full-length, near life-size, multi-figured compositions from Zoffany’s Indian period. The nearest comparison is Zoffany’s companion portraits of General Norman Macloed, and Sarah, Second Wife of Norman Macloed, in the Dunvegan Castle Collection, dated to 1787, which are also over two metres tall (but on two canvasses). They have none of the drama created by the scene and the interacting figures. We have found no reference to any other paintings, by any artist, of Claud Alexander.

Some thirty-three paintings and several drawings are known to survive from Zoffany’s years in India. Eight portraits from this period are in publicly accessible UK collections, although only four are multi-figured portraits, and none are on this scale. The Tate owns Colonel Mordaunt’s Cock Match (c.1784-6) and the Blair Family (1786), both on a smaller scale, and Aberdeen Art Gallery the conversation piece of the Morse and Cato families (1784). The portrait of the Auriol and Dashwood family is in the family collection. More survive in India.

2. Detailed explanation of the outstanding significance of the item(s).

Significance of figures associated with the item(s): maker/client/owners?

Claud Alexander was an important East India Company servant from 1772-1785, serving as Military Paymaster-General under Warren Hastings, at a
time when the East India Company was moving towards a greater professionalism. Alexander’s story is not just remarkable for his East India career, but for his subsequent re-invention as a Scottish laird, industrialist and philanthropist. He founded the Catrine Cotton Mill, built in 1790-1, working with David Dale (who worked with Richard Arkwright). In a 1791 letter he described the mills, built in 1790, with a water wheel of 30ft diameter, spinning 5000 spindles. A ton was being spun and sent to market each week, and it was the largest manufacturing establishment in Ayrshire, and the fourth largest in Scotland (Stanley D. Chapman ‘Fixed Capital Formation in the British Cotton Industry, 1770-1815’, The Economic History Review, ns, vol 23, no 2, Aug 1970, pp.235-266). Alexander also created a worker’s village with Church and Sunday school. Ballochmyle had literary connections – Robert Burns, a near neighbour, wrote The Bonnie Lass of Bannochmyle to Wilhelmina, Claud’s sister.

Boyd Alexander, the figure on the right in Zoffany’s picture, went to Bengal in 1776, and in 1778-9 was Deputy-Paymaster to the Garrisons at Patna. He lived in his brother’s house in Calcutta, before leaving India for good in February 1784. On his return to Scotland he was MP for Renfrewshire in 1796, and returned as representative for Glasgow in 1806.

The Alexander family has been the focus of historical enquiry. Charles Rogers wrote Memorials of the House of Stirling and of the House of Alexander (Edinburgh 1877), which includes some detail of this branch of the family. An abortive ‘serious social economic’ history of the Alexander family from 1500-1885 was begun by a descendant of the sitters, Boyd Alexander, but never completed. The same author transcribed Claud Alexander’s personal correspondence and left the transcripts to the National Archives of Scotland when he died in 1980. Most recently Viccy Coltman, Head of History of Art at Edinburgh University, has prepared a chapter on ‘Claud Alexander in Calcutta 1774-86’ for a book provisionally entitled The Scots in India. This analyses Alexander’s career as part of a bigger story of the role of Scots in a global empire. Alexander is referred to in articles by BR Tomlinson ‘From Campsie to Kedgeree: Scottish Enterprise, Asian Trade and the Company Raj’ in Modern Asian Studies, vol 36, no4, Oct 2002, pp.769-791 and Michelguglielmo Torri ‘Trapped inside the Colonial Order: The Hindu Bankers of Surat and Their Business World during the Second Half of the Eighteenth Century’ Modern Asian Studies, vol 25, no2, May 1991, pp.367-401. Claud Alexander is therefore a link between several fields of enquiry – the East India company, the role of Scots in empire, and specifically a ‘case-study in how a private fortune amassed in the East India Company service was invested in local industry back home in Scotland’ (Coltman).

The Indian servant, although as yet un-named, is represented on the same scale as the Alexanders and in a highly individuated way. He is presumably based on a specific model, possibly Alexander’s actual servant. Mary Webster has asserted that ‘the servant clearly engaged Zoffany’s interest; his face is carefully modelled as he looks out with oriental inscrutability and the accuracy of his lovingly painted dress combines a naturalness that contributes to one of Zoffany’s finest portrayals of an Indian’ (p.480). The pictorial purpose and
cultural significance of such figures within eighteenth-century portraits has been the focus of much scholarly debate and speculation, providing evidence of colonial attitudes towards race, class and identity.

**Significance of Subject-Matter**

As discussed above, the painting illuminates the profound connections between colonial and domestic life in the cultural and economic spheres. The experience of empire, its material histories, and the creation and maintenance of trans-global families and their status, has increasingly become the subject of academic discourse. In recent times the role of images and other aspects of material culture, and their role in creating and promoting identities has become the subject of book-length studies and scholarly articles by, among others, Natasha Eaton, Kay Dian Kriz, Douglas Fordham, David Solkin, Sarah Monks, Hermione de Almeida, and George H. Gilpin. In addition a more focussed study of the roles of Scots in empire was pioneered in Helen Smailes’ exhibition and book *Scottish Empire – Scots in Pursuit of Hope and Glory* (SNPG 1981), part of an increasing awareness of the role of empire in creating opportunities and political leverage for Scots within the British union (for which see also Linda Colley ‘A Scottish Empire’ in her influential *Britons: Forging the Nation 1707-1837*, 1992, pp.117-132).

**Significance of materials/process/usage?**

The canvas, rarely for an eighteenth-century work, is unlined.

**Is/are the item(s) of local/regional/national importance?**

Yes; in fact the painting ties local and national (Scottish and British) history together, and connects these with a global history of empire.

The painting arrived at Ballochmyle soon after its creation, and remained in the family until 2010. It celebrates the purchase of Ballochmyle by Claud Alexander, and hung there as a reminder of the Indian connection (a photograph of it in situ is illustrated in catalogue of Sotheby’s sale, 8 December 2010, lot 42). It is part of the history of Ballochmyle, and through Claud Alexander’s works as philanthropist and industrialist it also has broader interest as part of the history of Ayrshire. It is of Scottish national importance as it is an image of a prominent landowner and cultural figure, and it has much broader significance for its role in illuminating the role of Scots in the Empire.