

# New discoveries concerning the portrait of an unknown man, the Island of Dominica, and an unscrupulous dealer

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Dorinda Evans



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Circle of Sir Joshua Reynolds (?)

*Portrait of a Man from the Island of Dominica (?)*, about 1770–80  
(detail)

[\[+ info\]](#)

Circle of Sir Joshua Reynolds (?)  
*Portrait of a Man from the Island  
 of Dominica (?)*, about 1770–80  
 Oil on canvas, 76 × 63.5 cm  
 Museo Nacional Thyssen-Bornemisza,  
 Madrid, 383 (1983.37)



This bust portrait of an unknown man in white – long misattributed and misidentified – first came into public notice in England, where there is a precedent for this kind of likeness. Given its original location, it is possible that the sitter was the African servant or enslaved black attendant of a wealthy British citizen. In such a case, his outfit would bear witness to that citizen's status. But while his striped silk coat could be seen as conventional household livery, the tall hat – in high-quality linen or silk, topped with lace – is quite extraordinary.<sup>1</sup> Its design makes the identity of the sitter open to question. In fact, the representation of this stunning crown has played (and must play) an operative role in the interpretation of the picture.

# 1

I am indebted to Aileen Ribeiro (Courtauld Institute of Art) and Clare Browne (Victoria and Albert Research Institute), specialists in costume, for identification of the fabrics. They differed in opinion on the hat. It could be silk (backed with cardboard) or starched linen.

fig. 1

**Agostino Brunias*****Free West Indian Dominicans*, about 1770****Oil on canvas, 31.8 x 24.8 cm****Yale Center for British Art, New Haven,****Paul Mellon Collection, B1981.25.74**

The portrait can be dated by the man's neckpiece and the cut of his coat, as well as the painting style, to about 1780. As a whole – including the canvas size and painted oval – the picture is convincingly English, but the sitter need not be. There are alternatives: he could be a foreign visitor from Africa or its diaspora, and this could explain the odd hat design.

## 2

For official, see Diana de Marly, *Dress in North America*, vol. 1, *The New World, 1492–1800*, New York, Holmes & Meier, 1990, 116. For dandy, see Mia L. Bagneris, *Colouring the Caribbean: Race and the Art of Agostino Brunias*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2017, 195. Unfortunately, there is no known Dominican / Caribbean expert in period dress.

## 3

See the similar hat in Brunias' painting, *Market Day*, Roseau, Dominica, about 1780 (Yale Center for British Art) and in the mistitled 1804 engraving after a lost picture by Brunias of the linen market on Dominica (Barbados Museum & Historical Society).

Contrary to what might be expected, the closest approximation to this hat is not found on an African aristocrat or an African Muslim of the period. Instead, its twin – though not identical – is found sitting on the head of a free West Indian on the island of Dominica, as depicted by Agostino Brunias in about 1770 [fig. 1]. The analogous cylindrical headpiece in Brunias' picture is probably made from pleated linen capped with bobbin lace. Its well-dressed wearer has tentatively been identified as both a plantation official and a 'dandy'.<sup>2</sup> This headgear seems to be unique to Brunias' known work. A second version (with tufts of probably linen at the top) is worn by an Afro-Dominican man and child in other Dominican pictures by Brunias.<sup>3</sup> This strengthens the connection with that Caribbean island without being conclusive evidence of a link. If the Thyssen sitter is



fig. 2  
**Agostino Brunias**  
***The Linen Market, Dominica, about 1775***  
Oil on canvas, 49.6 × 64.8 cm  
Colección Carmen Thyssen,  
CTB.1986.22

Dominican, he probably fled to England as part of the exodus of English planters just before the French claimed the island from the English in 1778.<sup>4</sup>

Whether Dominican or not, the sitter might have been sufficiently successful to have commissioned the portrait himself. Alternatively, it could have been a gift from him or for him, relating to a friend. An example of such a gift – thought to have been bankrolled by the Duke of Montagu – is Thomas Gainsborough's 1768 portrait of Ignatius Sancho (National Gallery of Canada), the black composer, writer and anti-slavery campaigner who had once been a slave. The possibilities are almost endless. Yet further research is thwarted by the absence of the sitter's name, his profession or even the (certain) identity of the portrait's first owner. Unfortunately there is not enough evidence to draw any definite conclusions concerning his identity.

With the face and hat rendered in relatively broad brushstrokes, the portrait follows the general painting style of Sir Joshua Reynolds, the first president of the Royal Academy in London (1768–92). The artist of this likeness was clearly talented and apparently intrigued by the challenge of convincingly rendering flickers of light on the coat's slightly ribbed, cream-coloured surface. The dark colouring of the sitter's skin and hair in shades of brown, rust and black provides a marked contrast to the nuanced differences in the sheen of the off-white clothing. Although the position of the collar is distorted on the left side (as if not drawn when worn), it is perhaps to call attention to the smooth surface of the silk lining of the sitter's coat and the fine linen or muslin of his shirt ruffle and neckcloth. Sadly, in spite of the rarity of the subject and the pictorial merits of the portrait – which would lead to an expectation of its recognition when created – there is no record of it having been exhibited or engraved in England in the 18th century. Nor does it appear in any such records in the 19th century.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4

The free people of colour and slaves in Dominica were remarkably fond of dressing up in fine clothes, including silk [fig. 2]. For this, see Thomas Atwood, *The History of the Island of Dominica*, London, J. Johnson, 1791, 220, 261. The island had been under British control since 1763. Governor Thomas Shirley left for England in June of 1778 with many Anglo-Dominican planters, and the French arrived on 7 September 1778. See Robert A. Myers, *A Resource Guide to Dominica, 1493–1986*, New Haven, Human Relations Area Files, 1987, vol. 1, 6. Unfortunately, Brunias' known patrons (who owned his pictures or to whom he dedicated his engravings of Dominica) and Shirley's papers do not lead to a connection.

#### 5

The portrait, for instance, is not in image indexes for *The London Magazine or Gentleman's Monthly Intelligencer*, 1747–83; *Gentleman's Magazine and Historical Chronicle*, 1777–86; and *Lady's Magazine*, 1770–85. It also does not appear as a portrait of a black or 'negro' man in Algernon Graves' indexes to the exhibitions at the Royal Academy of Arts, the Society of Artists of Great Britain and the Free Society of Artists (scanned for mentions). Furthermore, it is not found in the present indexes



fig. 3  
**Angelica Kauffman**  
*The Ely Family, 1771*  
Oil on canvas, 243 × 287 cm  
National Gallery of Ireland, Dublin,  
Presented, 4th Marquess of Ely, 1878,  
NGI.200



fig. 4  
**Ozias Humphry**  
*Christiaan van Molhoop, about 1795*  
Pastel on paper, 72.5 × 61 cm  
Tate Britain, London, Purchased with  
assistance from Tate Members and the  
Sir Robert Horton Bequest, 2013, T13796

to English and Caribbean newspapers of the 18th century; the main published indexes of British auction records; and indexes to dealer stock books at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles.

###### 6

For the relatively recent re-identification of the artist and sitter in Humphry's portrait, which was exhibited at the Royal Academy, see the website for Tate Britain (<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/ozias-humphry-284>).

As for the subject's characterisation, the Thyssen likeness is distinctive when compared to the usual treatment of an African attendant to a European or to a Briton. In contrast to such renderings, his hat is not the plumed, Orientalising concoction habitually used in a fashionable attempt to make the black slave or servant more 'exotic'. The practice served as an expression of foreign luxury or empire. In 1771 the Swiss-born artist Angelica Kauffman painted a portrait of the aristocratic Ely family in Ireland accompanied by a young (albeit Indian) page, at right, depicted in this tradition [fig. 3]. Another example is the English painter Ozias Humphry's portrait of about 1795 of Baron van Nagell's running footman [fig.4], who would accompany his employer's coach. His livery, including an elaborate, feathered headpiece, befitted a public person and, in its exoticism, was almost certainly not the same as that of other household servants. Since the baron was the Dutch ambassador to Great Britain, this servant (who had once been a slave) was unusual in wearing the red, white and blue colours of the Dutch flag.<sup>6</sup>



fig. 5

**Sir Joshua Reynolds**  
***The Right Honourable John Manners, Marquess of Granby, and a Groom, 1766***  
 Oil on canvas, 245.5 × 207 cm  
 Royal Collection Trust,  
 RCIN 405894

The representation of well-dressed dark attendants (usually a turbaned boy or young man) became so fashionable that Reynolds used his own black footman as a model for several pictures, casting him in the role of a groom in his 1766 portrait of the Marquess of Granby [fig. 5].<sup>7</sup> Such additions – like the horse, the uniform and the military background – served to increase the sitter's status. As the dark-skinned subordinate to a powerful man, the groom could easily be read as either a slave or a freed servant.

Like Reynolds' footman, the Thyssen sitter might have been an artist's model. However, the argument against this is that in such a case, it is likely that the portrait would have been exhibited or engraved as an advertisement, showcasing the artist's talent. Besides this, the sitter might be expected to appear in other pictures. So far there is no record to support this, and the peculiarity of the headdress is difficult to understand in the context of a model.

7

On Reynolds' servant, see James Northcote, *The Life of Sir Joshua Reynolds...*, London, Printed for H. Colburn, 1818, vol. 1, 204.

In general, there are differences between the Thyssen portrait and the exotic type that are consistent enough to merit noting. Humphry's portrait is executed as if the sitter were a theatrical character with his head tilted and a look of suspicion or scepticism. This must have been in accordance with the baron's wishes in the commission. By comparison, the Thyssen sitter, with his upright posture, reveals less about his personality, but has greater dignity or gravitas. As in Humphry's portrait, there is also a psychological presence, in acknowledgment of the viewer. This is not always found in portraits. Surely this sentience and characterisation are due to the artist's skill, but they suggest a degree of respect for the subject that adds to the mystery of this unknown individual.

With so much undisclosed, the prominent hat in the Thyssen portrait inevitably played a role in an accretion of erroneous interpretations. Superficially it resembles a standard chef's toque, but that archetypal hat did not come into being until the 1820s, too late for this sitter but perfect for complicating interpretations of the portrait.<sup>8</sup> The chef's identification not only stuck but also got to be elaborated over time. For about forty years in the 20th century, the Thyssen portrait was misidentified and published as Gilbert Stuart's portrait of George Washington's cook. It is neither by Stuart – who is famous for having painted admired portraits of the first president of the United States – nor of Washington's cook. Such a person never wore a hat like this.

8

Cooks did not wear toques before 1821, when French chef Marie-Antoine Carême introduced and popularised the hat. See Daniel Engber, 'Who Made That? (Chef's Toque)', *The New York Times Magazine*, 28 March 2014, 24.

9

Clara Marcellán Fernández, curator at the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza, found a similar silvered, bunched-leaf frame on John Hay's 1666 portrait of Samuel Pepys (National Portrait Gallery, London).

The first part of this mix-up – the mistaken attribution – was apparently due to a self-educated art dealer from New Zealand, Reginald Nankivell (1898–1977), who styled himself Rex de Charembac Nan Kivell and ran the Redfern Art Gallery in London. He was the one who publicised the portrait as by the English-trained, American artist Gilbert Stuart, and affixed a small plaque with Stuart's name (and wrong dates) on the 17th-century English frame, which he might have provided.<sup>9</sup>



fig. 6

Unidentified photograph of the painting,  
12.7 × 10.2 cm, in Scrapbook, [52],  
*Papers of Rex Nan Kivell, 1938–1977*,  
Archive, National Library of Australia,  
Canberra

**10**

See the *Papers of Rex Nan Kivell, 1938–1977*, Ms 4000, at the National Library of Australia, Canberra. The photograph is found in Ms 4000, Series 2, Miscellaneous – Nan Kivell's Scrapbook Albums, item 6 (listed as Box Folio), [52].

**11**

The date of the scrapbook is estimated by Nathaniel Williams – Nan Kivell's biographer and formerly an archivist at the National Library of Australia – in a letter to Dorinda Evans of 2 December 2021. He thought the photograph was probably a reprint and checked to find that nothing is written on the reverse. I am indebted to him for his help.

**12**

The Witt photograph (filed under Gilbert Stuart, *Unknown Sitter*) is close to but not the same as the one in Nan Kivell's album. It shows more sheen on the bridge of the sitter's nose. A photocopy of a sheet of paper with the provenance is pasted on the reverse of the photographic mount. Because it is a photocopy, the mount must date after 1959.

**13**

The handwriting was identified by Nathaniel Williams in a letter to Dorinda Evans of 21 November 2021.



fig. 7a

Detail of lighting on the lips  
of the sitter in fig. 6



fig. 7b

Detail of lighting on the lips in the  
*Portrait of a Man from the Island  
of Dominica (?)*

Fortunately, the National Library of Australia has preserved Nan Kivell's surviving papers, which include an early photograph of the portrait with its plaque [fig. 6].<sup>10</sup> The image is undated and unidentified in a scrapbook album that he compiled probably in the mid-1970s.<sup>11</sup> As a document, it is useful in establishing that the portrait has since experienced minor retouching, as in the lighting on the lips [figs. 7a, 7b]. Another early photograph of the portrait, on a mount from probably the early 1960s, is in the Witt Library's archive at the Courtauld Institute of Art, London.<sup>12</sup> Attached to the mount is a photocopy of a piece of paper giving the early provenance or history of the picture. Significantly, the writing is in Nan Kivell's own hand.<sup>13</sup>

## 14

Curiously, Nan Kivell's papers include a variation on his Thyssen provenance. See his copy of a letter of 4 February 1969 to Alan Walker of the National Library of Australia (Ms 4000, Correspondence, January–July 1969 [File 51] – Box 5, National Library of Australia), in which he states that his formerly-owned portrait of Lord Hobart (National Library of Australia) by Sir Thomas Lawrence 'came from the Hulbert family who originally lived at Tilshead Manor, Wiltshire'. The family was 'friendly with the Lawrence family (Sir Thomas' father) ... and apparently the friendship lasted through Sir Thomas' life time because the Hulberts had several Lawrence portraits and a portfolio of Lawrence's drawings'. Rather than supporting the Thyssen provenance, this record of origin – which shifts the friendship to an earlier generation – contributes to doubt. John Hulbert's brother purchased the Tilshead Manor Farm but not until 1864. John Hulbert's father, Thomas, was ten years younger than the artist and lived on a farm, away from the town of Devizes. Moreover, the artist lived in Devizes only from the ages of three to ten. Additionally damning, Nan Kivell's portrait of Lord Hobart is now not considered to be by Lawrence. In truth, there is no known, supporting evidence that the Hulberts ever owned any work by Lawrence. I am grateful to Wiltshire historian Lyn Dyson for Hulbert and Lawrence family research.

## 15

Lucy Peltz, senior curator at the National Portrait Gallery, London, has worked on Thomas Lawrence's collection, which was primarily focused on drawings. She confirms that there is no known inventory of the collection in her email to Dorinda Evans of 8 July 2021.

He wrote that the original owner was the English artist Sir Thomas Lawrence, and that Lawrence gave the portrait to John Hulbert of Lavington, Wiltshire, at the time of Hulbert's marriage to 'the daughter of Lord Wolsley'. As he explained, Lawrence and Hulbert had been 'boyhood friends' in Devizes, Wiltshire. Two parts of this record are particularly troublesome: Hulbert provably did not marry a daughter of a Lord Wolsley; and the two men could not have been childhood friends because Lawrence was about forty-six years older than Hulbert.<sup>14</sup> There also is no surviving support for the story that Lawrence, who had a notable art collection, ever owned the portrait.<sup>15</sup>

Mention of the Hulberts reveals more than a mere recital of the picture's history. John Hulbert's heir and youngest daughter was Fanny Louisa Hulbert, who had an interest in art and, in her old age, effectively adopted the much-younger Nan Kivell.<sup>16</sup> After she sold the art that she possessed along with inherited belongings (catalogue not extant), she purchased a controlling interest in the Redfern Art Gallery in 1930 and, a year later, put Nan Kivell, who worked there, in charge as managing director.<sup>17</sup> When she died in 1934, he became her executor and sole heir. This is one way he could have acquired the Thyssen portrait if it had descended to her.

Although the gallery promoted contemporary art, Nan Kivell, on the side, was an avid collector of artefacts and art related to the past of Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific. Eventually, he sold his huge, historically important collection to the Australian government for a fraction of its real value, and this generosity led to a long-desired knighthood.<sup>18</sup> His preferences in his collecting add to the enigma of the origin of the Thyssen portrait in that they suggest – importantly – that the picture could easily have been purchased without Fanny Hulbert playing any role in its acquisition.

## 16

John Hulbert (1815–1853) was a prosperous Wiltshire farmer who left his household goods to his wife, Louisa, including ‘books, prints and pictures’. See his will in *Wiltshire Wills and Probates*, P1/1853/19, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre, Chippenham, Wilts., England. His wife’s will (P31/1/38/194, Wiltshire and Swindon History Centre) divided her possessions between her two daughters with the proviso that the survivor would inherit everything. The survivor, Fanny Louisa Hulbert, left her entire estate to ‘my dear and adopted son’, Rex Nan Kivell (her will, proved 19 March 1934, London Registry).

## 17

Fanny Louisa Hulbert sold the contents of her house in Codford, Wiltshire, on 4 September 1930 through an auction conducted by Woolley and Wallis. It was advertised in the *Western Gazette* of 29 August 1930. I am indebted to Lyn Dyson for this find.

## 18

On his quest for knighthood, see John R. Thompson, ‘Nan Kivell, Sir Rex De Charembac (1898–1977)’, *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, Melbourne, Melbourne University Press, 2000, vol. 15, 460.

## 19

According to biographer Nathaniel Williams, ‘Nan Kivell wouldn’t be beyond inventing a provenance’. Email to Dorinda Evans of 5 October 2021. Numerous lies that he told about himself are known, such as that he had been ‘gassed on the Western Front’, although he saw no action. For this, see Thompson 2000, op. cit. note 18.



fig. 8

**John Webber**

***A Chief of the Sandwich Islands, 1787***

**Oil on canvas, 147.3 × 114.4 cm**

**Rex Nan Kivell Collection, The National Gallery of Australia and the National Library of Australia, Canberra**

For instance, one of Nan Kivell’s characteristic acquisitions is a 1787 oil portrait of a chieftain of the Sandwich Islands by John Webber [fig. 8], the English artist who accompanied Captain James Cook on his third Pacific expedition. The man’s fantastic, plumed headpiece is expressive of Nan Kivell’s taste for the rare, exotic and flamboyant – as is the hat in the Thyssen portrait. Moreover, if he had bought the Thyssen portrait without a known provenance, he would have been acting in a way consistent with his past to supply one from his imagination.<sup>19</sup> Whatever its origin, the portrait meant more to him than most of the pictures he handled because, toward the end of his life, he pasted a photograph of it in the one preserved album that contained his favourite gallery memories.

The Thyssen portrait's provenance is indisputable only after it came into Nan Kivell's possession, which was probably about 1935/40. Regrettably, the gallery's records up to 1939 were destroyed during World War II, and there is a gap in what survives that might cover the period of its acquisition.<sup>20</sup> In fact, there is no mention of the portrait in Nan Kivell's surviving papers – just the lone photograph. Nor does it appear in the Redfern Gallery's early 20th-century catalogues and clippings at the Victoria and Albert Museum.

A socialite, heiress and author – Daisy Fellowes (1890–1962) – purchased the portrait from the Redfern Gallery apparently by about 1945. This is when she mentioned it as representing a 'chef' in an undated letter to the British diplomat, Duff Cooper, who was close to her and must have known the portrait. She refers to her friend Jean Cocteau, who was a Surrealist artist and had written an Orphic Trilogy, as Orpheus, and writes: 'Orfaus [sic] is downstairs with pencil and paper prepared to make me look like a cross between the chef and Lloyd George'.<sup>21</sup> David Lloyd George, the British prime minister, was easy to caricature because of his inordinately bushy moustache, but the Thyssen portrait could top that as being of a black man with an outrageously elaborate – as it would seem – chef's toque. From Daisy, the portrait descended to her daughter, Ermeline Isabelle Edmée Séverine, Countess A. de Castéja (1911–1986). Before her death, Baron Thyssen-Bornemisza acquired the portrait in 1983 at the Hôtel Drouot sale of her collection, with the Hulbert provenance still intact, and he sold it to the Spanish state a decade later.

The picture might have been forgotten if it were not for an undated photograph of it in a small room used for dining, taken in Daisy Fellowes' house [fig. 9]. The image was reproduced in a 1977 article on Fellowes when the painting belonged to her daughter, Ermeline. Shown above a sideboard, the unknown sitter is now understood as projecting such an undeniable chef's identity that he exemplifies the use of the room. Taking a cue from its attribution to Stuart, who was closely associated with George Washington, Ermeline identified the picture for the journal *Connaissance des Arts* as allegedly that of Washington's cook. Whether that idea dates further back is not known, but this label – provided just after

## 20

It does not appear in the Redfern Gallery catalogue for a 1937 *Portraits* exhibition; the Redfern Gallery Press Cuttings, 1923–59; or the Redfern Gallery elephant folios for 1937–40 in the library of the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. I am grateful to assistant-librarian Alex Chanter for checking. According to Nathaniel Williams, Nan Kivell's archives, 1920–39, were destroyed during World War II. Email to Dorinda Evans of 2 December 2021.

## 21

See her undated letter, now numbered 8, in 'Daisy Fellowes' Letters to Duff Cooper, 1934–1948', DUFC 12/16, Churchill Archives Centre, Churchill College, Cambridge, England.



fig. 9  
**Roger Guillemot**  
**Interior View of Daisy Fellowes' House,**  
**undated. Lost photograph reproduced**  
**in *Connaissance des Arts* 302,**  
**April 1977**

the American Bicentennial – gave a new, self-propelling fame to the sitter with the showy hat. Indeed, it was not long before the name of the real cook – Hercules Posey, as the slave was called – could be supplied. Wrongly understood, the picture appeals to ameliorating fantasies about American slavery and helps fulfil a desire in the United States to find overlooked African-Americans of historical importance.

Due to its mistaken identity, the portrait was lent to the exhibition *Lives Bound Together: Slavery at George Washington's Mount Vernon* held in 2016 at Washington's home in Mount Vernon, Virginia. To take advantage of its presence, Mount Vernon's senior curator, Susan P. Schoelwer, convened a small group of scholars and conservators – including specialists on Stuart – on 13 March 2017 to discuss the work. The focus of the meeting was its questionable attribution. Two authenticated portraits by Stuart were present for comparison. The conclusion of those present, that not only the attribution but also the sitter's identification were wrong, caused the Museo Thyssen-Bornemisza to remove both designations.

With the present undermining of what was thought to be known, scholars are left with the portrait itself as the only reliable document on which to base further research. The artist, the sitter or the meaning of the costume might be determined in the future, especially if historical mention can be found. Meanwhile the picture's history tells an enlightening tale about a London dealer's deception; the ways in which a misidentification can build on itself; and the fame that naturally accrues to a work that can be linked to both Washington and African American history. As it is, the picture assumes value as a well-painted, arresting portrait. In all likelihood, with so much missing, it will always remain completely or partly a mystery. ●