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Postures After the Antique in Eighteenth-Century Portraits of Women

Abstract

This paper re-examines the relationship between eighteenth-century portraiture and the antique where women adopt the postures of floating female figures from Pompeiian wall paintings in eighteenth-century portraiture. I argue that eighteenth-century floating portraits afforded their female sitters an opportunity to assert classical knowledge while adhering to typical conventions of femininity.

Keywords

Portraiture, classical reception, Pompeii, classical antiquity, Herculaneum Dancers, Antichità di Ercolano

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Cover Page Footnote

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This essay seeks to contribute to the understanding of gender, portraiture, and classical antiquity by proposing that portraits of eighteenth-century women obtained classical knowledge by adopting the bodily postures of floating women depicted in Pompeiian wall paintings. Women in these ancient Pompeiian wall paintings floated against a black background, poised in mid-dance with drapery accentuating their movements. There was a change in later eighteenth-century European portraiture when a substantial number of portraits began to likewise depict women as floating in midair or with the toes of one foot positioned on the ground with the other foot aloft as though floating in the air. While not every eighteenth-century portrait depicts a woman that is floating in the same way as Pompeiian wall paintings, I will refer to the portraits in this manner as “floating” for shorthand since one or both feet of the sitter are typically suspended in the air.¹ Posed in this way, women assumed the postures of ancient artworks and were thereby granted the air of classicism typically afforded to sitters of portraiture through other means. Seen through the lens of Arline Meyer’s notion of the “attitude” in the eighteenth century, which she believes constitutes ideas beyond the simple pose of the sitter, women in floating portraits asserted their classical knowledge with their adopted postures (45). Judith Butler argues that gender identity is constituted through the repetition of corporeal acts established through gestures, movements, and enactments (“Performative Acts” 519). In the case of the floating portraits, the repeated physical attitudes adopted from Roman wall paintings created an avenue through which eighteenth-century women could present a visual identity authorizing classical knowledge within the scope of feminine standards. This essay will first establish how Pompeiian wall painting circulated to artists throughout the eighteenth-century world before turning to ways in which the floating portraits presented classical knowledge. After examining select examples of floating portraits, I will contextualize the change in the fashion of women’s portraiture to mimic the postures of Pompeiian wall paintings in relation to established, sensual representations of women inspired by classical antiquity. My reinterpretation argues that eighteenth-century floating portraits allowed their sitters to assert classical knowledge while still adhering to typical conventions of femininity. That is, the floating portraits of eighteenth-century women catered to the male gaze while simultaneously signaling a subversive engagement with classical knowledge.

Eighteenth-century portraits in connection with classical antiquity

In eighteenth-century portraits, there are several distinct classes for how an artist depicted their sitter in relationship to classical antiquity. One popular category associated with the Grand Tour depicted men amid renowned classical sculptures or with monuments of the Greco-Roman world present in the background, as

Pompeo Batoni's portraits exemplify.² I will refer to such portraits as "in the style of Batoni," since Batoni was one of the most prolific painters in this genre. However, others included Angelica Kauffman, Andrea Casali, and Anton Raphael Mengs.³ Scholars have interrogated the antiquities included in men's portraits for their meanings, such as Christopher M.S. Johns's exploration of national identity through Batoni's *The Honourable Colonel William Gordon* (385-90).⁴ Although the presence of women on the Grand Tour in the eighteenth century is well documented,⁵ painters of the time did not as frequently depict women in the style of Batoni, surrounded by ancient artworks.⁶ Additionally, eighteenth-century portraits of men in settings other than the Grand Tour also referred to antiquity, depicting their sitters as collectors amongst their classical objects. Frequently these portraits of collecting or examining antique objects aligned their sitters with eroticism. An example of this connection is Richard Cosway's *Charles Townley with a Group of Connoisseurs*, which Vicky Coltman concludes fetishizes antiquity as the men present ogle the nude Venus statues (159-90).

Another popular classification in which portraiture and classical antiquity collided was the portrait historié, wherein the artist presented the sitter as an allegory or in mythological guise. Marlen Schneider, for example, tracks the social implications of the rise and fall of the portrait historié, which began earlier in the century with men and was later adopted by portraitists of women to celebrate beauty, youth, and grace (208-21).⁷ There is also targeted scholarly interest in investigating Grand Tour portraits of women who fashioned themselves through mythological guise. Leo S. Olschki's work asserts that Batoni painted many women in the guise of the goddess Diana in connection with antiquarian literature interests of the time (404-7). Thus, learned eighteenth-century men largely posed as themselves amid antique sculptures and architecture reflecting eighteenth-century trends aligning classical antiquity with masculinity (Lajer-Burcharth 399-400). In contrast, eighteenth-century women, in their portraits, were primarily subsumed in characters from ancient myth.

However, there was another category for women's portraits in connection to antiquity beyond allegory or the portraits in the style of Batoni: that of assuming the posture of classical artworks. This was a classification noted in men's portraiture earlier in the century, especially in relation to the Apollo Belvedere.⁸ In addition, I propose that a trend emerged in the late eighteenth century where artists frequently depicted women as floating or with one foot aloft and drapery fluttering around them. Eighteenth-century women adopted this pose from floating figures of women in Pompeiian wall paintings, thereby associating their bodily postures with classical artworks. In a portrait by John Hoppner, for

example, Emily St. Clare adopts the stance of a Pompeiian wall painting of a woman holding a tambourine above her head (Fig. 1).



Figure 1. John Hoppner, English (1758–1810). *Portrait of Emily St. Clare as a Bacchante*, Oil on canvas. 94 3/8 x 58 1/2 in (239.7 x 148.6 cm). The Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, Kansas City, Missouri. Gift of Robert Lehman, 45.1. Photo courtesy Nelson-Atkins Media Services.

Both position their feet similarly in the air, with only one foot of St. Clare barely alighting on the ground. St. Clare's drapery also billows in the wind like the wall painting. The similarity of the portrait to the Pompeiian wall painting could be considered as only a coincidence or that the Pompeiian wall paintings were too obscure to have had such vast influence. However, the discovery of Herculaneum and its environs beginning in 1709 drew many travelers to examine finds in

person. It spurred publications in the last quarter of the eighteenth century that disseminated information about the Pompeian wall paintings throughout Europe. The wide dissemination of Pompeian discoveries gave artists opportunities to encounter the floating women of Pompeian wall paintings that in turn inspired the floating portraits of women beginning in the late eighteenth century.

Dissemination of the *Antichità di Ercolano Esposte* and the Herculaneum Dancers

The systematic excavations of both Herculaneum that began in 1738 and Pompeii in 1748 fell under the strict Bourbon jurisdiction of King Charles VII and his son, Ferdinand, both of whom employed a host of regulations to maintain a monopoly on the discovery. Visitors had to apply for permits to visit, and if they were successful, they had to be accompanied under supervision, with drawing and note-taking strictly forbidden.⁹ In their quest to control the excavated objects and information disseminated about them, the Bourbons suppressed initial attempts at publication, such as Marchese Venuti's report about the discovery of the Villa of the Papyri (Trevelyan 105). Despite such attempts to regulate knowledge, information about the findings leaked to the public, and as interest in the sites grew, so did the pressure to publish. The Royal Publishing House, under Ottavio Antonio Bayardi, published some volumes on Herculaneum including *Prodromo delle antichità d'Ercolano* in 1752 and *Catalogo degli antichi monumenti dissotterrati dalla discoperta città di Ercolano* in 1754. However, these publications had only fleeting references to the objects and contained very few illustrations.

Official publications debuted in the midcentury and increased in pace as the eighteenth century wore on. In 1755, Bernardo Tanucci and King Charles VII formed the Royal Herculaneum Academy of Archaeology, a group of fifteen scholars in charge of publishing the objects and paintings. This committee was responsible for publishing eight volumes of *Le Antichità di Ercolano Esposte* from 1757-1792 (Mattusch 14-5).¹⁰ The *Antichità* was only selectively distributed at the beginning, often given as gifts, and therefore prohibited copies of accounts of the site continued. King Ferdinand IV eventually authorized wider dissemination of the volumes in the 1770s.¹¹ Accompanying this more extensive distribution were also versions of the *Antichità* printed in different languages and at lower price points than the original, sizeable *Antichità* with costly illustrations.¹² The translated and cheaper versions of the text ensured a much larger viewership towards the end of the eighteenth century. The impact of translation on the arts was highlighted in a letter Ferdinando Galiani wrote in 1767 to urge translation of the *Antichità* into English: "All the goldsmiths,

costume-jewelry makers, painters of carriages and ornamental panels need this book. Did Your Excellency know that everything these days is made *à la greque*, which is the same as saying *à Erculanum?*” (qtd. in Bologna 79). The wide dissemination of the *Antichità* gave the artists who painted the floating portraits ample access to Pompeiian wall paintings.

The volumes of the *Antichità* included many engravings of the floating women from Pompeiian wall paintings, whose postures were then adopted by women in eighteenth-century portraits.¹³ The most popular floating figures of Pompeiian wall painting replicated in the *Antichità* were the so-called Herculaneum Dancers (Fig. 2), which is a misnomer since they were excavated from the Villa of Cicero in Pompeii. Raleigh Trevelyan attributes this mistaken provenance to Herculaneum to the wall paintings’ inclusion in the *Antichità di Ercolano*, first published in 1757, whose title would suggest finds were only from Herculaneum despite being otherwise (105). The Herculaneum Dancers refers to a series of wall paintings of floating women found at the Villa of Cicero in 1749 in two different rooms, according to modern scholarship’s interpretation of excavation records (Ciardiello “Le antichità” 82). *In situ*, the Herculaneum Dancers were wall decorations, but when they were excised from the walls of the Villa of Cicero, they were transformed into individual vignettes for display at the Museo di Portici in Naples.¹⁴ This was the typical practice under the Bourbons who were not interested in expanses of colored walls and instead preferred transforming decorative motifs into framed works of art for the Museo di Portici (Najbjerg 59-66). Various also called *danzatrici*, *ballatrici*, *bacchantes*, or *maenads*, the Herculaneum Dancers depict women as if arrested in mid-dance, floating against a black background and with drapery accentuating their movements. These women are often associated with *bacchantes*, and their attributes indicate such a role: thyrsi, baskets, jugs, plates, and wreathes of ivy.



Figure 2. Select plates of the Herculaneum Dancers from the *Antichità*. Top to bottom, left to right: floating woman with tambourine (*Le Antichità di Ercolano Esposte*, part 1, plate xx), floating woman with cymbals (part 1, plate xxi), floating woman holding up drapery (part 1, plate xviii), floating woman with a basket on her head (part 3, plate xxxi), floating woman with thyrsus and staff (part 1, plate xxiv), floating woman with hooded drapery (part 3, plate xvii), floating woman with billowing drapery and plate (part 1, plate xix), floating woman with ewer and plate (part 1, plate xxii).

While the Herculaneum Dancers were the most renowned group of floating women from the *Antichità*, many others in a similar style with fluttering drapery were also found in the environs of Pompeii, and these were likewise influential in the eighteenth century. For example, a particular image of a bacchante shown against a black background and carrying a cymbal and thyrsus, though its provenance was in the House of Naviglio in Pompeii, was commonly grouped by eighteenth-century antiquarians with the Herculaneum Dancers (Osanna et al. 70). Wall paintings of floating women beyond the Herculaneum Dancers were also published in the *Antichità*.¹⁵ Nor were women the only figures that appeared floating in Pompeian wall paintings; floating male figures and floating putti also appear in the illustrations published in the *Antichità*.¹⁶

The floating figures of Pompeian wall paintings were enormously popular in the eighteenth century because they exemplified the era's ideals of beauty and grace.

The *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society described the Herculaneum Dancers as having “attitudes of which are very genteel, and the drawing pretty” (“Extract of a Letter from Naples” 157). In a letter to Count Brühl in 1762, Johann Joachim Winckelmann wrote of the Herculaneum Dancers: “The work of a great master, they are as fleeting as a thought and as beautiful as if they were drawn by the Graces” (Winckelmann 83). In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century travelogues, both male and female travelers to Italy wrote admiringly of these floating figures, calling them, for example, “exquisitely beautiful” (Buckingham 325), “very graceful attitudes” (Miller 80), “elegant” (Waldie 90), and “very graceful” (Flaxman 68). The immense popularity of the Herculaneum Dancers and other floating figures from Pompeii permeated the visual arts of the long eighteenth century, including eighteenth-century portraits of floating women.¹⁷

Ennobling portraits with classical knowledge

Before turning to specific examples of eighteenth-century portraits, I will demonstrate how floating portraits ennobled women with classical knowledge. The act of taking on the posture of antique artworks, as undertaken by female sitters, was a mode of knowledge rather than simply a visual signal about knowledge. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone sees kinesthesia as driving knowledge; it is through motion that one can establish a relationship with the world (116–18). Repeatedly posing in the stances of Pompeian wall paintings for portraits engendered an identity forged with classicism. For example, Sophia Catherine Musters, who sat for Sir Joshua Reynolds from May to December of 1782, might have developed a kinesthetic relationship to classical antiquity when adopting a pose derived from the Herculaneum Dancer carrying an ewer and plate, thereby curating knowledge and connoisseurship. Since the body can act as a site for disseminating socio-cultural information, adopting postures of antiquity in portraiture inserted women into the realm of classical knowledge (Caviglia 19).

Another way sitters of floating portraits ennobled the female body was through neoclassical fashion, which the sitters of the floating portraits wore. Neoclassical fashion often signified an authentic, artistic truth (Rauser *The Age of Undress* 29). The associations between gender and dress are parsed by fashion scholar Jennifer Jones, who connects the emergence of the austere costume in the late eighteenth century to a masculine taste for classical forms that subsequently drove out earlier eighteenth-century preferences of women (117 ff). This adoption of the classical style in dress elevated female fashion from an art associated with frivolity to one imbued with noble simplicity (Cage 205). Women’s adoption of this type of dress allowed them to take on roles as arbiters of taste and to function as works of art themselves.¹⁸ The assumption of classically inspired garments in the portraits of

floating women indicated knowledge of the elevated discourse of neoclassicism through the lens of female fashion.¹⁹

Allegory created another avenue through which the sitter of the floating portrait was associated with classical antiquity. Many, but not all, portraits of floating women tend to be allegorical. The women in floating portraits took on allegories and mythological guises such as Flora, Hebe, Wisdom, Hope, and Iris. This correspondence between floating portraits and the guises adopted in them reflected a familiarity with the text of the *Antichità*, which frequently attempted to link the floating women of Pompeiian wall painting with mythological figures or allegories. For example, the Herculaneum Dancer with an ewer and plate is named by the *Antichità* as Hebe (Part 2, 221). Women who adopted the pose after this Herculaneum Dancer were typically identified as Hebe through the titles of their portraits.

Allegorical portraits elevated the genre of portraiture, serving as a way for the sitter to insert herself into an intellectual or historical sphere (Eliasson 60; Isman 396; West *Portraiture* 148–53). Allegorical guises could afford female sitters a significance they did not possess in life, allowing them to challenge traditional gender roles, as discussed by Kathleen Nicholson (“The Ideology” 33, 36). Marcia Pointon asserts that the pervasive mode of allegory in eighteenth-century portraiture of women “rescued” portraiture from likeness and instead inserted the sitter into a complex discourse whose meaning resonated culturally (177, 12). Thus, adopting a classical guise elevated the sitters of floating portraits to participate in the intellectual discourse of the classical.

Connecting the floating figures of Pompeiian wall paintings and eighteenth-century portraits of women

A closer look at several examples of floating women in eighteenth-century portraiture will demonstrate their thoroughgoing connection to Pompeiian wall painting, neoclassical dress, and allegory. The male and female artists who created these portraits were of varying nationalities, and their combined careers spanned the long eighteenth century. Many, however, were male and British, reflecting the general enthusiasm of the British at that time for consuming antique culture and the many artists from Britain who flocked to Italy. Given the popularity of traveling to Italy, most floating women's portraits were connected to Italy through the artist, sitter, or patron.

Often portraits of floating women directly quoted the Herculaneum Dancers. For example, Élisabeth Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait *Julie LeBrun as Flora* (Fig. 3) copies

the Herculaneum Dancer who carries a basket on her head.²⁰ Both Vigée-Lebrun's Julie and the Herculaneum Dancer face the viewer, their bodies turning to the right.



Figure 3. Elisabeth Louise Vigée-LeBrun, *Julie LeBrun as Flora*, 1799, Oil on canvas, Museum purchase, Collection of the Museum of Fine Arts, St. Petersburg, Florida.

Each woman balances a basket atop her head, using a hand for additional support. The shawl fluttering behind Julie mimics the diaphanous flow of the drapery of the Herculaneum Dancer with the basket. Both wear garments that reveal the body. In the case of Julie, her neoclassical dress exposes her left breast draped only in translucent fabric. There are slight differences: Julie's feet are not visible in Vigée-Lebrun's painting, and she grasps a laurel crown instead of a thyrsus. Nonetheless, Vigée-Lebrun takes pains to allude to classical antiquity. In lieu of the black background of the Herculaneum Dancer, she has painted a Neapolitan volcanic landscape, clearly situating Julie in a classical context. Mt. Vesuvius was

a big draw of the Grand Tour, given its connections to the destruction of ancient Pompeii. The volcano was frequently pictured in portraits commissioned by those on a Grand Tour, such as one of Goethe by Wilhelm Tischbein. Vigée-Lebrun's inclusion of Vesuvius in the portrait of Julie signals the Neapolitan landscape and all its associated ancient finds, which may suggest that we read this floating portrait, and Vigée-Lebrun's many others of floating women, through a classical lens.²¹ Further situating Julie in a classical context is her adoption of the guise of Flora, Roman goddess of flowers. Although Vigée-Lebrun never mentioned seeing the Pompeiian wall paintings in her narrative *Souvenirs*, it was possible she viewed the Herculaneum Dancers at an excursion to the Museo di Portici while in Naples. More likely was an encounter with the wall paintings through her connections with Sir William and Lady Emma Hamilton either at their house in Caserta, where copies of them were pictured on the walls (Richter 35), or in Sir William's library that held a copy of the *Antichità* (Touchette 138).²²

A portrait of Louisa Hope by Henry Bone, commissioned in 1813 by her husband, Thomas Hope, who had been on a Grand Tour in his youth during the late 1780s, also directly quotes a Pompeiian wall painting. Louisa Hope holds a shawl behind her in an exact mirror image of the Herculaneum Dancer who holds one end of a piece of drapery above her head with her right arm and the other end below, at her hip.²³ The way she uses her left hand to pull her dress across her body reveals her curves. Hope's feet poise one in front of the other as though caught in movement, again paralleling the wall painting. Thomas Hope's fascination with ancient costume likely informed the portrait; he published a book reproducing many of the Herculaneum Dancers (Watkin and Hewat-Jaboor 79).²⁴ Hope wrote in the 1812 edition that he desired to aid the artist to appropriately costume their figures and that the illustrations were intended as a model for the artist and not the antiquarian (5-10). In the original 1809 volume, an image is included that is a mirror reversal of the Herculaneum Dancer on which Louisa Hope's posture is modeled (Hope 113), and in the revised 1812 volume, he directly reproduces that Herculaneum Dancer (Hope 209). Bone was likely one such artist encouraged to use Hope's designs in his work.

Some artists did not exactly replicate a Herculaneum Dancer in their portraits, but they certainly alluded to Pompeiian wall paintings of floating women.²⁵ John Hoppner frequently adopted the style of the floating women of Pompeiian wall paintings for his female sitters.²⁶ One example is his portrait of Lady Heathcote in the guise of the goddess Hebe (Fig. 4).



Figure 4. James Ward after John Hoppner, *Lady Heathcote*, 1804, British Museum, London. *British Museum*, 1902,1011.6161. © The Trustees of the British Museum. Shared under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0) license.

In this portrait, Lady Heathcote, her hair and neoclassical garments windswept, looks as though she is just alighting onto the clouds. The way her shawl billows behind her recalls the floating women of Pompeian wall painting, and so does the position of her feet. Furthermore, the ewer and dish she carries evoke the Herculaneum Dancer who holds the same items and is associated with Hebe. An artist like John Hoppner, associated with the Royal Academy beginning in 1775, had access to the *Antichità* since all volumes were in their library.²⁷

In a portrait of Maria Mirska holding a cymbal in each hand, one raised above her head and the other held below her waist, Polish artist Jan Rustem combines

references to two Herculaneum Dancers (Fig. 5). The posture of Mirska evokes the same Herculaneum Dancer whom Louisa Hope was modeled after as well as another Herculaneum Dancer, one who holds the cymbals. The seemingly windswept movement of her neoclassical dress and shawl accentuate her body.



Figure 5. Jan Rustem, *Allegorical Portrait of Maria Mirska, Barbara Szumska, and Adam Napoleon Mirski*, 1808, National Museum in Warsaw, MP 308 MNW. © Copyright by Ligier Piotr/Muzeum Narodowe w Warszawie.

Interest in Poland in neoclassical culture was well substantiated by King Stanisław August Poniatowski's collection, such as *Dessins enluminés des peintures trouvées à Herculaneum*, a collection of watercolors from Pompeii, including the Herculaneum Dancers (Miziołek *Muse, Baccanti e Centauri* 38). This volume, purchased sometime around 1786, was inspired by the *Antichità*, which Poniatowski received as a gift from King Ferdinand IV in 1762 (Miziołek *Count Stanisław* 8-9). It was likely Rustem came across such sources during his art education in Warsaw with the Painting Establishment at the Royal Castle. Hubert Kowalski and Jerzy Miziołek suggest that a further inspiration for the portrait of Maria Mirska was an 1808 performance of tableaux vivants at the

Potocki Palace in Warsaw where staged in a room of live statues was “Lorcía en danseuse d’Herculanum” (121-2).

Influences on floating women portraiture

Scholars in the past have attributed the iconography of portraits of eighteenth-century floating women to a myriad of sources, with different ones for each painting, but never has the entire genre been ascribed to the single source of Pompeiian wall painting. The attribution of floating women to the influence of Old Masters in Italy is a popular connection. In Rome, eighteenth-century artists had the opportunity to study sixteenth- and seventeenth-century paintings that sometimes included women who appear to be floating or have fluttering drapery. For example, Julius Bryant suggests Raphael’s *Galatea* in the Villa Farnesina as a source for Sir Joshua Reynolds’s portrait of Sophia Catherine Musters in addition to the possibilities of the *Madonna Immaculate* in a Bolognese altarpiece by Ludovico Caracci and a portrait of Olivia Porter by Anthony van Dyck (Bryant 335).

Likewise, scholars often attributed eighteenth-century portraits of floating women to various antique influences. These range from the *Herculaneum Dancers* themselves to other exemplars of ancient artwork. For example, Alex Kidson suggests that a portrait by George Romney of Viscountess Elizabeth is modeled after Raphael’s *Galatea* or after a figure from a Greek vase painting (107–8). Diane Lesko attributes influence to both the *Farnese Flora* and Pompeiian wall painting for Vigée-Lebrun’s portrait of Julie (3), and the Utah Museum of Fine Arts marks both the *Herculaneum Dancers* and the *Erechtheion Caryatids* as inspiration for Vigée-Lebrun’s *Princess Evdokia* (Anderson).

While these individual attributions remain valid, the ubiquity of the *Herculaneum Dancers* in eighteenth-century material culture supports Pompeiian wall painting as the primary source for the portraits of floating women of the long eighteenth century. The *Herculaneum Dancers* decorated interiors on walls, ceilings, and floors;²⁸ porcelain;²⁹ furniture and decorations;³⁰ and other smaller items such as gems³¹ or micromosaics in the eighteenth century.³² This presence in the decorative arts was undoubtedly facilitated by the increased access in the later eighteenth century to the illustrations of the *Herculaneum Dancers* in the *Antichità*. As already established, some floating women’s portraits directly quoted specific *Herculaneum Dancers*, while others instead more generally recalled the larger corpus of floating women from Pompeii. Both direct and indirect quotations of the Pompeiian wall paintings were also common in the decorative arts, so this phenomenon was not limited to portraiture.³³

Another important supporting factor for the popularity of these floating women at the turn of the century was Emma Hamilton, first the mistress, and later the wife, of the English ambassadorial envoy to Italy, Sir William Hamilton. After arriving in Naples in 1786, Lady Emma Hamilton began performing her so-called Attitudes, a series of fluid poses that mimicked and were inspired by the ancient world. In her renowned performances of the Attitudes, she often donned a classically inspired robe and sandals and used a shawl to transform from one classical pose to another (Holmström 119–20). Lady Hamilton’s Attitudes were deeply inspired by classical antiquity, including the Herculaneum Dancers. Artists such as Vigée-Lebrun routinely depicted Lady Hamilton as a bacchante in her portraiture, often mimicking the Herculaneum Dancer with the tambourine as in *Lady Hamilton as Bacchante*. These connections between Lady Hamilton’s Attitudes and the Herculaneum Dancers are well-established in scholarly studies.³⁴ By utilizing such ancient sources, Helen Slaney draws from Sheets-Johnstone’s kinesthesia as knowledge model to suggest that Lady Hamilton could imaginatively conceptualize the ancient world (32). Lady Hamilton was also an exemplar of the way in which men possessed a woman through the voyeurism of the connoisseur. Terry Robinson suggests that Hamilton was depicted in contemporary satire as an object of the connoisseurly gaze that stimulated the flesh (20–2). Sir William Hamilton and Lady Emma Hamilton are also used by Ann Bermingham as an illustration of how the eighteenth-century accomplished woman was an aesthetic object to be gazed upon by the connoisseur (505–8). The sitters of floating portraits displayed classical knowledge through kinesthesia, like Lady Hamilton, and likewise became aesthetic objects for the male connoisseur.

Many portraits of floating women in the eighteenth-century bore a striking resemblance to Lady Hamilton by including fluttering shawls, which made sense since Lady Hamilton also sought inspiration from the Herculaneum Dancers. For example, Rosaria Ciardiello suggests that the vogue for assuming the position of a bacchante stemmed from Lady Hamilton’s Attitudes, and therefore assigns the pose of Maria Mirska, as painted by Jan Rustem, to the influence of Lady Hamilton (“Influenza” 86). The Herculaneum Dancers and Lady Hamilton enjoyed a rise to popularity together, bolstering each other along the way. This strong connection was born out in visual culture, including many of the portraits of floating women of the eighteenth century.

While scholars attribute influences for floating women portraits to ancient artworks, Old Master paintings, or even Lady Hamilton, the floating figures of Pompeian wall paintings most fully explain all the characteristics. The windswept hair, the billowing drapery, the classical dress, the feet precisely

placed one in front of the other, and the attributes included in the eighteenth-century portraits of floating women make a case for a single source of inspiration in Pompeian wall painting. Take, for example, the *Portrait of Princess Karoline von Liechtenstein* by Vigée-Lebrun, where the connection to an Old Master painting like Guido Reni's *Aurora*, a fresco in the Casino dell'Aurora in Rome, is visually compelling. However, Vigée-Lebrun includes Mt. Vesuvius in the background, indicating a more likely geographical context of Naples over Rome. Indeed, other visual images, such as Old Master paintings, were contributing factors in the popularity of the style of floating women. Still, the trend is far too widespread to be ascribed only to disparate sources when a single-source influence can be identified that was so prominent in eighteenth-century material culture.

Sensualizing and eroticizing the antique

The sitters of floating portraits staked their claim to classicism through kinesthetic knowledge, neoclassical dress, and allegory. However, the portraits presented this classical knowledge within the scope of sensualized and eroticized relationships of the female body and classical antiquity that were common in the eighteenth century. Thus, portraits of floating women allowed their sitters to signal vicarious participation in intellectual circles while remaining within socially approved norms of eighteenth-century womanhood.

However, like other eighteenth-century portraits, those of floating women also sensualized their subjects, adhering to standards of feminine depiction in relationship to classical antiquity. The female body was unquestionably displayed for the male gaze in the floating portraits, a display facilitated by the neoclassical, free-flowing garments that rose to popularity beginning in the 1790s.³⁵ This robe à la grecque style of the high-waisted, white muslin gown worn with a cashmere shawl freed the woman's natural body from the more structured, corseted mode of dress, consequently making the female body more readily available for the consumption of its male viewers. The more natural female body was also aligned with nature, which in turn was closely associated with feminine sexuality (Perry 29). Additionally, the materiality of white muslin enhanced perceived notions of sexuality with its transparency that called attention to the skin beneath the garment.³⁶ In the floating portraits under consideration, the looser neoclassical style of the drapery clung to the body, revealing its curves, seemingly blown by a gust of wind that made the body a consumable, sensuous object. Depiction of such sensuous female bodies in portraiture walked the line of idealized beauty and as such was still able to facilitate the discourse of high art, such as classical knowledge (Kriz 56). Therefore, the portraits of eighteenth-century floating

women resonated with already established modes of sensualizing the female body through classically inspired fashion.

The sensuality of the portraits of floating women aligned with other established patterns of correspondence between antique artworks and the eroticization of the female body in connoisseurship. For example, *The Dilettanti Gem Group* by Sir Joshua Reynolds features men examining ancient gems. The way in which the men encircle the gems with their thumb and forefinger “replicate[s] the ancient *figus* gesture that signifies female genitalia” (Redford 101). This gesture established connections between female sexuality, classical antiquity, and connoisseurship. In another portrait by Reynolds, *The Dilettanti Vase Group*, members of the Dilettanti examine the publication of Sir William Hamilton’s collection of Greek vases. One man holds a woman’s garter while looking out toward the viewer; Andrew Carrington Shelton suggests that this detail situates women in a “hierarchy of aestheticized commodities that runs the gamut from antique vases to fine wines to sexual conquests” (136). Additionally, erotic associations of the female body with classical antiquity were also forged between the moving body and the connoisseur. This was illustrated previously with Lady Emma Hamilton who, while posing after antique artworks, was also portrayed as an aesthetic object “possessed” by the connoisseurly gaze of Sir William Hamilton. In the case of the genre of floating women portraits, their bodies sensuously draped in neoclassical dress in an adopted posture after antiquity similarly cast them as antique artworks for the male connoisseur to objectify, sexualize, and eroticize.

Dualistic approaches in the eighteenth century

Floating portraits of the eighteenth century relied on dualistic approaches toward women’s relationships to classical antiquity. On the one hand, the floating portraits presented sitters ennobled with classicism through kinesthetic knowledge, neoclassical dress, and allegorical guises. On the other hand, the portraits presented this classical knowledge within the scope of sensualized femininity. The tensions between the nobility and sensuality of floating women accorded with dualistic approaches toward eighteenth-century women and classical knowledge in general, as attested by other artworks. A famous example of this dualism, the *Venus de Medici* offers a case study of the complicated reception of the classical, female body in the eighteenth century, where she is seen both as a paradigm of art and nature and as a threat through her erotic appeal.³⁷ This is illustrated by Wendy Frith in two case studies of the *Venus de Medici* in garden landscapes in the eighteenth century. At Castle Howard, the *Venus de Medici* is enclosed within a private, natural glade, associating the statue

with the “virtuous body that is fashioned in obedience to nature and conforms to nature’s laws” (Frith 72–4, 77). At Wycombe, however, the Venus de Medici was displayed in a temple with high visibility for consumption of the female body and in an environment rife with sexual allusions (Frith 79). Much like the case of the Venus de Medici in the British landscape, the floating women of portraiture reflected the seemingly contradictory landscape of the female classical body in the eighteenth century.

In a challenge to the trends eroticizing women, the floating portraits asserted classical knowledge though they still operated in a sensual sphere appropriate to women. This type of subversion was notable in other eighteenth-century artworks where women similarly disrupted normative modes of femininity. For example, miniature women’s almanacs were a subversive mode of female participation in Enlightenment knowledge. The miniaturizing of paintings in the almanacs’ pages and their decorative covers presented a feminized knowledge, yet women were able to thereby participate in the discourse of history painting (Whyte 164–7). Grand Tourist Anna Amalia utilized the fan, an object scripted with feminine performance, to advertise her classical knowledge and travels (Lindeman “Gendered Souvenirs” 60). Likewise, portraits of floating women asserted classical virtuosity within the established scope of femininity: fashion, allegory, and object of desire.

Conclusion

The fashion that appeared at the end of the eighteenth century for taking on the postures of Pompeiian wall painting in women’s portraiture was a new mode of representation for women that quickly gained popularity. Recognizing the floating portraits as a trend is significant for establishing how eighteenth-century women curated classical knowledge through portraiture. Previously established categories of women’s portraiture that relied on neoclassical dress or allegory to signal classical virtuosity were not the only ways to indicate classical knowledge in the eighteenth century. Floating portraits instead present a new mode for understanding how women might visually claim classical knowledge in the eighteenth century: through bodily engagement with antiquity. However, women’s associations with antiquity in floating portraiture were anchored within an eighteenth-century world that prized duality. Women donned classical clothing that by its very presence ennobled the sitter. However, the way the fabric interacted with and revealed the body also sensualized the sitter. Women presented themselves as arbiters of classical knowledge by adopting bodily postures and guises after the antique. However, that same body was also consumed by the male gaze that eroticized the antique. The postures of Pompeiian

wall paintings that sitters repeatedly adopted across portraits of the long eighteenth century facilitated a subversive mode of feminine knowledge. Sitters of these portraits asserted their authoritative classical knowledge veiled within the sensual and erotic standards of feminine depiction in relationship to classical antiquity.

¹ Additionally, many of these portraits have clouds as a groundline on which the sitter's feet alight, which is suggestive of floating on air.

² For more on Pompeo Batoni's portraits of Grand Tourists, see Barroero and Mazzocca; Bowron; and Bowron and Kerber.

³ See, for example, Marks.

⁴ See also O'Dwyer.

⁵ For women on the Grand Tour, see Brian Dolan, who documents case studies of women who used the Grand Tour for educational pursuits, improving health, escaping domestic situations, and general cultivation. Attilio Brillì likewise explores the female experience on the Grand Tour through a series of case studies of women who visited and lived in Italy.

⁶ A portrait of Margaret Georgiana Poyntz, later Viscountess Spencer, is depicted seated against the backdrop of the Colosseum. Another good example is Angelica Kauffman's portrait of Anna Amalia, also with the Colosseum in the background, that Christina Lindeman calls a celebration of "navigating within the realm of male institutions" (*Representing Duchess Anna Amalia* 44). While portraits like this of Grand Tour women in the style of Batoni are unusual, plenty of women travelers had portraits commissioned while in Rome. For example, see James, or Tremellen, who challenge the idea of a uniform, recognizable genre of Grand Tour portraits.

⁷ For a more specific case study of French allegorical portraiture, see Nicholson "Beguiling Deception."

⁸ For example, a portrait by Pompeo Batoni of the 4th Duke of Gordon, Sir Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Captain Augustus Keppel, or van Haecken's (after Allan Ramsay) portrait of Norman McLeod all depict their sitters in the pose of the Apollo Belvedere.

⁹ Some visitors drew or took notes from memory after their visit; however, others were sneakier. Lady Anna Miller was one such crafty visitor who explains: "Observe I have not dwelt half as long as I might have done upon this cabinet of curiosities for such indeed it is; but my time and memory both fail me, it being with the most utmost difficulty I contrived to take a few notes in my pocket-book, without being observed" (Miller 83).

¹⁰ Volumes one through four and seven of the *Antichità* series depicted wall painting and were also entitled *Le Pitture Antiche d'Ercolano e contorni incise*.

¹¹ An example of unauthorized distribution includes Johann Winckelmann's 1762 *Letter on the Herculanean Discoveries* and 1764 *Report of the Latest Discoveries at Herculaneum*, both of which published some finds before the *Antichità*. Other publications in the English-speaking world included the *Gentleman's Magazine*, *Annual Register*, *Philosophical Transactions* (Mattusch 15-16). Jérôme Charles Bellicard and Charles-Nicolas Cochin published unauthorized sketches made from memory in a book, *Observations sur les antiquités de la ville d'Herculaneum*, in 1754 (Ramage 165).

¹² The volume was also translated into different languages; for example, John Lettice and Thomas Martyn published an English version in 1773 with illustrations by Grignon (Chevallier 58). Pierre Sylvain Maréchal and François-Anne David translated the volumes of the *Antichità* into French from 1780-1803 and Christoph Gottlieb von Murr and Georg Christoph Kilian into German from 1777-1779 (Ramage 163). Also making the volumes more widespread were cheaper, smaller editions that circulated around Europe (Tassinari 65), including one by Tommaso Piroli in 1789 called *Le Antichità di Ercolano* (Ciardiello "Influenza" 80).

¹³ A selection of floating women illustrated in the *Antichità*: part 1, plate xvii, xviii, xix, xx, xxi, xxii, xxiii, xxiv; part 2, plate xxix; part 3, plate xxvii, xxix, xxx, xxxi; part 4, plate xix, xxiv, li; part 7, plate xv, xviii, xxxix, xl, xliii.

¹⁴ See Ciardello “La Ricostruzione” (Fig. 9) for a recent reconstruction of what the Herculaneum Dancers would have originally looked like on the walls of the triclinium of the Villa of Cicero.

¹⁵ A selection of floating female figures outside of the Herculaneum Dancers from the *Antichità*: Part 2- plate xxxix, xl; Part 4- plates xix, xxiv, l, li; Part 5- plates xv, xviii, xxxix, xl, xlii, xliii.

¹⁶ A selection of floating male figures from the *Antichità*: Part 3- plate xlvi; Part 4- plates xxviii, xxxii; Part 5- plate xxxvi, x.

A selection of cupids from the *Antichità*: Part 3, plates xxxiv, xxxv; Part 4, plate li.

¹⁷ For an overview of Pompeiian wall paintings in eighteenth-century artworks, including the Herculaneum Dancers, see Ramage. For an extensive discussion of eighteenth-century artworks that draw from the Herculaneum Dancers specifically see Ciardiello “Influenza” (82-6).

¹⁸ This argument is put forward by Rauser, who sees women in neoclassical dress as living statues, inserting themselves into cultural discourse (“Living Statues” 484).

¹⁹ This is argued by Susan L. Siegfried who asserts that the classical figure and fashion were commensurate types of knowledge in Marie Denise Villers’ *Une étude de femme d’après nature* (93).

²⁰ Similar also to this portrait of Julie is another by Vigée-Lebrun of Princess Evdokia.

²¹ Select examples of other floating portraits by Vigée-Lebrun: *Lady Hamilton as Bacchante* directly mimics the Herculaneum Dancer with the tambourine; the portrait of Princess Karoline by Vigée-Lebrun does not exactly quote any specific Pompeiian wall painting, but instead draws from the body as a whole, with the woman surrounded by billowing drapery and floating in midair against a volcanic landscape; like this painting is another by Vigée-Lebrun of Pelagia Saphiha.

²² Vigée-Lebrun mentions going daily to the Caserta house while painting a portrait of Lady Hamilton (68).

²³ *Portrait of a Lady* by Angelica Kauffman quotes this same Herculaneum Dancer similarly.

²⁴ Figures that were modeled from the Herculaneum dancers in Hope vol. II include: “Grecian female” (178), “Bacchante dancing” (180), “Grecian female from a fictile vase” (185), “Dancing girls” (209).

²⁵ A good example of a portrait that references no specific Herculaneum Dancer is one painted by Sir Thomas Lawrence. Although Lady Leicester holds a branch in her hand and floats in midair, she recalls no specific wall painting. She is generally evocative of figures of floating bacchantes, such as from the House of Sirico. Richard Cosway’s *Lady Duff* similarly evokes the spirit of the floating figures of Pompeiian wall painting without referencing one painting.

²⁶ Other Hoppner portraits that also are evocative of the Herculaneum Dancers include a portrait of Lady Charlotte Campbell floating in midair and holding flowers that is in the spirit of the floating women in Pompeiian wall painting, such as figures from the House of Sirico or the House of Marcus Lucretius, and a painting commissioned of Emily St. Clare holding a tambourine that directly references the posture of the tambourine-holding Herculaneum Dancer.

²⁷ The first four volumes containing wall painting were likely a gift from the King following a letter by Sir Joshua Reynolds to Sir William Hamilton in 1769 and probably arrived shortly thereafter making them some of the earliest books in the collection. The volumes were definitively in the collection prior to 1801 when John Flaxman wrote desiring further volumes to round out the collection (*Le Pitture Antiche D’Ercolano E Contorni Incise*).

²⁸ A selection: the Pompeiian Room in Ickworth House near Bury St. Edmunds (Ramage 169); the Pompeiian room in the Schloss Friedensthal in Gotha (Praz fig. 22); the Palazzo Altieri in Rome, Pompeiian room in hunting lodge at Ludwigsburg Palace in Baden-Württemberg, the Grüne Galerie in the Neuer Schloss of Stuttgart, the Castle of Wörlitz, the Derby House and Syon House in London, and Osterley Park House in Middlesex (Ciardiello “Le antichità” 68–9), the Dining Room of Château Malmaison (Ciardiello “Influenza” 84).

²⁹ A selection: plate with a dancing maenad manufactured by the Real Fabbrica Ferdinanda in the Galleria Nazionali di Capodimonte, Inv. N. 468 (Caròla-Perrotti fig. 261); cups and plates from the

Collezione d'Arte Villa Cagnola with images of the dancers, Inv. 377A, 377b (Claut fig. 74); plate manufactured by the Fabbrica Michele Giustiniani (Rotili plate XXXIV).

³⁰ A selection: an English sideboard with the figures in grisailles (Praz fig. 23), a Wedgwood pair of girandoles in the Wedgwood Museum (Reilly fig. 373).

³¹ A selection: a carnelian intaglio by Antonio Pazzaglia (Tassinari fig. 7), a glass paste cameo from the Staatliche Münzsammlung in Munich (Tassinari fig. 23), a tortoiseshell cameo (Tassinari fig. 24), an onyx cameo from the Museo Boncompagni Ludovisi in Rome (Tassinari fig. 28).

³² For example, a Herculaneum Dancer micromosaic plaque from necklace (Grieco fig. 139).

³³ For example, an eighteenth-century sofa from the Palazzo di Capodimonte has four roundels of floating women on its back (Osanna et. al. 1.18). The roundel on the end depicts a woman who carries a basket on her head and thyrsus in her hand as a direct quotation from the Herculaneum Dancers wall painting from the Villa of Cicero. The other three flying women carry shawls that billow behind them in circles in the spirit of the Herculaneum women, but do not precisely match any of the floating figures of Pompeiian wall painting.

³⁴ A selection: Holmström; Touchette; Lada-Richards; Chard; Faxon; Jenkins and Sloan; Contogouris; Richter and Quilitzsch.

³⁵ As Laura Mulvey established in her seminal article "Visual Pleasure and the Narrative Cinema," women connote a *to-be-looked-at-ness* (62). In the eighteenth century, for example, Shearer West sees the body of the actress as both a locus of voyeurism and one of cultivated cultural decorum ("Body Connoisseurship" 158–60).

³⁶ Though as Rauser argues, eroticism was not the only intent and effect of the transparent neoclassical dress; it also engaged in the honesty of transparency (*Age of Undress*, 66–9).

³⁷ For the reception of the Venus de Medici by travelers to Florence, see Hale.

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