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The Aesthetics of Colonialism: George Chinnery's Portrait of Gilbert Elliot, 1st Earl of Minto, 1812 — [Source link](#)

Victoria Coltman

Institutions: Edinburgh College of Art

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This article ~~charts/surveys~~ the condensed lifecycle of an early nineteenth-century ~~British imperial~~ portrait of a Governor-General of Bengal: ~~starting with from~~ its commission ~~by the merchants of Calcutta and~~, its execution by George Chinnery, an expatriate British artist in ~~India, Calcutta~~. ~~From there, it proceeds to examine~~ its reception by the sitter, ~~Gilbert Elliot~~ and by family members who accompanied ~~him/him~~ to India. ~~This leads on-~~to a transfer of ownership, which resulted in ~~the portrait's~~ passage to London and its immediate afterlife in the wake of the sitter's death ~~when it was reproduced~~ as a memorial engraving. Chinnery's *Gilbert Elliot, 1st Earl of Minto* (Figure 1) has never previously been the focus of sustained art historical discussion or detailed visual analysis. On an initial viewing, it is easy to dismiss as one of a series of colossal portraits of nineteenth-century colonial governors that seem all swagger and no substance, in Tracy Anderson's provocative summary of portraits of a later Viceroy of India; overburdened by its awkwardly-posed figure and crowded with literal and allegorical objects that reference on a scale from overt to elliptical the sitter's preeminent administrative role ~~in India in Britain's empire as Governor-General of Bengal~~ from 1807 to 1813.¹

The ensuing discussion seeks to find substance in its swagger – to investigate the cultural politics of this ~~understudied/imperial~~ portrait as being embedded in (and pictorially embodying) what Nicholas Dirks has called the aesthetics of colonialism.² It offers a ~~case-study of the cultural lineaments of large-scale, public portraiture – as a distinctive genre within the aesthetics of colonialism~~ ~~micro-art-history of portraiture and empire~~ in which the sequential stages of the evolution, reception, passage and reproduction of the portrait are recounted via a close reading of the personal correspondence of the sitter and members of his family. Particular attention is given to the familiar letters composed by Minto that were shipped by the packet from the Indian subcontinent to his absent wife Anna Maria, who remained in Britain during his Governor-Generalship. Parts of this voluminous epistolary archive dealing with what Minto dubbed 'the Indian chapter' of his history were previously published by his great-niece, the then Countess of Minto, in her volume *Lord Minto in India*, (London, 1880).³ They are now in the National Library of Scotland. In one of Minto's letters

dated 9 April 1809 he insists that its contents should 'be considered as address'd to the family only, & not as a circulating library volume...I think in general that pecuniary arrangements, & private interests are not fit subjects of general communication & gossip'.⁴ Three months later he was even more emphatic, writing 'I do not write (like Mr. Pope, not I truly) familiar letters with a distant forecast of publication – none of my descendants, Executors, administrators or assigns will be guilty of such impiety as to send me to the press.'⁵ While Minto's great niece would later be guilty of such impiety, as he put it, the letters that refer repeatedly to the portrait that form part of his familiar correspondence were not included in her 1880 volume. Tellingly, given his aversion to a wider audience in the form of publication, neither were those just cited - even though she devoted a chapter to 'Family Letters - Edinburgh in 1809', which includes a number of examples from that year from Minto's continuous cascade of correspondence.⁶

Historians of the British Empire have long recognised the wide range of ways in which family and empire are entangled.⁷ According to Durba Ghosh's often-cited conclusion, 'The empire was, in many ways, the family writ large', so for the Minto clan, the family was also the empire in miniature, with Minto as the patriarch of a sprawling, fractured unit that was simultaneously domestic and colonialimperial, affective and imperious.⁸ Two of his sons participated directly in his Governorship, with John Edmund, who had been in India since 1805, elevated from the unremarkable post of writer to that of his father's private secretary and George captaining the *Modeste*, the frigate that took Minto first to India and later to Java as part of the military expedition whose victory the portrait by Chinnery commemorates. Minto wrote to his wife regarding John's accelerated promotion as follows: 'I cannot pretend to have chosen him on the grounds of great experience or habits of business, but I could nowhere else have found, in a greater degree, one of the principal comforts and advantages which this office was intended to furnish, I mean that of safe, faithful and cordial communication in all matters of confidence'.⁹ Their eldest son, also Gilbert, remained in Scotland managing the estate at Minto in the Borders; 'Gilbert's reasonable views and moderate habits made [sic] lead more slowly indeed than a longer residence in India, but still

lead to a state of comfort for us [Minto and his wife] and him.’¹⁰ What such a state of comfort might have comprised is articulated in a later letter of June 1810 from Calcutta: ‘I have a vehement desire [writes Minto] to see, at length, my estate and family relived entirely from every encumbrance of debt. The money I now send must be strictly applied, therefore, to the payment of debt, I mean such sums as are expressly appropriated to that purpose’.¹¹

The portrait of Minto that claims our attention in question (Figure 1) was executed by an expatriate British artist, George Chinnery, who was then the principal portrait painter in Calcutta, from 1812. Since 1772, Calcutta had been the administrative capital of Bengal, and a major centre in the later eighteenth-century for the production of portraiture, second only to London in Britain’s empire of faces.¹² Chinnery’s twenty-three year sojourn in India was one of the most prolonged of the eighteen British portrait painters based there between 1770 and 1825 and discussed by Mildred Archer in her survey text *India and British Portraiture*. Archer organises her artists chronologically, so Chinnery is her last arrival in Madras in December 1802, where his brother John Terry Chinnery was already working for the East India Company. When George Chinnery left Calcutta for the China coast in 1825 it seems to have been to escape his overbearing wife, Marianne, who had finally followed him to India by 1818 – the artist’s own kin should not be overlooked in our discussion of the family in its colonial iteration. A contemporary of Chinnery’s suggests another possible reason: ‘differences between Mr. and Mrs. Chinnery were not exclusively the cause of his disappearance from Calcutta. There were *differences* with his creditors too’ with a reputed £40,000 worth of debts.¹³

Chinnery has been described more recently in contradictory terms; introduced in an account of *British Romantic Art and the prospect of India* under the rubric ‘the last romantic artist of India’, whose art is immediately said to be ‘far more imperial than Romantic’.¹⁴ Such classifications (romantic/imperial) are especially obfuscatory if subscribing to the view that in India, romanticism was ‘a doctrine of colonial appropriation’.¹⁵ They are also particularly reductive in relation to the uneven quality of Chinnery’s pictorial output. ‘He likes landscape

painting a thousand times better than portrait painting’, wrote one of his sitters in a letter of 1825, in a statement echoed by his twentieth-century art historical biographer: ‘Portraits were his bread and butter, but his inclination lay rather with landscape and topography’.¹⁶ Since Chinnery rarely signed his oil paintings, many inferior examples are misattributed to him, hence his portrait output looks noticeably second rate and has not improved since Archer wrote this in 1979.¹⁷ His discreet group of about a dozen self-portraits, in contrast, are immediately characterful and art historically rich, especially the artist viewed from behind, and these primarily late works from the Macao period deserve to be better known among scholars of this solipsistic sub-genre of portraiture.¹⁸ Chinnery was persistently haunted by fears of his professional reputation, which seems to have been compounded rather than alleviated by his distance from the metropolis. In July 1814, he wrote his former sitter the Earl of Minto a characteristically obsequious and chaotic letter:

‘Respecting the Portrait I had the honour to execute for your Lordship [Figure 1]...I fear tho’, indeed I am sure, that in England, where art has been set in the soil of Emulation and has produced such flourishing examples of successful culture it will suffer by comparison - The Exhibitions, the great stimulus to Exertion on the Scale of Excellence, where the example of others, paves the way to our own endeavors, I am away from! I have nothing here to guide or to help me – all must be my own – I paint with Chinnery & sometimes excel him, but sometimes he beats me – when a former Picture is better than a late one! Of the merits of New Work as far as it is a good resemblance of your lordship I am well aware – many of the details I believe were very well – but I doubt whether in general Splendour & Effect it will keep pace with similar works of art at home at all’.¹⁹

Three years later, in [a letter dated](#) March 1817, he boasted to one of his many pupils, Mrs. Marmaduke Browne, ‘I have not studied 25 years for nothing...there are not 6 at home even who I would stand in awe of’, immediately undermining and contradicting his own bravado with the more cautious ‘but don’t say I said so’.²⁰

Chinnery’s repeated use of a term as loaded and evocative as ‘home’, even after twelve and fifteen years respectively of professional practice in India, is noteworthy. Home resonates as

a concept throughout colonial and postcolonial histories, much as it permeates the letters as a site of longing for sojourning Britons ~~Seots~~ dispersed throughout the late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British empire. Home is a crucial category within European travel because it is the space of return and of consolidation of the self which is enabled by the encounter with the other, writes Inderpal Grewal, who uses home and harem as spatial constructions and concept metaphors in her discussion of nation, gender and empire.²¹ According to Rosemary George's account of postcolonial twentieth-century fiction in the concepts and structures we recognise as 'home', 'distance in itself becomes difference'.²² While for most Britons living in the Indian subcontinent ~~Asiatic exile~~, the idea of home had a particular currency – a world of 'known limits' and a space of 'absolute familiarity' to quote Ranajit Guha - for Chinnery 'home' seems to have represented a cut throat marketplace of competitors, improved by access to the works of their peers through metropolitan exhibition culture, a community of artists from which he was necessarily dislocated by distance.²³ Drawing on this buoyant historiography, this article uses home and colony and empire, rather than home and harem, as metaphoric and metonymic constructions in its case-study ~~micro-art-history~~ of colonial ~~portraiture~~ and empire. Because while Chinnery's portrait of Minto was executed in an imperial idiom and seemingly commissioned as a diplomatic gift, it ended up in a domestic, familial context that was the sitter's home: Minto House in the Scottish Borders (Figure 2 a&b). In addition to the home/colonyempire binary, it seeks to raise a constellation of related issues imbricated into what Dirks has dubbed the aesthetics of colonialism both in and out of visual representation: these concerning the relationship between formal and domestic portraits, public and private contexts, likeness and unlikeness, proximity and distance, youth and age, ~~black and white~~ and at theirs close of the article, colony and metropolis. Such 'binarisms are essential for the purposes of definition,' writes George.²⁴ As the oppositional means by which colonial regimes operated, they are readily applicable to a close reading of one hitherto understudied example of its formal, large-scale portraiture.

In February 1811, Gilbert Elliot, soon to be Earl Minto, wrote to his wife in one of his 'diurnal snatches' of being the sitter in two projected portraits of the Governor-General of Bengal, one predestined for the Council chamber in Calcutta to be painted by Chinnery; the other as a gift for the 'King of Delhi' to be executed by another expatriate British artist 'who, as Minto explains, 'has long had the lead as painter in Bengal', Robert Home.²⁵ A year later, Minto describes sitting for his portrait to Home and his intention to sit to Chinnery.²⁶ The commissions are now reversed, with Home responsible for the portrait for the Council Chamber as the artist preferred by the merchants of Calcutta; the Chinnery for the King of Delhi potentate. Minto's initial concerns about the portrait by Home -- 'I expect a sort of wooden likeness & a stick of a picture' - were confirmed when it was completed a month later: 'as I foretold [he wrote to his wife, it] is a most wooden affair'.²⁷

The portrait referred to is a full-length of the Governor-General executed in oils on a colossal canvas measuring 233.6 x 152.4 cm (Figure 3). Minto is represented standing at full length in full ceremonial dress looking to the right and is shown holding in his left hand a roll of paper inscribed 'Mauritius'. On the table next to him, another roll of paper is inscribed 'Address from the merchants of Calcutta on the capture of Mauritius and Bourbon, 1810', referencing the merchants who commissioned the portrait from Home for a reputed - and enormous - fee of ten thousand rupees.²⁸ A portion of a map of the East Indies unfurls on the table towards the external viewer, while the distant exterior view is of Mauritius, specifically Port Louis. The canvas is highly specific in terms of the historical events it celebrates: namely, the capture in 1810 by the British under Minto's Governor-Generalship of Bengal of the two main islands of Mauritius, the Ile de France and the Ile de Bourbon. These distant territoriesislands gave the empire of the French enemy a vital naval base in the Indian Ocean, halfway along the passage between the Cape of Good Hope and India. Their taking of East Indiamen loaded with cargoes that were the property of the merchants of Calcutta had been constant, hence the latter's subsequent gratitude to the Governor-General for eliminating the French threat in the form of a commemorative portrait. Although the sitter was disparaging about the ligneousness of the portrait as he perceived it, for the historian of Britain's maritime

victories during the Napoleonic war this is a potent document, an arresting piece of visual propaganda.²⁹

Minto wrote to his wife concerning his still projected portrait by Chinnery again on 28 March 1812, 'I am going to sit to Chinnery & expect a good, I may say, a fine picture from him – It is to be another full length in robes. But I may perhaps sit to him for one of his excellent miniatures, at least for a smaller picture, in the character of a gentleman.'³⁰ Minto's variegated judgement of Chinnery's work is striking – his 'good' or 'fine' oil portraits, whereas his said to be 'excellent miniatures'. 'Chinnery's miniatures are painted with the strength of oils & are beautiful,' Minto had enthused in an earlier letter to his wife in which he had described a pair of unidentified miniatures of his son George and his daughter-in-law Eliza.³¹ Another miniature portrait of Minto which Chinnery subsequently painted for his other daughter-in-law (John's wife), Amelia, was 'thought by every body the most perfect likeness as ever was.'³² Likeness, or rather unlikeness, is a persistent critique in the reception of colonial portraiture, as we shall see.³³ Minto's letter additionally provides a revealing sense of self, where he differentiates between formal, full length portraits and smaller domestic portraits in which alternate public/private characters are assumed: the Governor-General for the former (that is, as an effective imperial administrator); a private gentleman for the latter.

By June 1812, Minto recounts 'My picture by Chinnery is very promising but requires a few sittings more at the rate of one per week'.³⁴ Though a month later it is said to have 'turned out extremely well', by October it is still 'just finished, or within a few hours of it', making it a pictorial product of at least five months' duration.³⁵ In a letter to his wife dated 7 October, Minto discusses the emergent portrait at length and in some detail, firstly, addressing the pointed issue of its (un)likeness: 'It is thought by everybody, especially John and all the family, to be a very perfect likeness [he writes], and it is most certainly a very fine picture.' John 'and all the family' with Minto in Bengal are here invoked as a consenting genealogical jury bearing witness to the verisimilitude of Chinnery's likeness of the patriarch. Minto's

~~letter proceeds to rank his portrait by Chinnery as being ‘of the least interesting class...in robes and high dress, with allegorical figures, maps, and other emblems of public distinction.’~~ Though ~~the portrait~~ was said to have been commissioned at the request of the ‘King of Delhi’, ~~the Mughal emperor based in Delhi, Akbar Shah II~~, Minto’s letter explains that he had no right to ask for such a diplomatic gift from the East India Company and so its possession had transferred to Minto’s ‘house and family’. Natasha Eaton has written on more than one occasion about the art of colonial diplomacy and its entanglement with the discourse of oriental despotism in an earlier period during the Governor-Generalship of Warren Hastings.³⁶ Where the Parliamentary Regulating Act of 1773 had made illegal the British acceptance of lavish Mughal tribute gifts of *khil’at* (rulers’ robes) and *nazr* (tribute money), the East India Company recognised that gifting could not be so easily abandoned in their dealings with Indian courts and so introduced their own form of symbolic and personal gift: the painted portrait. In Eaton astute analysis: ‘Hastings’s peculiar mimicry of the Mughal gift grafted on the British custom of portrait-exchange had a cutting edge: it operated as de facto tribute from the indigenous rulers for which no return gift was made.’³⁷ The precise details of the Anglo-Indian prestation (or lack thereof) between Minto and the Delhi potentate remain unclear, although Minto’s denial of his portrait as tribute signifies English political supremacy over this once powerful Indian dynasty. ~~These types of large, official portraits of Governor-Generals were usually commissioned for predestined locations - what Pinney identifies as that Christopher Pinney designates as the sacred spaces of the colonial administration.~~³⁸ One such sacred space and administrative nerve centre was the Council Room in Government House at Calcutta (Figure 4), where as recorded in a photograph from the 1890s,—like Robert Home’s ‘wooden likeness & stick of a picture’ of Minto (Figure 3) was hung alongside portraits of his predecessors. for the Council Room in Government House at Calcutta (Figure 4).³⁹ At the far end of the room is hung A. W. Devis’s similarly colossal portrait of a seated Warren Hastings, who in introducing portrait gifting into his foreign policy initiated a visual genealogy for the official Governor-General portrait. By the time Minto sat for Chinnery, such portraits were (over)loaded with what their sitter

disparagingly describes in a letter to his wife as ‘robes and high dress, with allegorical figures, maps, and other emblems of public distinction’.

Minto’s letter proceeds to explain, ‘I would certainly rather have a head or half length in a blue frock hung up in any room that I may inhabit myself, than this splendid ostentatious sort of mirror to stand before or sit under – But the time will come when the original & the picture will not be fellow lodgers & when those who will own it, cannot be quizzed for admiring themselves in that glass. It will come home therefore with the rest of the luggage.’⁴⁰ Although late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century sitters do mention sitting for a portrait – as Minto did in earlier letters to his wife – there are far fewer accounts in which the sitter-/subject articulates their relationship with the finished product, as Minto does hereon this occasion. The sitter looks not so much directly into the reflective surface of the isomorphic mirror as more obliquely and distantly projecting the despatch of the colonial portrait home. –when ~~w~~What was once a mirror for the living sitter-/subject will then become an exercise in distant relations – relations made irrevocable in his death. Minto’s letter additionally alludes to the politics of display (‘to stand before or sit under’) of his painted portrait. In the 1890s Council Room in Government House, Calcutta (Figure 4), the viewer was made to feel subordinate – being positioned below the feet of not one, but a series of life-sized portraits of Governor-Generals. In this context, the physical body of the ruling class that congregated in this room was mirrored in the painted bodies of its Governors framed and hung around its walls.

Five months later, in ~~In a subsequent letter dated 29~~ March 1813, Minto discusses histhe portrait by Chinnery again; on this occasion, in terms of a bipolarity between the sitter-/subject, original/copy that was exacerbated by the six year separation between him and his wife. Questioning whether the veracity of his painted portrait might not accord with her memory of his countenance, he writes

‘Although the likeness is so universally commended that it must be true, I expect you at first sight to differ with those who now compare it with the original, for although the painter has given it plenty of bloom, there are points of adage that one cannot define, but which belong to

1813 rather than to 1807, & may not exactly meet the impressions that still remain with you. That will go off, however, when you have seen me a little while as I am, & I hope we shall have long enough together yet to make you think this picture a youthful likeness.⁴¹

If, to quote George again, ‘distance in itself becomes difference’, so as regards the polemical issue of likeness ~~s-between-the-sitter/subject-and-original/copy~~, physical proximity with the original sitter-subject and the painted portrait enables in-sight on various levels. ~~These-that~~ are concurrently and paradoxically superficial and profound, being only skin deep (based on the topology of surface) and in Lady Minto’s case, a longstanding familiarity with the topography of her husband’s ~~the~~ face. Having acknowledged their six year separation, Minto’s letter proceeds to imagine the couple’s reunion in the short (‘at first sight’) and longer term, where the 1812 likeness may yet become a ‘youthful’ one.

‘John [Elliot] is an excellent correspondent and has the best epistolary style in the family,’ Minto wrote to his wife in August 1805.⁴² John mentioned both the portraits by Home and Chinnery in a letter dated 9 October 1812:

‘Home’s picture of my father is come home & is now in the council room [Figure 4] – It is certainly the worst picture I ever saw in my life of any description & what makes it the more valuable it has not the smallest likeness in the world – it is just as like you [his mother] as my father...Chinnery is to be done in about a week and I think a finer picture I never saw...My Father has to my great joy resolved on keeping it and taking it to Minto. It will be an invaluable thing there although it is certainly not the sort of thing for a family picture. I should like it to go home before us that you may judge of it by what my Father was when he left England. It is astonishing how little alteration I see in him except in his colour which like every bodies elses is changed to white, but even in this he is less altered than any body else.’⁴³

Echoing his father’s dislike of the portrait by Home in its palpable unlikeness, John’s letter indicates how the formal portrait of his father as Governor-General of BengalIndia only became a domestic possession (‘a family picture’) in its subsequent delegation. His letter pre-empted that of his father by five months where it projects the return of the painted subject prior

to that of the original sitter, so his wife might judge the difference between the sitter-/subject and her memory of him. The final sentence of this portion of his correspondence provides one occasion on which an émigré British company servant in India articulates the apparently ubiquitous practice of ‘whitewashing’ the embrowned skin of colonial servants in their painted portraits, including that of Minto. ~~Astonishingly, Few~~ art historians have ~~never~~ discussed this aesthetic etiolation ~~in any detail; their silence making them complicit in such colonial practices.~~⁴⁴ In an often cited chapter, Richard Leppert focuses on Johann Zoffany’s group portrait of the music-making *Morse and Cator Families*, 1784, (Figure 5) in which ‘India has itself been absented’ existing only as what he calls a “semiotic ‘present absence’”.⁴⁵ Mildred Archer pre-empted Leppert’s statements by two decades, in her observation ‘When we look at the portraits made for the British in India, we at once notice India is itself almost entirely excluded. . . Portraits of the British in India differ in no basic way from portraits which were made at home.’⁴⁶ India is by no means excluded from all the portraits of the sojourning British. Yet its absence in painted portraiture is primarily manifest in the bleached faces of its colonial male sitters; the imported European furniture and London fashions in the group portrait of the Morse and Cator families, for instance, are secondary to the whitened physiognomies of the male sitters. Jordanna Bailkin has written on making and breaking the imperial palette, specifically on the birth and decline of *puree* or Indian yellow, a pigment prized for depicting darker shades of flesh, which she situates at the intersection between material culture and imperial politics.⁴⁷ From the passing comment in John Elliot’s letter, white pigment adopted for bleaching the sunburned complexions of British faces in colonial portraiture also elucidates the intersection between visual/visceral culture and imperial politics; where such colour coding pictorially embodies the aesthetics of colonialism.⁴⁸

It has been asserted that Chinnery’s boredom often shows in the commissioned formal portraits that he ~~produced~~ in India, in that they are highly conventionalised portraits in the Georgian tradition.⁴⁹ Jeffrey Auerbach has independently drawn attention to what he identifies as the ‘the pervasiveness of imperial boredom’ throughout the nineteenth and into

the twentieth centuries as articulated in the diaries, log books and letters that constitute the private archives of empire.⁵⁰ Focusing on Garnet Wolseley, William Denison and Richard Burton, Auerbach demonstrates how scholars of empire have been seduced by its thrill as perpetuated in best-selling novels and articles in the popular press. An equally pervasive aspect of colonial and later imperial service that remains overlooked but is articulated in familiar letters and is similarly a characteristic of the experience of subjective time, is aging. Whether this was unique to the Indian subcontinent or more widespread across Britain's transoceanic conglomerations, is worth pursuing, especially as it has been argued that 'Time was a means of imposing order on 'disorder', and the colonial experience involved temporal domination as much as territorial control.'⁵¹ For the British in early nineteenth-century India, including Governor-General Minto, time was not only an instrument of colonial conquest against the timeless Other as it is said to have been in later nineteenth-century colonial Australia: it marked their own accelerated disintegration.⁵²

What is implicit in Minto's letter of March 1813 – that he has aged during the six years apart from his wife – is made explicit elsewhere. Previously he had written to her apologising for his shortcomings as a correspondent: 'the honest truth is that I am older every birthday, which is very common in the East'.⁵³ In 1813 Minto was an antiquated (by sojourner standards) sixty-two years old; he would spend a total of six years in India, where time was said to be protracted. 'Fifteen years in India is equal to twenty-five in Europe', calculated a Scottish contemporary in the Indian subcontinent.⁵⁴ In the same letter to his wife, Minto refers to his youth as being 'a year or two ago'. In this former 'youthful' phase, he had written to her in December 1809: 'My domestic longings, conjugal & paternal, & indeed collateral & consanguineal... are becoming every month more importunate & unreasonable not to say troublesome and officious... I grieve to say that I am actually counting days with all the exactness of a clock. The days are innumerable indeed, yet, being a good arithmetician, I actually know their number...I reckon this diurnal reckoning one of the most improvident acts of my life, and I must go on counting and longing to the end of the chapter.'⁵⁵

Unlike a clock, which keeps time in a mechanical fashion, the portrait likeness seems to defy it in being impervious to the external forces inflicted on the sitter of aging, disease or death, although Leppert reminds us that this was not the case in India where ‘tropical heat was detrimental to the life of the canvas’ on which the sitter’s pictorial representation emerged in oils.⁵⁶ As three-dimensional material objects, rather than flat pictorial likenesses, portraits do mark time, albeit summarily. They were often commissioned at prescient moments in a sitter’s lifecycle: a coming of age, a socially-advantageous engagement, a marriage, the production of an heir or the reproduction of a voluminous family. ~~To Pointon’s discussion of portraits of children as an emotional insurance policy, it is worth adding also a fiscal one—parents rarely commissioned portraits until their progeny were sufficiently robust to merit the investment.~~⁵⁷—Post mortem, portraits commemorate the extinguished life of the sitter by seemingly offering a visual précis of it. In Richard Brilliant’s concise analysis: ‘Portraits translate the transitory aspect of a person’s life, with all its variations in appearance, into a consolidated image’.⁵⁸ Official portraits commissioned by committee, by institutions rather than individuals, often commemorated a particular event in the sitter’s career during his lifetime —and Chinnery’s large-scale, full-length (232.2 x 148 cm), formal portrait of Minto is one example (Figure 1). It exists in multiple versions – as commemorative portraiture often does – and the minutiae of the protracted transactions with Chinnery concerning the completion and reception of a portrait commissioned by the Dutch inhabitants for the Council chamber of Government House at Batavia, in which Minto is shown seated in a three-quarter view looking across the canvas to his right (Figure 6) are exhaustively documented in a series of letters among the Minto papers in the National Library of Scotland.⁵⁹

In the finished version that devolved to the sitter (Figure 1), he is shown in an almost life-size, full-length, portrait, his face turning slightly to the right, in a gesture that is balanced by his left arm which draws his robe across his lower body. This action exposes his legs – the left stepping slightly forward – as the corporeal carapace or bodily pedestal, so to speak, on which the British colonial presence empire in India is carried. Harry Berger Jr identified what he dubbed ‘the fictions of the pose’ in early modern portraiture that is readily applicable to

Chinnery's later portrait of Minto.⁶⁰ Berger sought to redirect attention away from the style and performance of the painter (which is more in line with Mildred Archer's methodology), to the style and performance of the sitter *as* sitter 'as the subject of and participant in a particular act of portrayal.' Minto wrote to his wife in a letter dated 10 March 1812 expressing concern about the efficacy of his legs on his projected return to the landscape of the Borders of Scotland: 'They have been so entirely confined to purposes of ornament, having touched nothing harder than a carpet or a mat, and carried their master no further than the length of a verandah for so many years, that I often have serious doubts and anxieties about the *craigs*'.⁶¹ These are the same legs that are exposed and paraded so prominently in the portrait by Chinnery, where they seem to offer a metaphor for the stability of colonial rule ~~the British empire in India~~ during his Governor-Generalship. If Chinnery's portrait absents India via the colonial sitter's whitewashed face, it simultaneously erases the disabling effects of the Indian climate on the enervated body of its British sitter-subject.

Minto's upright figure is swathed in his peer's robes, which form a material scaffolding, or front and back buttress, for his slim torso. The attendant accessories update the successes of the British maritime empire in India since Home's 1810 canvas (Figure 3). Unrolled maps on the table next to Minto and on the floor at his feet are inscribed (from left to right) 'Map of the Mauritius', Bourbon and 'Java 1811', which indicate the symbolic appropriation of territories and peoples (detail of figure 1).⁶² The seizure of Java in the Spring of 1811 finally removed the French threat from the Indian Ocean. Java and the Spice Islands were a source of mercantile wealth then only comparable to India.⁶³ Whoever controlled these islands also commanded the principal sea passages from across the Indian Ocean to China so it was a strategic victory for Britain on many fronts. As Minto wrote in a letter to the Secretary of State which was printed in *The London Gazette Extraordinary* on 2 September 1811: 'by the successive reductions of the French Islands and Java, the British Nation has neither an Enemy nor a Rival left from the Cape of Good Hope to Cape Horn.'⁶⁴

Just behind ~~Minto~~Chinnery's right arm in the portrait by Chinnery, a coronet is upraised on a stool; palm leaves are visible through the window beyond. The coronet and peer's robes remind us of Minto's recent elevation to the British peerage following his successful tenure as Governor-General ~~in~~of distant India. For years, he had toiled as a diplomat in Europe, while he and his wife had pursued a concerted campaign for his elevation from an inherited baronetcy.⁶⁵ On the opposite side of the canvas to the coronet is an allegorical sculpture of three classicising figures in a triangulated composition, that consists of two female figures between a helmeted and bearded one, accompanied by the lion of England (detail of figure 1). While a definitive reading of the sculptural group remains elusive, the central figure, with his helmet, sword and shield, would appear to be the warlike deity Mars; the woman on the right with a snake and resting on a pillar, Hygieia, the goddess of health. Her upraised left hand, which might have contained a more explanatory accessory, is cropped off the vertical side of the canvas. The second female figure seen in profile to the right holding a mirror must allude to other defining aspects of Minto's Governor-Generalship ~~of~~ India. Although its precise meaning may confound us, this classicising iconography draws upon ~~establishes~~ an ambitious antique precedent for the valorisation~~realisation~~ of Britain's empire ~~imperial project~~ in the early nineteenth ~~century~~.⁶⁶ ~~Indian subcontinent~~. The European-style monument on the far right middle ground of the canvas is balanced on the left by the natural foliage and cloudy skyscape of Bengal.

'I hope you will like the full length as large as life, since it is to stare you in the face at quiet Minto', Minto wrote to his wife on 25 June 1813, 'but I swear it will not fit your taste for it is all over Robe & Coronet & Cushions & Ermine, & Scarlet, & Emblematical groups, all of which accompaniments I hope are unlike the sitter.'⁶⁷ For the sitter ~~subject~~, his official colonial portrait with its rhetorical dress and hyperbolic accessories was an exercise in unlikeness. This is one occasion when the discernment of likeness or its antithesis permeates beyond the physiognomic contours of the painted face to the entirety of the pictorial canvas; where a formal colonial portrait intended for one situation – a diplomatic gift in unhomey India – ended up being intended for a very different context – a domestic property ('quiet

Minto') in the Scottish Borders, whose upkeep and extension had been financed by Minto's imperial appointment (Figure 2). Minto superintended the building works at a distance in correspondence with his wife and his eldest son Gilbert, who supplied him with proposed plans and elevations as the project progressed under the Roxburghshire architect Archibald Elliot. 'it will be a capital habitation [Minto wrote in December 1809] not like a piece of fine building, but like a better thing, a country gentlemen's house in the country.'⁶⁸ This gentleman's house in the country would accommodate three generations of the reunited Minto family with John and George, their wives and children. By March 1813, Minto describes how the sitting room should be furnished with bookcases, a closet and a sofa with room for the sizeable portrait by Chinnery. 'it is my fate to see myself begg'd, & torn out [he writes], as they say of a flaunting Lady's dress, in my own quiet house, & amongst my simple glens & hazel banks'.⁶⁹

For Mildred Archer, 'Impressive and competent though these large ceremonial portraits [by Chinnery] undoubtedly are, they tend to be somewhat stiff and over-burdened with random properties.'⁷⁰ On one level, this is an apt summary of Chinnery's portrait of Minto (Figure 1). On another, as Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass have asserted in their study of Renaissance clothing, portraiture is not autopsy – an expose of the interior life of the sitter, as materiality – a celebration of their material life of substance. This corresponds nicely with Minto's own description of the luxury fabrics and objects in his portrait. For Jones and Stallybrass, identity is 'clearer [in portraiture] in the case of the objects than of the subjects. And the objects refer us back to the *making* of identities – the transnational labor through which subjects and objects alike come into being.'⁷¹ The portrait of Minto is about the transoceanic power of the British empire in the embodiment of the Governor-General of India; commemorating the maritime conquest of new territories for that empire during his term of office sovereignty.

Minto's portrait never did become a youthful likeness in the presence of its naturally aging sitter-subject as he had envisaged only a year earlier – he died seventy miles from London en route to Minto in July 1814 while finally 'performing the voyage home' that he had so long

imagined in the vivid dreams he recounted in letters to his wife.⁷² In the days immediately following his death, John Elliot commissioned the engraver, Charles Turner, to produce a memorial engraving in mezzotint (Figure 7) after the portrait by Chinnery (Figure 1) for the sum of 150 guineas.⁷³ The production of the formal, oil on canvas portrait in Calcutta and its subsequent serial reproduction as an engraving published in London in June 1815 adds colony/metropole to our existing repertoire of binaries that constitute the aesthetics of colonialism. For Ann Laura Stoler and Frederick Cooper and Cooper in their influential essay 'Between metropole and colony: Rethinking a research agenda', 'Visions of empire were created and clarified out of metropolitan discourses as well as by those fashioned in the colonies themselves.'⁷⁴ Turner's engraving further 'clarified' at least two apparent deficiencies in Chinnery's canvas, in the slight repositioning of Minto's legs and the shortening of his right arm so that it no longer protrudes through Minto's gown but falls underneath it as it simultaneously exposes his legs. The coronet and the stool on which it stood were removed having already passed to Gilbert as the eldest son, with the former being relocated to the lower border of the engraving where it topped the also removed. In centre of the inscription space, Turner added the Minto crest with the family motto Non Eget Arcu. topped by the coronet. This amended colonial portrait image would have been reproduced and disseminated throughout the imperial public sphere as part of the inchoate commodification of empire that Auerbach has identified later in the nineteenth century.⁷⁵

In summary, the rhetorical binaries that have punctuated this discussion throughout, between colony/empire and home, formal and domestic portraits, public and private contexts, likeness and unlikeness, proximity and distance, youth and age, black and white and colony and metropole, though seemingly in opposition are actually interdependent and mutually defining. All the binaries that have been identified as being embedded in and in the case of Minto's portraiture, embodying the aesthetics of colonialism were co-constituted. In addition, as Stoler and Cooper and Stoler assert, 'Colonial projects were fundamentally predicated on a tension between notions of incorporation and differentiation that were weighted differently at

different times.⁷⁶ Chinnery's portrait of Minto (Figure 1) bears all the weight of a colonial project in its commission and execution, its colossal size and its focus on the professional achievements of its sitter-subject. Yet these aspects of the portrait can be situated in a creative friction with its subsequent transfer of ownership to the sitter as a private individual and its shipment to Britain, where it was destined for the sitting room of the extended and refurbished Minto House in the Scottish Borders (Figure 2). The substantive swagger in Chinnery's portrait seems to be located in the ways in which it erases the debilitating effect of the Indian climate in its representation of Minto's body, whether his firm legs, his whitewashed complexion or his decelerated age. While the sitter's private correspondence and that of members of his family attests to his corporeal fragility, his official, large-scale portrait valorises colonial power in India via the fortified body of its Governor-General.

~~Cooper and Stoler~~ and Cooper's statement might be further modulated with 'at different times and in different contexts'. Two years after Minto's death and a year after the engraving was published in the metropolis, since shortly after Minto's death and in the metropolis the ongoing issue of the (un)likeness of the portrait became even more freighted. John wrote an impassioned letter to Gilbert dated 9 May 1816:

'my decided opinion [is] that the picture should not be touched convinced as I am that in improving the drawing of the figure & the painting of the face the picture would be ruined in its great merit of likeness...it is the strongest likeness in the eyes of those who knew him in late years. Chinnery who is always ready to alter anything in his own pictures may when he comes home do the leg & arm which are wrong but I would not even trust him with the face...I have no doubt you will feel about it exactly as I have done & that I might have saved my breath to cool my porridge but I am so anxious on the subject that I could not help saying what I have. I have recommended a handsome frame but nothing at all magnificent.'⁷⁷

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¹ Anderson, ‘Fashioning the Viceroy’, 293-311.

² Dirks, *Colonialism and Culture*, 5. Dirks writes, ‘Colonialism is now safe for scholarship, and culture seems to be an appropriate domain in which to measure the effects of colonialism’.

³ National Library of Scotland (hereafter NLS), MS 11063 folio 89.

⁴ Calcutta, 9 April 1809. NLS, MS 11064 folio 36.

⁵ 6 July 1809. NLS, MS 11064 folio 75.

⁶ The phrase continuous cascade of correspondence is Finn’s in her ‘Family Formations’, 104.

⁷ Cleall, Ishiguro and Manktelow, ‘Imperial Relations’, n.p.

⁸ Ghosh, *Sex and the family in colonial India*, 253. My understanding of family formation – what Cressy calls ‘a thicket of connections and cross-connections’ - has been greatly assisted by Tadmor, *Family and friends in eighteenth-century England*; the essays in *Continuity and Change*, 25.1 (2010) and on transatlantic families in an earlier historical period, Cressy, *Coming Over*, esp. chapter 11, ‘“The part of a kinsman: Separation, reunion and the wider circle of kin”’, 263-291 (the quotation is from 277); Cressy, ‘Kinship and kin interaction in early modern England’, 38-69.

⁹ 9 April 1809. NLS, MS 11064 folio 38.

- ¹⁰ NLS, MS 11080 folio 5.
- ¹¹ NLS, MS 11065 folio 64.
- ¹² Marshall, 'The white town of Calcutta under the rule of the East India Company', 326.
- ¹³ Hunter, *Bits of Old China*, 271-2.
- ¹⁴ De Almeida and Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance*, 295-301, 296.
- ¹⁵ Arnold, 'Deathscapes', 344.
- ¹⁶ Edward Paget, 17 May 1825, quoted in Conner, *George Chinnery, 1774-1852*, 129. Conner has a chapter on the Calcutta Portraits, 102-29. Conner, 'The Poet's Eye', 73.
- ¹⁷ Archer, *India and British Portraiture, 1770-1825*, 372.
- ¹⁸ Ormond, 'George Chinnery's image of himself', 89-93; 160-164.
- ¹⁹ 12 July 1814. NLS, MS 11325 folios 146-147. Ormond notes that Chinnery began to send pictures to the Royal Academy exhibitions in 1830, after a hiatus of twenty-eight years. He continued to do until 1846. Ormond, 'George Chinnery's image of himself', 92. Among the Minto papers is also a letter from Marianne Chinnery, dated 31 May 1814 congratulating Minto on his return to England; NLS MS 11154 folio 95.
- ²⁰ Ormond, 'Chinnery and his pupil, Mrs. Browne', 157-8.
- ²¹ Grewal, *Home and Harem*, 6, 136, 230.
- ²² George, *The Politics of Home*, 4.
- ²³ Guha, 'Not at home in empire', 484. In addition to the works cited here and above, the following have shaped my understanding of 'home' in the British empire: Hall and Rose, *At Home with the Empire*; Godby, 'Ideas of "home" in South African landscape paintings by Thomas Bowler and Thomas Baines', 84-96.
- ²⁴ George, *The Politics of Home*, 4.
- ²⁵ 7 February 1811. NLS, MS 11066 folio 10. 'diurnal snatches' is NLS, MS 11064 folio 75.
- ²⁶ 7 February 1812. NLS, MS 11067 folios 5-6.
- ²⁷ 28 March 1812. NLS, MS 11067 folio 29.
- ²⁸ 9 October 1812, John to Lady Minto. NLS, MS 11095 folio 282. Home's 'Register of sitters, pictures begun and money received, 1795-1814' (National Portrait Gallery Archive) confirms he was actually paid half this sum - five thousand rupees for the portrait from the merchants of Calcutta in January 1812. The following month Home also produced a copy head of Minto and a small full length portrait.
- ²⁹ See Mackenzie, *Propaganda and Empire*, which deals with a later historical period. More could be said on imperial propaganda pre-1880 and in portraiture.
- ³⁰ NLS, MS 11067 folio 29.
- ³¹ 7 February 1812. NLS, MS 11067 folios 5-6.
- ³² NLS, MS 11067 folio 129. Amelia was the daughter of James Casamaijor, a member of the governing council of Madras. The interconnections between the Casamaijor, Minto and Russell families are discussed by Finn, 'Colonial Gifts', 203-31.
- ³³ See Gombrich's comment: 'it is not really the perception of likeness for which we are originally programmed, but the noticing of unlikeness, the departure from the norm which stands out and sticks in the mind.' 'The mask and the face', 13. For a recent discussion of likeness and portraiture, see Coltman, 'Henry Raeburn's portraits of distant sons in the global British empire', 294-311.
- ³⁴ 23 June 1812. Barrackpore, NLS, MS 11067 folio 50.
- ³⁵ 9 July 1812. NLS, MS 11067 folio 54; 7 October 1812. NLS, MS 11067 folio 72.
- ³⁶ N. Eaton, ~~considers the art of colonial diplomacy and its entanglement with the discourse of oriental despotism in her~~ 'The art of colonial despotism', 63-93; 'Critical cosmopolitanism', 189-204 and chapter 4 of her monograph: *Mimesis across Empires*, 151-94.-

³⁷ Eaton, *Mimesis across Empires*, 173.

³⁸ Pinney, 'The material and visual culture of British India', 239.

³⁹ ~~C. Pinney, 'The material and visual culture of British India', D. M. Peers and N. Gooptu (eds.), *India and the British Empire*, (Oxford, 2012), 239.~~

⁴⁰ 7 October 1812. NLS, MS 11067 folios 72-73.

⁴¹ 29 March 1813. NLS, MS 11067 folio 123.

⁴² NLS, MS 11058 folio 95.

⁴³ NLS, MS 11095 folios 281-282. In an earlier letter to his wife Minto describes Indian children as 'black brats', 'all stark naked' and 'uncommonly lively merry monkeys, [adding], & I am not at all annoyed by their back skins, as John is. He has no charity for a dark complexion'. NLS, MS 11064 folio 60.

⁴⁴ In addition to those art historical works cited elsewhere in the footnotes (Archer, Almeida and Gilpin), Smylitopoulos, 'Portrait of a Nabob', 10-25, makes no mention of skin colour in the images she discusses. The exception is Ray in her 'Baron of Bengal', 33-34; and her *Under the Banyan Tree*, esp. 83: 'whiteness crystallized into one of the most powerful signs of European authority writ large within the somatics of Britain's empire'.

⁴⁵ Leppert, 'Music, domestic life and cultural chauvinism', 68, 80. Tobin rehearses Leppert's arguments in her chapter 'Accommodating India: Domestic arrangements in Anglo-Indian family portraiture', *Picturing Imperial Power*, 121.

⁴⁶ Archer, 'British painters of the Indian Scene', 867-8.

⁴⁷ Bailkin, 'Indian Yellow', 197-214.

⁴⁸ As a starting point, see Rosenthal, 'Visceral culture', 563-92, in which she argues that whiteness as a visually racial category emerged as an explicit value in the eighteenth century. The following are also invaluable: Salesa, *Racial Crossings*; Wheeler, *The Complexion of Race*; Lorimer, *Colour, Class and the Victorians*.

⁴⁹ De Almeida and Gilpin, *Indian Renaissance*, 298-9.

⁵⁰ Auerbach, 'Imperial Boredom', 283-305.

⁵¹ Perkins, 'Timeless Cultures', 349.

⁵² Nanni, 'Time, empire and resistance in settler-colonial Victoria', 5-33 and his *The Colonisation of time*.

⁵³ Minto, *Lord Minto in India*, 332.

⁵⁴ 2 September 1817. William Fraser to his father, Edward Satchwell Fraser. NRAS 2696, bundle 14.

⁵⁵ 20 December 1809. NLS, MS 11064 folios 190-191. *Lord Minto in India*, 229.

⁵⁶ Leppert, 'Music, domestic life and cultural chauvinism', 89.

⁵⁷ ~~M. Pointon, *Hanging the Head: Portraiture and social formation in eighteenth century England*, (New Haven and London, 1993), 206.~~

⁵⁸ Brilliant, 'The Limitations of Likeness', 172.

⁵⁹ Conner, *George Chinnery, 1774-1852*, 108-9, cites the letters in question in the NLS. He also mentions two other portraits of Minto by Chinnery: one sent from Calcutta to Batavia and another sent to Malacca.

⁶⁰ Berger Jr., 'Fictions of the Pose', 87-120.

⁶¹ Minto, *Lord Minto in India*, 337-8.

⁶² Edney, *Mapping an Empire*, 337.

⁶³ Mostert, *The Line upon a Wind*, 580.

⁶⁴ NAS, GD364/1/1215.

⁶⁵ Finn, 'Family Formations', 103.

⁶⁶ One of the readers helpfully reminds me that Minto also subscribed to the neoclassical idiom for a Temple of Fame he had erected at his country residence at Barrackpore to the

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memory of the British officers who died at Java and Mauritius between 1810 and 1811. See Ray, *Under the Banyan Tree*, 143-4. This locates the portraits by Home and Chinnery and the temple as part of a wider circuit of propaganda that includes visual culture and the built environment.

⁶⁷ NLS, MS 11067 folio 129.

⁶⁸ NLS, MS 11064 folio 202.

⁶⁹ NLS, 11067 folio 122.

⁷⁰ Archer, *India and British Portraiture*, 372.

⁷¹ Jones and Stallybrass, *Renaissance Clothing and the materials of memory*, 46.

⁷² See, for example, a letter dated 20 December 1809. *Lord Minto in India*, 229-230.

⁷³ NLS, MS 11752 folio 148. Whitman, *Charles Turner*, no. 373. Turner engraved nearly one thousand plates during a forty year career.

⁷⁴ ~~F. Cooper and~~ Stoler and Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony', 12.

⁷⁵ Auerbach, 'Art, advertising and the legacy of empire', 1-23.

⁷⁶ Stoler and Cooper, 'Between metropole and colony', 10.

⁷⁷ NLS, MS 11752 folios 163-4.

⁷⁸ NLS, MS 11325 folio 149; folio 148.

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