



Sir Joseph Banks, Bt. by Sir Joshua Reynolds (1771–1773). © National Portrait Gallery. 127.0 x 101.5 cms

UNFREEZING TIME

Patricia Fara*

‘A picture is worth a thousand words’: this snappy soundbite is often attributed to Confucius, but it was coined by American advertising agents in the early twentieth century. Although they may well not have realised it, they were contributing to a long-lasting debate that started in ancient Greece, when philosophers compared the instantaneous

impact of an image with the drawn-out appreciation required for an epic poem.

This portrait of the botanist Joseph Banks (1743–1820) immediately reveals a man of around thirty, who liked to wear luxurious clothes but disdained the formality of a powdered wig. Although the desk, books and papers imply a sedentary profession, the globe

and the view through the window suggest that he is no reclusive academic; similarly, the fur collar on his velvet cloak and the comfortable curve of his belly illustrate that he enjoys non-intellectual pleasures. A mere handful of facts – yet for communicating the essence of this human being, is the visual likeness less or more rewarding than a long written account?

Over the centuries, many critics have maintained that the pen is mightier than the brush. Pictures stretch out in space, but they are confined to a moment in time; in contrast, a verbal description can range over long periods, and include not only external appearances but also details of characters, transformations and achievements. Whereas a portrait may be taken in at a glance, a biography demands hours of attention and explores events that span the length of a life. Art was often said to be Poetry's weaker sister, able to capture superficial impressions but not of investigating in depth. Like mathematics and classical languages, literary scholarship belonged in the domain of men: women were better suited to the shallower pleasures of Italian, embroidery and flower painting.

During the eighteenth century, portraiture was widely condemned as the lowest form of art. The man who did most to redeem its reputation was Joshua Reynolds, who in 1768 became the Royal Academy of Art's first President. Within a few decades, he had converted his speciality into an imperial export – or as the artist Benjamin Robert Haydon put it, 'Wherever the British settle, wherever they colonise, they carry and will ever carry trial by jury, horse-racing, and portrait-painting.'

Technically superb, Reynolds also succeeded by defying the limitations a flat canvas imposed on the representation of time. Soon after Banks returned from his three-year voyage around the world with Captain Cook, his uncle commissioned a depiction of this world traveller to hang in the family mansion. Banks was so pleased with the result that he arranged for engravings to be made and put up for sale.

Although this is an inevitably static image, Reynolds has cleverly incorporated past and future to supplement the present. Emphasising the snap-shot nature of a portrait, he has painted his subject half rising in welcome from his chair, a transitional pose perhaps borrowed from Rembrandt van Rijn, one of Reynolds'

favourite painters. At six feet and thirteen stone (unusual at this time, when average bodies were smaller than now), Banks was an imposing man. Reynolds shows Banks uncorrupted by his exotic experiences, not gesticulating like a foreigner but displaying the restrained manners of a convivial, well-bred Englishman. James Boswell – Samuel Johnson's famous biographer – described him as 'an elephant, quite placid and gentle, allowing you to get upon his back or play with his proboscis.'

The globe in the background signifies that Banks has safely returned from his trip, while the conventional study and inkwell root him in tradition by confirming that he is a gentleman. His slightly rumpled hair and the stubble on his chin – clearly visible in the original – reinforce the impression that this is a living person who moves through time as well as space. Banks was anxious to participate in Cook's second voyage, and distributed engravings of this portrait in a campaign to establish his credentials as an explorer. The paper beneath his determinedly clenched left hand carries a well-known Latin motto from an ode by Horace, which can be translated as 'tomorrow we will again cross the immense ocean.' The words are clumsily retouched in the painting, perhaps reflecting the contempt for Latin verse expressed by the autodidactic Reynolds – but the message is very clear on the mezzotint organised by Banks.

This portrait articulates a wished-for future, and it remained one of Banks's favourites, even though apart from a trip to Iceland he never left Britain again. In a letter explaining his choice of poetic text, he implicitly compared himself to the Trojan voyager Aeneas. This self-identification matched the contemporary vogue for European explorers of bestowing Greek names on Pacific islanders and using classical imagery for portraying the region. Many Europeans regarded the South Seas as a paradise uncorrupted by civilisation: when visiting it, they travelled backwards in time as well as outwards across vast uncharted waters.

*Dr Patricia Fara is an historian of science and has been President of the AHS since 2016. This is the fourth in a series of short articles in which she discusses a number of images, each illustrating a different way of incorporating time and its passing within a picture without showing a clock.