DOCUMENTING ART: AN 18TH CENTURY COLLECTION THROUGH ITS CATALOGUE DESCRIPTIONS

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the Wilton House collection and its presentation throughout the eighteenth century, focusing on how catalogues functioned as tools for both interpretation and social signaling. The collection, housed at Wilton House — the stately home of the Earl of Pembroke — was documented in a series of catalogues published between 1731 and 1795. Over the course of the century, more than ten editions appeared, some of which were illustrated. These editions provided insight into the artworks, family background, and collecting practices, shaping how visitors experienced the collection and understood its cultural value. In eighteenth-century Britain, such collections were markers of prestige, turning private wealth into public status and influence. Through an analysis of select rooms at Wilton House — using the catalogues as a primary source — this essay addresses broader issues of display, gender, and identity, highlighting the cultural significance of collecting in the British aristocratic tradition.

KEYWORDS

Collecting | **Catalogue** | **Wilton House** | **Earl of Pembroke** | **Display**

In the eighteenth century, as country house tourism peaked, Wilton House — home to the Pembroke collection — emerged as a key destination for visitors across the social spectrum. Comprising antiquities, early modern sculpture and replicas[1], paintings, drawings, and prints, the collection had been shaped primarily by Philip Herbert, 4th Earl of Pembroke (1584-1650), and Thomas Herbert, the 8th Earl (c. 1656-1733), and was subsequently preserved and expanded by their descendants. As the costs of travel declined, access to such estates extended beyond the aristocracy to include the bourgeoisie, military officers, artists, and scholars (Anderson, 2018: 2). Visitors were typically required to pay an admission fee and, if desired, purchase a printed catalogue – an expense often deemed essential. As Thomas Martyn noted, catalogues were indispensable for the "uninformed observer," offering interpretive guidance that deepened engagement with the collection (Martyn, 1766, vol. 1, ii). These publications, often structured as guidebooks, functioned mainly as "interpretive tools" of the collection (Anderson, 2014), as they provided historical, iconographic, and stylistic context while mapping visitors' routes through the house, transforming passive viewing into a cultivated experience (Anderson, 2018: 21). Publications on country houses did not emerge suddenly in the 18th century; their precursors existed in the previous century, primarily as albums of engravings without accompanying textual explanations. One of these early publications is the Wilton Garden edition (ca.1645) (Harris, 1968: 60). It contains engravings based on drawings by architect Isaac de Caus (1590-c. 1655), who oversaw the renovation of the south side of the house (Heward, 1992: 78-117). The Pembroke collection was recorded in a series of catalogues that were published from 1731 to 1795. Some of them were illustrated and sold in shops in the town of Wilton, the estate itself, and London, inviting the public to enjoy and study the art through the examples chosen by the collector (and the editors) and the explanatory commentary. With exceptions, the catalogs belonged to the category of ephemera and could be easily transferred. Through the use of catalogue descriptions, the act of visiting a collection was presented as an opportunity to study art history, so these editions had, at least to some extent, an educational aspect. At the same time, they offered to the purchaser the possibility of acquiring the objects of each collection in an indirect and symbolic way; they could also be given as gifts, as one can deduct from the handwritten dedication on a copy of *Aedes Pembrochianae*, the 1795 catalogue of the Wilton collection, where we read: "AH Penruddocke The gift of her Son, Charles Penruddocke 1797".[2] Last but not least, catalogue descriptions were the tangible evidence of the collector's wealth and taste, forming in the collective mind an idealized version of the collector's identity and contributing to their posterity. Furthermore, as Jocelyn Anderson suggests, the descriptions altered the public identity of the country houses (Anderson, 2018: 21, 62).

In some cases, the authors chose to highlight those elements of the estate which were of greatest interest. For example, the gardens of Stowe were particularly prominent, unlike Wilton, where the main attraction was the collection of antiques (Harris, 1968: 60). The descriptive nature of these catalogues is evident from titles such as "A description of the paintings, sculptures, and artifacts in the Earl of Pembroke's house at Wilton" and "A description of the collection of paintings at Houghton-Hall in Norfolk" These printed descriptions indicated to which of the works the visitor should give due importance (Anderson, 2018: 19), and could even serve as a captivating advertisement that draws visitors to the respective house (Wilson; Mackley, 2000: 81).

1. To acquire replicas of famous artworks such as the Medici Venus and Apollo Belvedere was a common practice for 17th and 18th century collectors such as the Earls of Pembroke or cardinals Richelieu and Mazarin. Another example is that of Hugh Smithson (Percy), 1st Duke of Northumberland (ca. 1714-1786), who filled his estate at Syon House in Middlesex with numerous copies of classical sculptures, among them the Apollo Belvedere, the Dying Gaul, the Medici Venus, and a marble version of Michelangelo's Bacchus by Joseph Wilton. The latter was based on a model Wilton had originally produced for the collection of the Duke of Richmond (Coutu 2015, 55–65).
2. This appears in the copy held in the Getty Institute's collection. See Richardson, 1795. The inscription likely refers to Charles Penruddocke (1773-1799), son of the politician Charles Penruddocke (1743-1788) of Wiltshire and his wife, Anne Henrietta. See Crisp, 1902, vol. 4: 53-54.

In general, these catalogues only had one edition, except for those of Stowe, Blenheim, Fonthill, and Wilton (Harris, 1968: 62). The Wilton House collection counts more than ten editions in the course of the 18th century, written or edited by various authors. This frequent reprinting, in contrast to other country houses, suggests a particularly high level of public interest and the continuous cultural relevance of the Pembroke collection. Here it should be added the illustrated album created by artist Cary Creed in 1730, which originally[3] contained 40 etchings of the antique statues in the collection accompanied by a few-word captions under each print but without any explanatory texts apart from the one-page introduction. *The marble antiquities [of] The Right Honble. the Earl of Pembrokes, at Wilton* [...] (London, 1731) was fiercely criticized by J.J. Winckelmann in his *Geschichte der Kunst des Alterthums* (1764). Referring to Creed's etchings, Winckelmann states that they are "horrible ('schlecht') in design" and they "rather mislead than teach" ("sie verführen mehr, als sie unterrichten", Winckelmann, 1764: XIII-XIV).

In 1731, Carlo Gambarini, Count of Lucca, published a catalogue dedicated exclusively to the paintings in the Pembroke collection. The catalogue would not have any subscribers; individuals would only pay the catalogue's price (Gambarini, 1731: XIII). Engraver and antiquary George Vertue (1684-24 July 1756) commented in in July 1731, that the catalogue was most likely done on the 8th Earl's instructions (Vertue, 1935-1936, vol.v24: 1-100).[4] Twenty years after the death of the 8th Earl of Pembroke, a new catalogue signed by Richard Cowdry, was published in 1751 and 1752 (second edition). This volume is dedicated by the author to the collector and antiquary Sir Andrew Fountaine (1676-1753), who, as Cowdry states, on learning that "many Persons of Rank" wished to have "an account of the curiosities" at Wilton, took care to secure permission from Thomas Herbert for Cowdry to have access to the collection. Additionally, Fountaine, who was close with the 8th and 9th Earls, supplied the author with essential details and instructed him on the appropriate approach to compile the catalogue (Cowdry, 1752). The catalogue by Cowdry was translated into Italian by Antonio Pillori and published in Florence in 1754. The Italian edition is dedicated by the author to the 9th Earl of Pembroke (Cowdry, 1754). Four years later, a new edition appears, this time written by Wilton House's "agent," James Kennedy. Kennedy's catalogue was republished and reprinted approximately 10 times between 1758 and 1786 (Harris, 1968: 67). The 1768 edition bears a single engraving depicting the bust of Apollonius of Tyana.

One of the most important editions of Wilton House catalogues was written by James Kennedy and published in 1769 referring both to the paintings and sculpture in the Pembroke collection. This edition was illustrated by the painter and engraver John Alexander Gresse (1741-1794) with twenty-five engravings of the most important sculptures, busts, and reliefs. In addition, the author states on the title page that this catalogue presents unpublished information and observations by Thomas, Earl of Pembroke. The edition opens with a dedicatory letter to Lord Robert Spencer (Kennedy, 1769). It is followed by an alphabetical list of subscribers, which includes notable figures such as William Gilpin, members of the Herbert family, the Earl and Countess of Pembroke, the Duke and Duchess of Queensberry, Lords Robert and Charles Spencer, and others. Following the list of subscribers, the reader of the catalogue can find "An Historical Introduction to the Antiquities and Curiosities in Wilton House." (Kennedy, 1769: I-XXXVIII). Part of the introduction is a list of images, each numbered and accompanied by a brief commentary (Kennedy, 1769: XXXII-XXXVI). The significance of this particular edition lies not only in the existence of the illustrations but also in the "Historical Introduction", where the author presents a detailed account of the 8th Earl's collecting methods, while glorifying the collector, thus contributing to his public image.

In 1774, a new catalogue called *Aedes Pembrochianae* was added to Wilton House's long list of publications, and by 1798, it had been reprinted 13 times. According to John Harris, although the authorship of *Aedes Pembrochianae* is sometimes credited to someone named George Richardson, this is incorrect and is the result of a misunderstanding because certain versions of this volume include articles by artist and theorist Jonathan Richardson (1667-1745), (Harris, 1968: 67). It is possible that *Aedes Pembrochianae* had more than one author or editor because the preface to the 1795 edition, when the intentions and method by which the volume

3. The following year the album was reissued with thirty-four additional prints.
4. In another note (BM Add. MS. 23,076), Vertue, referring to paintings at Wilton, cites the catalogue compiled by "Gamberini". See Vertue, 1933: 1–86.

was produced are stated, uses the first person plural and refers to "editors" who wished to compile an impartial record of the Pembroke collection, and for this reason, they did research and combined their 'judgements' to give it 'merit and originality' (Richardson, G. (;), 1795). The title of this catalogue evokes the tradition of renowned collection catalogues — such as Aedes Barberinae, Aedes Giustinianae, and Aedes Walpolianae — and appears to draw on their prestige and allure Moreover, the signifier 'aedes' itself refers to the interpretation of a) "house" and b) "dwelling of the gods, sanctuary, temple of the Muses", adding a further element to achieve the ultimate goal of interpreting Wilton House as the place where all these 'wonders' of art are kept and at the same time of projecting its owners as prominent members of English society. This new catalogue description of the Wilton House collection uses passages from ancient authors (e.g. Ovid and Pliny) to analyze depictions of various types of artifacts. This volume includes "An Essay on the Origin, Progress, and Decline of Sculpture in the Greeks and Romans". Moreover, a comprehensive index is provided to guide visitors to the specific works and their locations within the rooms. The 1795 catalogue was made available for purchase not only at a Salisbury bookshop but also directly at Wilton House (Richardson, G., 1795), expanding public access to the collection bridging the gap between elite collectors and the broader educated audience. Compared with catalogues of earlier decades, this volume signals a growing sophistication in linking classical erudition with the construction of social identity.

The content and the language of the catalogues reveal that the authors were addressing an educated audience with an interest in classical antiquity, mythology, painting, and literature. The pronounced emphasis on antiquities can be attributed to the emergence of classicism and antiquarianism in eighteenth-century Britain. Furthermore, from Gambarini's first catalogue to the final edition of *Aedes Pembrochianae*, we encounter numerous bibliographic references, including works by Ovid, Vasari, Anton Francesco Gori, Pliny, and Count Caylus.[5]

The economic context of eighteenth-century Britain offers important insights into the accessibility of early collection catalogues. Considering the overall income level, the first guides were expensive (Vaughan, 1974: 87).[6] To put things in perspective, around 1734 a working-class family of four spent roughly two shillings and seven pence a week on bread and three shillings and six pence on meat. A middle-class household of six, with a servant in tow, might spend ten shillings and two pence on meat and fish and another six shillings and one pence on soap (Vanderlint, 1734: 77, 135). Against this backdrop, the relatively modest cost of catalogues posed no challenge for aristocratic households, turning these publications into unmistakable symbols of social privilege.

The collection catalogues were available for a fee ranging from six pence to five shillings at the house entrance, the concierge's lodgings, a nearby bookshop, or the town inn (Harris, 1968: 60). Rates varied depending on the inclusion of illustrations and the type of binding, frequently resulting in much higher expenses for visitors (Vaughan, 1974: 89, 93). In a document found in Bodleian Library, it is mentioned that the 1751 catalogue compiled by R. Cowdry would cost 2 shillings and 6 pence (Harris, 1968: 67). The illustrated edition of the Pembroke collection (edited in 1786) was priced at 10 shillings and 6p (Kennedy, 1786), while the unillustrated catalogue from 1774 cost only 2 shillings and 6p (Anderson, 2018: 56). The *editio princeps* of the antiquities catalogue at Wilton featuring engravings by Cary Creed was priced at 25 shillings, whereas the subsequent edition, with additional engravings, cost 10 shillings more (Harris, 1968: 62). When author Arthur Young (1741-1820) came to Wilton House, he found out that the catalogue cost half a crown and was sold by a servant (Young, 1769: 194-195).

Although quantitative research has not provided us with evidence that could lead to a conclusion on how many copies of the Wilton catalogue descriptions were sold during the 18th century, it is known that the Earl of Pembroke's stately home was one of the most visited of that era. In fact, Caroline Powys, who traveled extensively and recorded her experiences in her discuaries wrote in 1776, when she visited Wilton: "at the porter's lodge,

5. See for example Gambarini, 1731: 43, 59; Cowdry, 1752: 18-21, 89; Richardson, G. (;), 1795: 19-20.
6. At the beginning of the 18th century, a loaf of bread weighing 4 pounds cost about 1 penny. (See Jeremy Boulton, "Food Prices and the Standard of Living in London in the 'Century of Revolution', 1580-1700," *The Economic History Review* 53, no. 3 (August 2000): 455–492).

where he desired us to set down our names and the number of our company, we saw by the book that there had been to see it the last year 2324 persons" (Powys, 1899: 165). Certainly, we can draw some evidence about the buyers from the lists of subscribers, when there were some (Vaughan: 85-87).

The cultural value of these catalogues embodies the intricate relationship between the architectural space, its curated collection, and the identity of its proprietor. In the words of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi and Eugene Rochberg-Halton: "The home is a shelter for those persons and objects that define the self; thus it becomes, for most people, an indispensable symbolic environment" (Csikszentmihalyi; Halton, 1981: 17).

Nevertheless, constructing one's identity can be a constant and rather complex process, since the person attempts to identify themselves in a cultural environment, where the social position is bound to the *Self* (Lewis, 2009: 336-363). This creation of identity highly depends on the specific objects that the individual has chosen to encounter in their home on a daily basis. However, not only common objects but also works of art have an effect on the above process, as

> "The presence and control of objects of art provide a permanent mirror of superiority into which the upper classes can look and always see what they believe to be their own excellence, thus reinforcing one of their principal claims to superiority, their belief in their own good taste." (Warner, 1963: 235 in Csikszentmihalyi, 1981: 18).

The matter is also discussed by Jean Baudrillard. Baudrillard attributes to the object a dual identity, as a material and as a mental body, whose meaning is determined by its owner alone. In turn, the objects constitute a system in which the individual, the collector in this case, seeks to build their "personal microcosm" (Baudrillard, 1994: 7). The collection "is structured by a sequence of terms, but the final term must always be the collector", while the object becomes a symbol of groups of objects and at the same time of the collector themselves (Baudrillard, 1994: 12-13).

In addition, we should always keep in mind that in the eighteenth century, art served as a vehicle for displaying prestige, while collections functioned as virtuous indicators of the upper class's wealth, transforming monetary assets into social and political capital (Pears, 1991: 161,173). During that period the role of the collector was elevated to that of the guardian of national wealth, since the act of collecting increased the total number of artworks in the country (Pears, 1991: 173). An art collection that applied to those observations was the one belonging to the Earls of Pembroke.

The Wilton House collection, like those of other country estates, can also be interpreted through Alfred Gell's theory of agency, which conceptualizes the house and its assemblage of objects as an art nexus or "a locus of the owner's agency" (Gell 1998: 18). Within this framework, artefacts act as indexes that prompt inferences (Gell 1998: 13-14). The nexus becomes especially complex when we consider the presence of numerous objects produced by a wide range of artists. In such instances, the works do not merely index their prototypes — when such prototypes existed (Gell 1998: 26) — but also reflect the agency of each one of the makers (Gell 1998: 23).

Yet, as Gell reminds us, art objects are produced for two main purposes: to be acquired by a patron — in this case, the Earls of Pembroke — and to be viewed by a public (Gell 1998: 24). This raises the inevitable question: who exactly was the public or the "recipients" in Gell's terms? Certainly, one answer would be the visitors who toured Wilton. But what of the household itself — the residents who encountered these works daily? If we take their presence into account, it becomes clear that country house collections addressed more than a single group of recipients and, consequently, invited multiple readings or "abductions" of agency.

We will now turn our attention to an analysis of the arrangement of some rooms within Wilton House as they were constituted in the eighteenth century. The construction of the library was completed in 1788; for this reason, the reader can only find a description of it in *Aedes Pemrbrochianae*, the 1795 catalog of the collection.



Fig. 1· John Buckler FSA, 1770-1851, East Front of Wilton House, Wiltshire, the Seat of the Earl of Pembroke, 1809, Watercolor and pen and black ink on moderately thick, cream wove paper, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1991.40.100.

The description begins with the previous space, the passage leading to the library. There, one could come across a statue of "Marc Antony the orator, who was praise by Cicero", as well as Hercules killing the serpents, and the bust of the roman consul, Asinius Pollio and of other notable historical figures (Richardson, 1795: 48-49). Moving to the main space of the library, one would find a variety of sculpture; among them the busts of philosophers, historians and poets of antiquity, such as Hesiod, Livy, Seneca, Socrates, Aristophanes and Sulpitia. Also, portraits of contemporary connoisseurs and antiquarians for instance Martin Folkes (1690-1754) and Sir Andrew Fountaine (Richardson, 1795: 50-51).

In the same room were displayed several painted portraits depicting members of the royal family, and of the Royal Society, of which the 8th Earl of Pembroke was president. Apart from these men of learning, some ladies' portraits were hanging there as well: the two wives of Thomas Herbert by Kneller and Gervoise and Lady Rockingham by Lely, all of which, were previously (in 1752) placed in the Breakfast Room (Cowdry, 1752: 93-94). But in the library were even more pictures: the self-portrait of Van Dyck, genre paintings by Van Ostade and Casteels (previously, in 1731 in the Yellow Damask Room), and a historical one by Alessandro Turchi. In addition, were displayed sketches by Caracci, Reni, Raffaello, Inigo Jones, and others. The sculptures of the roman goddess Libertas, and of Apollo, god of light, music, and poetry, were also displayed (Richardson, 1795: 51-58).

How were these objects connected to one another, and to the room in which they were displayed? The catalog itself offers an important clue, where the author invokes Asinius Pollio: "If his reputation in arms was great, in letters it was greater" (Richardson 1795, 51–58). By drawing on this example, the compiler may have intended to place the earls of Pembroke in direct comparison with Pollio. Like him, they combined military and political authority with an aspiration to be remembered as learned nobles. The library, with its alignment to deities such as Apollo, became an apt setting in which to display this identity, uniting martial and civic virtues with associations of knowledge, art, and the humanist values drawn from Cicero and Livy (Urbinati 2012, 607–21).

As Viccy Coltman has argued, eighteenth-century libraries could function as "idealized and imagined replicas of antiquity," spaces where the collector's ideas about the classical past were materialized in objects and where a "refined dialogue between ancient sources and modern treatises" was staged (Coltman 1999, 35–50). Within this context, the acquisition and display of Greek and Roman antiquities should be understood not only as gestures of taste or erudition but also as acts that aligned the British elite with a perceived continuity of classical virtues — a notion articulated by Jonathan Richardson the Elder and echoed by Shaftesbury and Addison in the claims that "no nation under heaven so nearly resembles the ancient Greeks, and Romans as" the British (Richardson 1792: 94). In this sense, the library was more than a repository of books and objects: it was a carefully constructed setting in which the ideals of ancestry, learning, and civic virtue were made visible and enduring.

As mentioned earlier, the busts of Sir Andrew Fountaine and Martin Folkes were placed in the library towards the end of the century. The two connoisseurs' presence in the Pembroke collection was not only physical, limited to advice about acquisition and catalogue writing; their own image also played an important part in the formation of a non-literal/connotative meaning within Wilton House. Fountaine, a prominent British nobleman, collector, connoisseur, and a member of the Royal Society, contributed to the enrichment of the Pembroke collection, acting as an agent, and he became a key figure in the creation of the 1752 catalogue. The presence of Martin Folkes, Esq. in Pembroke's circle was crucial as well. Martin Folkes was a collector, antiquarian, connoisseur, patron of Hogarth, astronomer and mathematician. He had apprenticed under Sir Isaac Newton and served as president of the Royal Society and the Society of Antiquaries. In 1746, Martin Folkes was involved in the realization of the catalogue of the Earl of Pembroke's coin collection (Roos, 2021: 1, 46).

Around the same time, Henry Herbert, the 9th Earl of Pembroke (1693-1749) commissioned the *all' antica* busts of the two men — and himself — to Roubiliac. Henry Herbert, Folkes and Fountaine were connected by friendly bonds and shared an interest in collecting and studying antiquities. Malcolm Baker interprets the coexistence of contemporary busts and antiquities as the three men's desire to appear not only as collectors who "discussed, classified and described" antiques, but also as individuals who "created images of themselves" and their surroundings based on ancient models (Baker, 2008).[7] To develop this argument further, it may be proposed that the 9th Earl of Pembroke and his contemporaries aspired to be recognized as men of letters; as collectors and keepers of public wealth, and ultimately as virtuous figures deemed worthy of serving as exemplars for future generations, much as the ancients had been for their own. This was a common practice in various collections assembled in the early eighteenth century, such as those of Pembroke, Burlington, Walpole, and others, the juxtaposition of the owners' likenesses with ancient sculptures created a timeless ensemble, in which — much like at Wilton — elements of both Roman and Celtic British history could coexist (Coutu, 2015: 7).

The historical context surrounding the display of these busts within Wilton House is of considerable interest. Originally, the busts of Folkes and Fountaine had been placed in the Double Cube room, one of the public rooms of Wilton. James Kennedy, the author of the 1769 catalogue, informs the reader that in close proximity to the busts were the statues of Clio, the Muse of History, and Aspasia, "famous for her learning and intelligence" (Kennedy, 1769: 33). As previously noted, by the close of the eighteenth century, the busts had been relocated to the Library. In the description of the room, it is stated that:

> "The bust of Martin Foulkes, Esq. by Roubiliac. He succeeded Sir Isaac Newton in the Presidentship of the Royal Society; and published a curious book on coins.
>
> and
>
> The bust of Sir Andrew Fountain, by Roubiliac. This gentleman was particularly skilled in English antiquities" (Richardson, 1795: 55-56).

7. Similar projects can be found in the eighteenth century, such as William Stukeley's self-portrait in his manuscript catalogue of the Pembroke collection (Baker, 2008). Another example is the mausoleum of the 2nd Marquess of Rockingham, where Joseph Nollekens's sculpted likeness stood surrounded *by all' antica* busts of the marquess's friends and political allies, creating a striking dialogue between personal memory and social networks (Coutu, 2015). Similarly, in 1939, Paul Getty commissioned the Italian sculptor Pier Gabriele Vangelli (1899-1987) to create his bust, in an effort to align himself with the antiquities he was collecting (Guilding, 2014: 5–6).

Thus, from the change in position, it can be assumed that when the busts were placed in the Double Cube Room around 1752, they were meant to suggest that Folkes and Fountaine were, above all, men of gentry. This was highlighted by their placement near portraits of King Charles I and Queen Henrietta Maria, their children, the Herbert family (all by Van Dyck), and other aristocrats, all of whom were, in some way, connected. By 1769, with the addition of the statues of Clio and Aspasia, the intellectual achievements of Folkes and Fountaine were also represented. This connection became even clearer by the end of the century, when the busts were moved to their final position in the Library.

Regarding the simultaneous display of family and monarchical portraits alongside busts of historical figures, Ruth Guilding explains that such iconographic programs were intended to indicate the timeless power of old families, as well as the ways in which this power was intertwined "with national and cultural history", emphasizing their dominant role. Moreover, it is important to understand the existence of a "culture of ancestor worship" and the fact that the combined exhibition of sculptural portraits and ancient busts revealed the owners' hope of extending the branches of their family tree, claiming, even mentally, kinship with the great persons of antiquity (Guilding, 2014: 29).

Among the many rooms within the estate, the Gallery of the Great Hall stood out as a key space, offering the collector a unique opportunity to shape both display and interpretation. As recorded in the 1752 catalogue of Wilton House, the armor of William, 1st Earl of Pembroke (c. 1501-1570), was displayed at the center of the Gallery, surrounded by various arms and armor. According to the catalogue, these surrounding items had been acquired by the 1st Earl as spoils of war. They were taken during his participation in the siege of St. Quintin, where he served as "Captain-General of the English Forces" under the reign of Queen Mary. There he captured among others the Constable Montmorency, and the Dukes of Montpensier and Longueville. The suits of armor and weapons were displayed in the same room alongside a painting of the *Last Supper* by Giorgione and a portrait of the 1st Earl of Pembroke (Cowdry, 1752: 21-22). As visitors exited the room and descended the stairs, they encountered a colossal statue of Hercules holding the golden apples of Hesperides "with a great air of satisfaction". This statue remained in place at least until the end of the century (Richardson, 1795: 39).

In the following years, around 1769, the arrangement of the objects remained the same except for the *Last Supper*, which was replaced by a portrait of Captain (or Major) Bernard. North Ludlow Bernard (1705-1768) was the second husband of Mary Fitzwilliam, the 10th Earl of Pembroke's mother. As Martin Robinson points out, "the 10th Earl became very close to his stepfather, who encouraged his enthusiasm for horses and the military". Bernard was the descendant of an Anglo-Irish family and he was "a distinguished soldier in the Dragoon Guards" (Robinson, 2021: 159) Certainly, by hanging Bernard's portraits near the one of the 1st Earl, it was declared that now Major was part of the family.

As the catalogues typically arranged the rooms in the order of the objects' placement, the layout of the display clearly indicates an intention to draw analogies between Hercules and the military figures of the family. In this light, the 1st Earl and Major Bernard were positioned as the family's own Hercules figures, while the golden apples symbolized both the armor of defeated enemies and their broader military triumphs. Moreover, several depictions of Hercules were displayed in Wilton House, as well as in other art collections of the period. Indeed, this hero — half mortal, half god — "was a favored figure in the iconography of the English country house during the 18th century" (Paulson, 1975: 29-30) a fact that aligns perfectly with the era's emphasis on civic virtue. Indeed, as David Solkin and other scholars have pointed out, during that period, Hercules was transformed by the British to a moral symbol, representing the superiority of virtue over pleasure and vice (Solkin, 1993: 63, 54). Hercules embodied the ideal of heroic virtue, because he was usually depicted as the destroyer of beasts that somehow threatened humanity (Paulson, 1975: 29). Additionally, the mythical hero could be interpreted as a symbol of masculinity, which is primarily defined in contrast to femininity. Consequently, his choice can be understood as a decision between exerting domination over others or being governed by one's passions, ultimately leading to "effeminization," a grave threat to the stability of (patriarchal) polite society. The term itself reveals the opposition to women and their "feminizing influence" (Barrell, 1989: 101-131). Here, this contrast and domination over others is depicted through the golden apples, the fruit from the garden of Hesperides, the daughters — the female children — of the Night.

The victorious, dominant Hercules can also be interpreted as a symbol of the 1st Earl and his victory in battle, acquiring his own "golden apples", the armor of the defeated enemy. Of course, the 18th century concept of masculinity came hand in hand with civic humanism. In the words of John Barrell:

> "The discourse of civic humanism was the most authoritative fantasy of masculinity in early eighteenth-century Britain; it was this discourse, above all, which represented civic freedom not only as an emancipation from servility and dependence, but as an emancipation from desire." (Barrell, 1989: 101-131).

Thus, the colossal statue of Hercules, positioned near armors and portraits of soldiers, could symbolize civic, masculine, heroic, and military virtue.

It is obvious from the previous example that gender-related ideas were embedded and represented in the display. Another illuminating example is that of the Countess of Pembroke's apartments (Closet, Dressing Room), which reveal how the room's function and contemporary beliefs about social role and gender influenced the display of specific works. Around 1731, the Countess' Closet contained paintings with religious themes such as Child Christ, Hagar and Ishmael, as well as paintings depicting little boys, landscapes and flowers (Gambarini, 1731: 56-57). The choice of these works can be interpreted as an attempt to project appropriate models through the 'ideal' biblical children and mothers which would have an exemplary effect on her. Additionally, the presence of images of young boys in the Countess's rooms evokes beliefs about 'imaginative conception' — the idea that images seen or imagined by an expectant mother could be imprinted on the fetus. Such concepts can be found in the *Book of Genesis* (30: 25-43), in St. Augustine's Against Julian, in Ficino's *Book of Life* (1489), as well as in Alberti's *On Architecture* (1452) and Giulio Mancini's *Considerazioni sulla pittura* (17th century) (Musacchio, 1997: 42-60). Moreover, we must not forget that in many cases the Closet also served religious purposes as the King James' Bible indicated in Matthew, Chapt. 6 (Bobker, 2020: 20).

The previous description of the Lady's private spaces stands in stark contrast to the Lord's Dressing Room and Closet (in 1795), where the decor was dominated by images reflecting typically 'masculine' pursuits, such as hawking. The room featured depictions of dogs and horses, animals to which he had a strong attachment, as well as portraits of gentlemen and military figures (Richardson, 1795: 45).

The sources and literature of the period under review confirm the influence of various factors and norms on the display in country houses. Among these was the belief that certain types of works, particularly paintings, were deemed suitable for adorning the walls of specific rooms. Portraits were most likely to be found in public rooms such as the hall, still lives and paintings depicting birds in the dining room, while works of the Old Masters were usually placed in the large apartments and cabinets. The libraries were dominated by portraits of scholars, the bedrooms by a few scattered paintings, framed drawings or engravings, and in most cases family portraits were displayed in the gallery (Russell, 1989). Reflections of the above are evident in the arrangement of certain rooms at Wilton House, including the Double Cube Room and the Library.

Guidance on which works were appropriate for the particular site was provided for example in the 17th century English treatise, called *Graphice*. Its author, William Sanderson (c. 1586-1676), explains how to best illuminate works and urges the reader-collector to hang works of ruins or buildings on the staircase, subjects with peasants and animals in the hall, portraits of kings and shields in the dining room, while he considers that portraits of wives and children are preferable to decorate private rooms or the bedroom, in order to avoid the risk of being seen by a "degenerate" visitor (Sanderson, 1658:27). This was not always the case of Wilton as the catalogs indicate.

Similarly, William Gilpin provides recommendations on display and lighting, offering his insights on potential alterations to the arrangement of the Pembroke collection, based on his visit to Wilton House. Gilpin suggests that only a few busts and statues should be placed in the rooms, allowing the viewer to perceive the collection as a whole. He believes it would be preferable to display the sculptures in an elongated gallery, similar to the one in Lord Arundel's residence or that of the Duke of Richmond at Whitehall. Additionally, he proposes that low-reliefs be framed and placed on the wall, with the busts 'standing' between them on bases attached to the wall or set into niches, while the statues would be positioned in the foreground. Moreover, Gilpin argues that a dark olive background might have been more suitable for the marbles, and that the light should come from above, not directly. It is important to keep in mind that all of Gilpin's observations are ultimately aimed at achieving a picturesque effect. In this context, he remarks that if "the antiquities were placed on one side of the room," they would be illuminated by the windows on the opposite wall. However, this type of lighting would not achieve the desired picturesque result. Such an effect might be more successfully attained through side lighting and curtains (Gilpin, 1798: 107-108). In addition to what has been said the availability of space and the acquisition of new works were inextricably linked to display (Russell, 1989). This was precisely the condition described by Daniel Defoe, who, after his visit to Wilton, commented on the plethora of paintings and stated that "at present the whole house is so completely fill'd, that I see no room for any new piece to crowd in, without displacing some other fine piece that hung there before" (Defoe, 1962: 194).

EPILOGUE

During the 18th century, the growing popularity of country house tourism prompted private collectors to open their residences to a broader audience. Central to this practice were collection catalogues, which offered contextual, iconographic, and stylistic insights while also shaping the collector's public image and legacy. These catalogues functioned both as practical guides for engaging with the collection and as symbolic representations of its cultural and intellectual value. They directed the viewer's attention, structured the tour experience within the estate, and framed art viewing as a form of scholarly engagement. In this way, catalogues not only affirmed the significance of the collection but also elevated the collector's social standing.

Earlier I suggested that country house collections might be examined through Alfred Gell's theory of agency, which raises the question of whether catalogue descriptions can be analyzed in the same way. Their informative character clearly played a role in shaping processes of learning and prompted inference, offering readers a form of "access" to the minds of authors and collectors (Gell 1998: 15). But can they truly be considered indexes in Gell's sense? Catalogues are, after all, "physical things, unique and identifiable," which enable specific forms of cognitive engagement. Yet Gell insists that indexes cannot simply be "readings or reproductions" (Gell 1998: 13) — a distinction that complicates, if not excludes, the possibility of treating catalogue descriptions as indexes in their own right. What becomes more fruitful, then, is to consider how the objects themselves, as described in catalogues and encountered in situ, acted as agents within the social and intellectual life of the house.

This is where Gell's framework proves most productive. His theory of agency can be used to interpret the relations within a country house collection, moving from textual mediation to the material presence of objects. In Gellian terms, we understand that, in a country house, such as Wilton House, the sculptures exercised intentionality: they mediated relationships between the viewer and the social world of the collector, signaling intellectual authority, connoisseurship, and civic virtue (Gell 1998: 6–9).

The busts of philosophers, historians, and poets in the Library — Hesiod, Livy, Seneca, Socrates, Aristophanes, and Sulpitia — do more than simply occupy space. They act as agents, shaping how visitors understand the intellectual ambitions of the Pembroke family. Positioned alongside portraits of contemporary connoisseurs like Martin Folkes and Sir Andrew Fountaine (Richardson, 1795: 50-51)., the sculptures guide the viewer to connect the family with the wisdom and virtue of both ancient and modern exemplars (Gell 1998: 6, 24). This careful arrangement, invoking gods like Apollo and the muse Clio, transforms the Library into a dialogue between the past and the present, where the objects themselves participate in storytelling.

The relations of the art nexus become more complex in the case of the creation and display of the Earl's own bust (Baker, 2008). In this instance, the artist still acts as the source of the creative act, and the index is shaped by the artist's agency and intention, but it is the prototype's appearance that they imitate. On the other hand, the model and patron — the prototype — not only serves as the cause of the index but is also affected by it, as the bust eventually turns the prototype into a recipient, leading to abductions about oneself. At the same time, another recipient, the visitor to Wilton, is affected by the artist's skill, becoming captivated, persuaded, or even having their responses directed by the prototype's presence (Gell, 1998: 29).

In the Armory, the armor of the 1st Earl of Pembroke, displayed in the center of the Gallery and surrounded by captured weapons (Cowdry, 1752: 21-22), does more than commemorate military victories. As agents, these objects communicate the Earl's courage and civic virtue, while the colossal statue of Hercules nearby reinforces the narrative of heroic masculinity. Together with the portraits of military figures such as Major Bernard, the objects guide the recipients/visitors to see the family as a lineage of valor and disciplined strength, their meanings emerging through spatial and symbolic relationships rather than merely through labels (Gell, 1998: 16-19, 24).

In the Countess of Pembroke's apartments, paintings of biblical children and mothers acted as agents that communicated idealized female roles and moral exemplars, while the Earl's dressing room displayed objects signifying masculine pursuits, such as hawking and military achievements (Gambarini, 1731, 56–57; Richardson, 1795, 45). Through such strategic placement, these objects exercised agency by instructing viewers in contemporary gender norms and shaping the identities of inhabitants and visitors alike — a dynamic consistent with Gell's conception of art as an active participant in social life (Gell, 1998: 12).

Considering the Wilton catalogues span from the 1730s to the 1790s, shifts in arrangement and emphasis likely reflect broader social and intellectual transformations of the Georgian period — such as the move from humanist to sentimental aesthetics, and from aristocratic display to a more moralized, public-facing notion of taste (Brewer 1997: 89, 94-107). Recognizing these temporal changes situates Wilton not as a static monument but as a living organism of cultural meaning, continually reshaped by evolving values.

Through the case studies of the Library, the Armory, and the private rooms of Wilton House, it becomes evident that the catalog descriptions are able to convey meaning about collected objects and their display. Moreover, the objects themselves are able to generate multiple interpretations depending on their spatial context. A portrait, for instance, may serve a commemorative function in isolation, but when placed among family likenesses, depictions of mythical figures, and suits of armor, it acquires a different function, becoming an *exemplum virtutis* that reflects ideals of virtue, lineage, and gender. The sources and literature of the period confirm that display in country houses was guided by a set of norms, including the belief that certain works were suited for specific rooms. Such conventions are articulated in early modern treatises, which advised collectors on the proper arrangement and placement of works in domestic interiors.

Today, display and context at Wilton House continue to evolve. New portraits are commissioned, architectural changes reshape the interiors, and as a result, fresh narratives and interpretations emerge, demonstrating that the country house remains an active site where meaning is continually negotiated and redefined.

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