

Thomas Bardwell



The Longe family of Spixworth Hall, near Norwich

Reference: 10847

Dimensions:

Height: 28 cm / 11 in

Width: 24 cm / 9½ in

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Gouache on vellum, in the original swept frame with labels attached, inscribed on a former label: '...ell Pinxt...about the year 1756'

28 x 24 cm; 11 x 9 1/2 inches

Provenance

Sotheby's, London, 22 March 1979, lot 84; Davis & Long Company, New York, British Watercolours 1 - 29 November 1980, ex. catalogue; Private collection, U.S.; Paul F. Walter, New York, until 2017

Exhibited

Anthony Reed, London, 1980, 'Heads and Bodies', no. 15, ill.;

Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, University of East Anglia, 'Sporting Art from East Anglian Collections', 28 June-10 August 1980, no. 19, ill.

Comparative Literature: cf. Walpole Soc. XLVI (1978) M.Kirby Talley Jr.: 'Thomas Bardwell of Bungay, artist and author'

This rural conversation piece is of exceptional interest as it is rare to find 18th century conversation pieces on vellum on such a small scale; it also has a fine level of painted detail providing invaluable information for the social historian.

Major Francis Longe (1726-1776), the owner of Spixworth Hall near Norwich, is painted at home, just returned from shooting, presenting his wife, Tabitha (née Howes) with a bag containing a live leveret, a symbol of love. His dog peers around the door which shows the park from which his master has just returned, and a spaniel lies at his mistress's feet. The sitters' identity as landowners of some standing is directly expressed. The label on the back of the painting states that Major Longe is 30 years of age and this dates the work to 1756. His only son Francis, born in 1748, is standing next to his mother and would have been 8 years old at the time this work was made.

Francis Longe married Tabitha Howes soon after he came down from Cambridge. Francis and Tabitha had a son, Francis, in 1748. Francis (the elder) was educated at Westminster School and Emmanuel College, Cambridge and served as High Sheriff of Norfolk in 1752, an office his son Francis was also to hold. His wife was the daughter of John Howes (d. 1771) of Morningthorpe Manor, Norfolk and his wife Barbara, daughter and heiress of Rev. Thomas Sydnor; they married in 1720. Barbara Howes was painted with her four children by D. Heins, when Tabitha was 14 years old.

Francis, the boy in the present drawing, inherited the estate on the death of his father in 1776. He had married Catherine Jackson (1752-1828) four years earlier. Catherine's father had an important position in the Admiralty, and sponsored Captain James Cook's voyage of discovery to Australia. Sydney was originally called Port Jackson after him. Francis and Catherine Longe had no issue; Francis died in 1812 and the estate passed to his cousin upon his widow's death in 1828.

Spixworth Hall was an Elizabethan house located just north of Norwich on the Buxton Road. The estate became mired in debt in the hands of Francis's widow Catherine; there were disputes over her ability to sell or mortgage parts of the property. She was reduced to cutting down a grand avenue of oak trees that lined the drive up to the Hall to produce an

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income. Spixworth Park was inherited by a relative, a great-grandson of Francis Longe and grandson of his second son called John (b.1731), Rector of Spixworth until his death in 1806. The house was demolished in 1950.

The attribution to Thomas Bardwell is historic and strongly based upon stylistic grounds as well as the inscription on the (now lost) label which accompanied it into the late 20th century. Bardwell was born in East Anglia in 1704 and died in Norwich on 9th September 1767 and became very popular amongst the gentry of East Anglia where he painted portraits, views of country houses and conversation pieces. The Geffrye Museum, London have an oil group portrait, possibly of the Brewster family of Beccles, dated 1736 in their collection with similarities to the present drawing, notably in the high level of detail of the interior. Another comparable oil of the Broke and Bowles family dated 1740 is in the Government Art Collection (and was included in 'Manners and Morals, Hogarth and British Painting 1700-1760', Tate 1987-8). There are however no other known vellum works by Bardwell on the scale of the present work.

Later in his career, Bardwell undertook a tour through Yorkshire to Scotland and painted portraits in some of the large houses en route. In his later years he had a thriving practice in Norwich. In 1756 he published a treatise entitled 'The Practice of Painting and Perspective Made Easy', an important book of its kind and of its time.

The genre which grew in popularity from the early 1730s was initially associated with painters such as William Hogarth and Gawen Hamilton. These "conversations" represent a peculiarly English contribution to the arts. They reflected the rising prosperity of the urban middle class in the early 18th century which led to a demand for a more intimate and modest style of portraiture appropriate to the social status of a new class of patrons. They often depict their subjects in their domestic surroundings, a contrast to the swagger of grand portraiture. The paintings thus produced with a high level of skill are exceptional visual evidence of their lifestyle and rising prosperity, their pride in their economic achievements and their self-confidence within their prosperous bourgeois surroundings.

Alongside these urban interiors are the relaxed rural conversation pieces of the Tory squirearchy produced in the years after about 1740 by artists such as Arthur Devis, Francis Hayman, Edward Haytley and Thomas Gainsborough. Bardwell would appear to have been well aware of these latest developments of composition and style both locally and in the metropolis. The portrait possibly of the Brewster Family of 1736 (see above) shows he was a pioneer of the genre, in both East Anglia and the country as a whole.

Paul Walter was born in 1935 to Fred and Anna Walter, co-founders of the New Jersey industrial instruments firm Thermo Electric. Anna Walter was a benefactor of the Morgan Library and Museum and the Los Angeles County Museum of Art. Through collecting, patronage, and leadership roles at the Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, Paul Walter became one of the city's most respected connoisseurs.

We are grateful to M. Kirby Talley Jr. for his comments on this work.