

## The Art of Domestic Life: Family Portraiture in Eighteenth-Century England

**Review Number:**

558

**Publish date:**

Friday, 1 December, 2006

**Author:**

Kate Retford

**ISBN:**

9780300110012

**Date of Publication:**

2006

**Price:**

£30.00

**Pages:**

368pp.

**Publisher:**

Yale University Press

**Place of Publication:**

New Haven, CT

**Reviewer:**

Joanne Bailey

Every picture tells a story. The story told by posed portraits of the family is one of change over time; family groups look different at different times. Thus the Victorian middle-class family is typically photographed in an indoor 'domestic' setting, its members unsmiling, connected to each other by the touch of a hand on a shoulder. Take a look at professional photographers' web pages today, however, and the modern family is often outdoors, caught in movement, grinning, and much more affectionate than its grim-faced, motionless ancestors. What do these different pictorial narratives of the family mean? Most obviously, it is a story of developments in the technology for capturing images. Early cameras required their sitters to remain immobile for long periods of time. Yet, as the historiography of the family reveals, we seek deeper meanings in such a development in representation. Does it illustrate a shift from a hierarchical family with weak emotional bonds to a more loving, closer, and, therefore, happier family? Does it indicate different kinds of power and gender relationships between family members? Is it, even, the fabled transition from the 'traditional' to 'modern' family?

This 'sentiments approach', as Michael Anderson christened it, is problematic when applied to the visual depiction of the family since similar transformations in styles occurred at earlier periods. In her stunning book, *The Art of Domestic Life*, Kate Retford shows that from the 1740s to 1790s the genre of family portraiture was transformed. In the early-eighteenth century, the family was self-aware and aware of the viewer; it was formally posed against a dominating background, and often included members of the wider family. By the later-eighteenth century, the 'nuclear' family was the centre of attention, dominating its surroundings and the canvas, ostensibly caught unaware by the viewer in a physically and emotionally

intimate moment in time. Retford's analysis of the meaning of this shift is sophisticated, lively, and beautifully illustrated, with sumptuous reproductions of all the closely-analysed art. Lawrence Stone used this visual shift as evidence for his broad-brush picture of the transformation of family relationships from emotionally distant in the sixteenth century, to more acutely patriarchal in the seventeenth, to companionate and loving in the eighteenth century.

Stone's controversial thesis is hardly at boiling level thirty years on, but it undoubtedly continues to simmer, setting the agenda for a number of scholars. Retford tips her hat to Stone's controversial framework, but goes beyond it to explore the family with some novelty. First she uses the expertise of her own discipline as a historian of art to bring new insights, as well as making excellent use of family correspondence, prescriptive literature, and contemporary commentary on the portraits during their display in the Royal Academy. She explains that historians of the family need not be so cautious of art as a source; a wariness that she sees as a reaction against earlier historians who used it clumsily. Art is a valuable source as long as it is fully contextualized. Thus portraits need to be read at several levels. They are aesthetic objects in themselves, and are, therefore, linked to stylistic influences within the art world. Nevertheless, they are also a historical record since they documented specific details about the sitters and their lives, therefore preserving insights into the family from within the conventions of the form.

Secondly, Retford is at pains to point out that art also reflects broader changes in behavioural norms and practices. This is significant given the existence of the influential cults of 'sensibility' and 'domesticity' in the later-eighteenth century. Clearly they made their mark upon domestic portraiture, offering, as Retford describes it, 'a new language for conveying the possibilities of private life' (p. 9). For all the power of the sentimental form, however, Retford's book insists that portraiture responded to new ways of representing feeling rather than depicting new feelings. Hence, earlier portraits of the family did not illustrate a lack of familial emotion, but conveyed gentility and polite posture as fashionable sensibilities demanded. Later paintings deployed the concept of sentiment in order to prompt sentimental reflection in the viewer and to advertise artists' abilities to convey emotion, that would gain them further commissions.

Thirdly, and most rewardingly for historians, *The Art of Domestic Life* focuses upon the role of the families themselves in this visual shift. In doing so, Retford resolves the paradox that historians face when addressing Stone's thesis about emotional transformation in the second half of the eighteenth century, for literature, art, and printed advice do reveal significant changes in sentiment. It is not enough to dismiss their tangible impact on family life by arguing that reality is different to prescription. Retford contends that 'the normative and the actual were not, and are not, hermetically sealed entities' (p. 37). The two shaped each other and thus portraits display the more normative elements of people's lives. This suited the sitters who commissioned portraits to advertise the fact that their lives followed socially-approved ideals. Through this shift in focus, Retford rejects the discredited search for emotional transformations, and instead proposes that the change in the depiction of the family reflects a cultural shift in the way that families portrayed themselves. Thus family portraits capture the essence of what each era thinks is the meaning of family life.

Finally, Retford shrugs off Stone's straitjacket by moving beyond outmoded models of traditional and modern. She innovatively uses evidence about the intended location of the portraits in the aristocratic family seats to argue convincingly that while fashionable ideas were taken up they did not oust more traditional notions of family. Thus male authority and dynastic concerns were simply repackaged in a sentimental form.

Retford's first two chapters examine depictions of married couples. In the first she analyses the 'pendant portrait'. In this, husbands and wives were depicted in separate portraits, but hung together as two halves of a whole. Strongly gendered, both their hanging and composition emphasized male activity and female passivity. The husband's portrait displayed his social position and primary activity from which the family derived its income, while his wife's demonstrated her feminine qualities of tenderness and sundry domestic attributes. In other words, they fall broadly into a private/public dichotomy. The chapter goes on to demonstrate, through case studies, the artificiality of the notion of separate spheres, since many of the women were involved in the public world of family politics or estate management. Perhaps a closer attention to recent scholarship that shows that 'private and public' had different meanings in the eighteenth century

would have been fruitful here. Overall, however, the book makes some useful contributions to the debate, particularly in the next chapter that explores the 'double portrait'. This highlighted companionship and emotion—particularly in the promenade picture, that showed the couple strolling arm in arm through a natural landscape. This created a narrative of marital mutuality and an integration of separate male and female worlds within marriage. This shift had three basic causes: artistic precedents; changing cultural fashions such as the vogue for public walks and modish forms of dance whose gestures denoted elegance; and new ways of defining the marital relationship in prescriptive material. The most valuable insight of this chapter is that the marital portrait conflated the private and the public and thus 'the image of the virtuous husband simultaneously became the image of the virtuous citizen' (p. 74). Thus this new vogue in portraiture did not demonstrate a new equality between husband and wife, but conferred benefits on men who used it to advertise their companionate relationship with their wives.

The next two chapters are particularly welcome since they focus on the portrayal of parenting, a subject ripe for reappraisal. Portraits of parents and their children became more intensely emotional from the mid-eighteenth century. Standing less on formalities, parents were shown cuddling their offspring, playing with them, and tenderly relating to them. Mothers had long been shown in devotional form, influenced by the conventions of the Madonna and Child, but the sentimental form idealized motherhood still further. Though new, relaxed forms of maternity were on display, Retford shows how these fashionable styles still conveyed the aristocracy's investment in the continuation of the family line. When placed in their planned location they conveyed the crucial importance of male inheritance and the value of woman in securing it (even, or particularly when, unbroken male succession was not the reality). While focusing on mothers, the genre gave them no extra authority, still positioning fathers as the guiding hand in child rearing and using devices to make the paternal presence explicit even in the bodily absence of the father in the portrait.

Although there was continuing emphasis on fathers' role in provisioning, educating, and disciplining their children, a significant change occurred in the visual depiction of fatherhood. In a fascinating chapter, Retford describes the rise in family portraits of the devoted, caring father who tended his children's emotional, as well as material, wellbeing. Again, she detects the coexistence of new and traditional forms, since the portraits frequently conveyed the fathers' supervisory role by placing them at the summit of a triangular composition, as well as symbolizing the importance of lineage by the fathers' close proximity to their male heir. These images of fatherhood were not 'private' or 'domestic' as we are inclined to understand it. Demonstrating the fluidity of 'private' and 'public' yet again, Retford shows that men used such tender devotion to advertise their civilized qualities; a factor that needs to be more fully explored by historians of masculinity in this period. It would have been interesting to consider more fully whether mothers advertised their status in a similar way. The possibilities of this are suggested in a later chapter by an account of the duchess of Devonshire's use of a portrait celebrating her maternal devotion to her daughter to restore her reputation, which was damaged by the criticism she endured while canvassing during the 1784 Westminster election.

Chapter five looks more closely at the role of family portraits in constructing a narrative of unbroken male inheritance. Here Retford's consideration of the final hanging of family portraiture reaps rewards. She shows that, while following new fashions, these images were conceived as additions to existing collections and therefore intended as another brick in the dynastic wall. Earlier family portraits were also brought into stylistic conformity by adapting inherited ancestral images to fit the narrative of unbroken succession. In some cases, ancestors who were inconveniently absent in pictorial form were added through the commissioning of fictitious portraits. The portraits served to make national claims as well as dynastic ones, since the genealogical links that were emphasized were those to heroes, military campaigners, and statesmen and in the process aristocratic families carefully advertised their alliances to political parties and devotion to royal houses. This finding in some ways helps to belie the book's title since in these elite families 'domestic' simply did not carry the connotations of 'private' or separateness that we associate with it. After all many of these elite homes had very public aspects, visited by the public as well as their peers, all of whom therefore were confronted with images intended to convey and therefore maintain the family's status, authority, and wealth. Of course, the elevation of men's role in sustaining the family line often required much manipulation

of the truth given that women contributed both titles and property through marriage and inheritance. The book would thus have benefited from a closer engagement with Elaine Chalus's and Ingrid Tague's work on aristocratic women's participation in politics and power thanks to the familial nature of eighteenth-century politics. In turn, this would have added further dimensions to the families' concerns to display their lineage. While it is easy to assume that it was the male members of the family who secured most from this manipulation of identity, the familial model of political life may have meant that some women at least identified with this 'public' self promotion.

The manipulation of self image and family identity is developed further in chapter six which looks at the ways in which members of aristocratic families used family portraits to restore their reputation when it came under attack from an increasingly powerful print media. This demonstrates that the conventions of the genre were so well recognized that they could be used to re-establish moral reputations in an era when the aristocracy were coming under criticism for their immorality. Retford's entertaining case studies show that the most successful attempts to restore reputation occurred when the sitter had some positive attributes, otherwise the gap between behaviour and ideals was too great to bridge. By showing the pervasiveness of the 'symbols' of ideal family life, the question is raised about the social origin of the concept of 'domesticity'. Often it is seen as a largely middle-class phenomenon, deployed to create an identity in opposition to aristocratic mores. In contrast, Retford concludes that the aristocracy adopted the sentimental values of domesticity independently and not as self-defence against a middle class intent upon gaining the 'domestic' high ground. This is an intriguing proposal, that indicates that the terms 'sentimental' and 'domesticity' need further research to unravel how far they were used in different ways by different social groups across the later-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries.

*The Art of Domestic Life* must be essential reading for historians of the family as well as historians of developments in art. Retford adroitly integrates the individual within the family group and wider cultural values, and shows how each influenced the other. Following current trends, she shows that the individual could deviate from behavioural norms, but still be structured by them. Thus the story told by these pictures of the family is one of adaptability and knowingness; where the image of the family is a vehicle to be consciously manipulated to achieve benefit to its members. All in all, Kate Retford illustrates that the field of the history of the family remains exciting and innovative.

The author is happy to accept this review and does not wish to comment further.

#### **Other reviews:**

[2]

---

**Source URL:** <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/558#comment-0>

#### **Links**

[1] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/item/2997>

[2] <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews>