

BRITISH ART IN AMERICAN COLLECTIONS

Contributed by
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Images, pp. 5–7: Studio of Charles Philips, *Portrait of Augusta of Saxe-Gotha, Princess of Wales (1719–1772)*, after 1737, oil on canvas, and Jeremiah Davison, *Portrait of Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales (1707–1751)*, 1731, oil on canvas, Art Properties, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York,

Gift of Edmund Astley Prentis, Class of 1906, School of Mines (C00.495, C00.496).

The Prince and Princess of Wales: Two Eighteenth-Century Portraits at Columbia University

Those who have visited or studied in the main reading room of Butler Library at Columbia University likely have noticed the two large portraits in ornate frames hanging 25 feet up on the south wall. These two paintings, measuring approximately 72 x 40 in. (182.3 x 101.2 cm), were donated to Columbia by alumnus Edmund Astley Prentis and have hung in that library for more than 60 years. The donor presented these portraits to the University as images of King George II (1683–1760), the eponymous founder of King's College (Columbia's original name), and his wife, Caroline of Ansbach (1683–1737). In a letter dated December 8, 1948, to the Provost, Prentis noted that the artist was unknown, but that they likely were painted around 1727 when George II had acceded to the throne. This information was accepted by all involved in the acquisition of these paintings, and there is no evidence in the curatorial files to suggest anyone since that time has investigated this matter further. Stylistically the paintings appear to be early eighteenth-century British, and iconographically the inclusion of the crown with three feathers at the top of the frames suggests an association with the Prince of Wales. Only now, however, through research conducted on both sides of the Atlantic and after a closer examination of the paintings, can we say for certain who the individuals are, as well as who painted these pictures and when.

Contrary to Prentis's claim, these portraits do not depict George II and Caroline but their son Frederick Louis (1707–1751) and daughter-in-law Augusta (1719–1772), the Prince and Princess of Wales and parents of King George III (1738–1820). When George II became king, his twenty-one-year-old son Frederick was named heir to the throne and subsequently was crowned Prince of Wales in 1729. Because the Prince died unexpectedly in 1751, it was his son who came to the throne next as George III. Frederick was born and raised in the German state of Hanover and arrived in London in 1727 soon after his father's reign began. The Prince was popular with the court and arguably became the most active patron of the arts among the Hanoverians (Rorschach). He sat to many artists for his portrait, such as Jacopo Amigoni and Philip Mercier. Another was Jeremiah Davison (ca. 1695–after 1750), a London-born artist of Scottish parentage who may have trained at the Kneller Academy. Although Davison is less well-known today, his ca. 1730 portrait of Prince Frederick was used by John Faber, Jr., to publish a mezzotint engraving (see page 1). Davison's painting has remained untraced to this day.



Although Frederick's pose in the print matches other contemporaneous state portraits, the peculiar, dramatic gesture of the Prince's right hand, with his long fingers resting on his chest, the two middle fingers touching one another and separate from the others, is distinctive and unique (see page 8). This visual clue seemed to be the strongest connection between Columbia's portrait and the Faber print, making a closer examination of the painting necessary. In August 2015, the staff of Art Properties used a Genie lift to go up more than 25 feet high to examine the painting, an adventure which proved successful. In the lower left corner of the painting, hidden under years of grime, was a signature and date that had never before been noted: *J. Davison Anno 1731*. The discovery of this inscription thus makes a compelling argument that Columbia's portrait of Frederick is the heretofore missing Davison painting from which Faber's print was made.

The whole-length portrait depicts the Prince standing nearly in profile but with his right foot and head turned toward the viewer. He wears robes adorned with ermine and the chains of state, and his left hand rests on his sword. On the table is his crown with its emblems of the fleur-de-lys and cross. This crown was made specifically for Frederick and was used by future Princes of Wales until 1901. However, Frederick rarely if ever wore it; instead, it was carried before him when he attended the openings of Parliament (Royal Collection Trust). In 1736 Frederick married Augusta, the daughter of the Duke of Saxe-Gotha. As the new Princess of Wales, she too was painted by a number of artists in London, most notably Charles Philips (1708–1747), a London-based artist who was among the Prince's favored painters.



Columbia's portrait of Augusta is a replica of an original, larger portrait signed by Philips and dated 1737, now in the Royal Collection (Millar, 1:177). A similar version of Augusta's portrait in three-quarter-length is in the National Portrait Gallery, London (Kerlake, 1:7-9). Because no signature is visible in Columbia's portrait, this version is likely one of the replicas produced by Philips's studio. The painting shows Augusta in a coronet and wearing a silver-gray gown and ermine-lined red cloak. She stands before a throne with a carved ornamentation of the badge of the Prince of Wales, three feathers in a coronet, which as noted also appears at the top of both frames. Augusta points toward her left, suggesting her portrait was part of a pair, and indeed in the 1730s Philips painted portraits of Frederick, one of which also is in the Royal Collection. (This pair of portraits by Philips was purchased by Queen Mary at Christie's London on December 4, 1931.) However, women traditionally were depicted to their husband's left (i.e., the right side when seen on a wall), so the implication here is that Augusta is pointing not to her husband but to the throne or something outside the frame.

The Columbia portraits, then, were not painted as a pair, but brought together by an owner who likely had them framed identically to reinforce the unity of the subjects. When or why the identity for the subjects was altered to George II and Caroline, as well as full provenance, warrants further investigation. In his 1948 letter to the Provost, Prentis wrote that he had just purchased these paintings a few days beforehand and that they were temporarily at the Durand-Ruel Gallery on 12 E. 57th St. in New York. A requested search from the Durand-Ruel Archives in Paris has shown that they were not involved in the sale of these paintings, so Prentis presumably purchased them elsewhere and had them temporarily stored at Durand-Ruel. It is not surprising that we know little about where these paintings were from, for in an oral history interview Prentis admitted that he frequently threw out receipts and forgot where he had purchased many works of art. Prentis graduated from the College of Mines in 1906 and had a lucrative career in engineering. This donation was among the first of many works of art to come from Prentis for nearly twenty years until he died in 1967.

Although this new information about these two royal portraits helps us better appreciate and understand their significance in the history of eighteenth-century British portraiture and their association with Columbia, sadly both paintings are in poor condition. The frames were cleaned and conserved twenty years ago, but the paintings themselves have suffered from many years of natural wear and tear. The canvases are slack and brittle, there is evidence of paint loss, and an accumulation of grime has altered their appearance dramatically. It is hoped that through the generosity of donors, Art Properties will one day be able to clean and conserve these important paintings so that students and scholars can study and learn from them for years to come.



Images on this page: Jeremiah Davison, *Portrait of Frederick Louis, Prince of Wales (1707-1751)*(detail), 1731, oil on canvas, Art Properties, Avery Architectural & Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, Gift of Edmund Astley Prentis, Class of 1906, School of Mines (C00.496); Frederick Lewis, *Prince of Wales (detail)*, print published by John Faber, Jr., after a painting by Jeremiah Davison, 1739 or before (1730), mezzotint, National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG D33031). © National Portrait Gallery, London.

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Resources:

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