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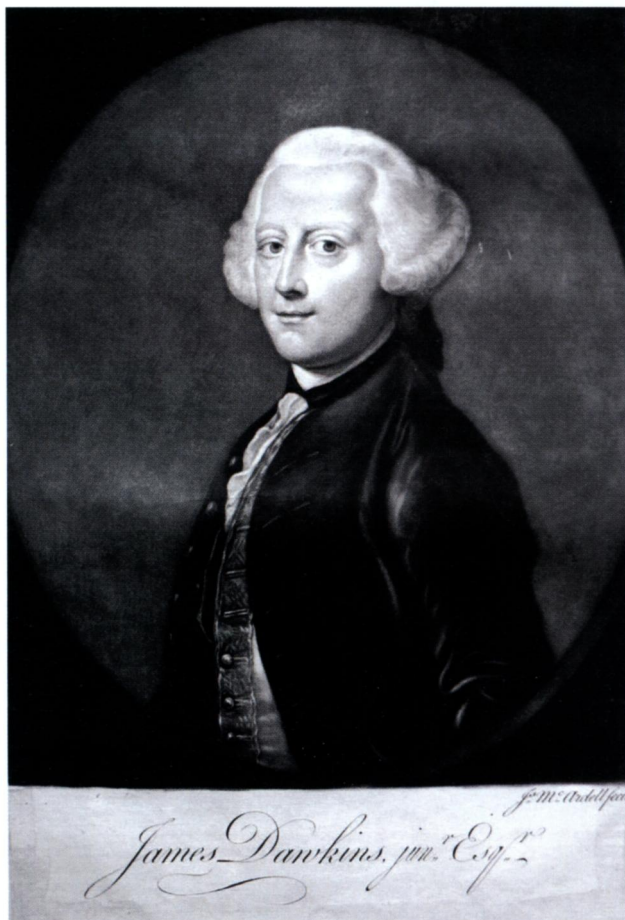


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James 'Athenian' Stuart's portrait of James Dawkins

Jason M Kelly



James 'Athenian' Stuart is best known for his work with Nicholas Revett, measuring the antiquities of Athens in the early 1750s. But a recent retrospective organized by the Bard Graduate Center and the Victoria and Albert Museum revealed the range of Stuart's talent as an engraver, architect, furniture designer, and painter.¹ One of the most frustrating problems facing the curators of this exhibition – and Stuart scholars in general – is the paucity of records relating to Stuart's career. Because of this, it is difficult to identify his commissions, which from the known examples, must have been of high quality. This is perhaps nowhere more apparent than in Stuart's work as a portraitist.

Stuart's skill as a portraitist is not well studied, probably because of the lack of surviving examples of his work, and evidence from the 18th century as to his ability is mixed. On the one hand was Thomas Jenkins's 1761 observation to Henry Hoare that Stuart was 'a man that has not succeeded in his first attempts as a Painter and not being able to get up at others may endeavor to pull them [other artists] down to him'.² Jenkins's comment must be taken with a grain of salt considering the fact that he was a competitor with Stuart. In fact, Stuart's emphasis on Greek antiquities was a real threat to Jenkins's business as a dealer in Roman antiquities. Opposing Jenkins's pronouncement on Stuart's skill was Stuart's appointment as the Painter to the Society of Dilettanti in 1763.³ Stuart succeeded George Knapton, and

the group required that he continue Knapton's series of Kit-Cat style portraits. The Society of Dilettanti's appointment of Stuart was an implicit recognition of Stuart's skill by a group of self-professed connoisseurs, although, in the end, Stuart never completed a single Dilettanti portrait.

There are only three known surviving examples of portraits by James Stuart. The first is a *Self-portrait as a youth* at the Royal Institute of British Architects. The second, at the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow, is of James Lee, a merchant, whom Stuart painted during a short stay in Smyrna during 1753.⁴ Stuart also painted a portrait of Nathaniel Lee, James's brother, but this is lost. A third surviving example of Stuart's work is a mezzotint engraving after Stuart by James McArdell. The engraving is a half-length portrait of James Dawkins, a Jamaican plantation owner and patron of Stuart and Revett (Pl 1). Until now, the drawing on which McArdell's engraving was based has remained unidentified by art historians, but Stuart's sketch in pastel exists in the collection of Dawkins family descendants (Pl 3). The original drawing is on paper backed by a larger second sheet. The application of pastel to the backing sheet is in a different hand from the first, suggesting that it was added later. The backing's pastel work was probably added by a member of the Dawkins family who wished to display the original in a larger frame. This addition predates 28 February 1913 when Dawkins descendants Auria Winterbottom, Hylda Nutting, and Dorothy Wilson sold the picture through Christie's. James Stuart's sketch sold for ten shillings and sixpence to a relative.

Stuart's portrait of Dawkins dates to the mid-1760s, nearly a decade after the death of James Dawkins, who died in Jamaica on 6 September 1757. Dawkins, a member of the Society of Dilettanti, passed his estate on to his brother Henry, and in his will, James stipulated that £500 be given to support an 'Accademy for Paintors Sculptors and Architects'.⁵ James Dawkins intended this money to fund the academy proposed by a 'Select Committee of Painters, Statuaries, Architects, Gravers, &c.' to the Dilettanti in January 1755.⁶ As patrons, the Dilettanti would have administered the money to pay for professors' salaries. When negotiations with the artists broke down over the academy's constitution, the Dilettanti abandoned their plan to support an academy of artists. Nevertheless, through James Stuart and Nicholas Revett, Henry donated the £500 to the Dilettanti.⁷ In turn, Henry was elected a member of the Dilettanti in May 1759. When the Dilettanti appointed Stuart as Painter to the Society in May 1763, they ordered him to paint portraits of both Dawkins brothers in appreciation for their generosity: 'That Mr. [Henry] Dawkins be requested to sit for his Picture to Mr. Stuart and the Painter of the Society at their expense... Mr. Dawkins be desired to permit the Picture of his Brother to be Copy'd by the Painter of the Society.' Most scholars have assumed that Stuart never attempted to complete these portraits because the Dilettanti minute books reveal that the group grew increasingly irritated by Stuart's lack of progress. In May 1766, for example, they were still ordering him to complete the commission. And, when he did not comply, the Dilettanti finally replaced him as Painter to the Society with his friend Joshua Reynolds in 1769. The existence of the



pastel suggests, however, that Stuart made at least an initial attempt to complete a portrait. The drawing was probably his first sketch – perhaps his only sketch – and the one on which McArdell based his engraving. Stuart's pastel gives us some insight into his working method. The central facial features were hatched in pencil, then accentuated with black pastel. He uses only the lightest touches of white to lift the features from the tinted paper. Unsurprisingly, he uses a heavier hand on the peripheral features – the clothing and the wig – only to indicate general forms and outlines. The pastel comes across as highly skilled and suggests that Stuart was a talented portraitist.

As the 1763 Dilettanti minute books ordered, James Stuart borrowed a painting from Henry Dawkins's portrait collection to draw James. His model was Enoch Seeman the Younger's painting of James Dawkins from the later 1730s or early 1740s (Pl 2). Fortunately – since the Seeman painting remains untraced – like the other paintings sold at Christie's sale of 1913, the portrait was photographed and catalogued together with family documents. Seeman's oval framed hand-in-waistcoat half-length of Dawkins is nearly identical in form to his 1739 portrait of Abraham Tucker (National Portrait Gallery), but there is no evidence for a relationship between Dawkins and Tucker. James Stuart reversed Seeman's painting, updated Dawkins's clothing, and aged him slightly, but in all, the Stuart pastel and McArdell's engraving retain most of the features of the Seeman prototype.

1 *James Dawkins* by James McArdell after James Stuart. Undated. Mezzotint, 31 by 23 cm. Private collection

2 *James Dawkins* by Enoch Seeman the Younger, c1736-1744. Oil on canvas. Private collection

3 *James Dawkins* by James Stuart, c1760s. Pastel, 28.9 x 42.5 cm. Private collection

1 SW Soros, *James 'Athenian' Stuart: the rediscovery of antiquity*, New Haven 2007.

2 Jenkins to Hoare, 29 August 1761 transcribed in S Roettgen, *Anton Raphael Mengs 1728-1779*, Munich 2003, II, p496.

3 Society of Dilettanti Minute Books, 6 February 1763, Society of Antiquaries of London.

4 Martin Hopkinson, 'A portrait by James "Athenian" Stuart', *The Burlington Magazine*, CXXXII (1990), pp794-5.

5 PROB 11/835, National Archives, London.

6 Select Committee to the Society of Dilettanti, 31 January 1755, Society of Dilettanti Letter Book, Society of Antiquaries of London fol122.

7 Society of Dilettanti Minute Books, May 1759.