

II

‘The gipsey-race my pity rarely move’? Representing the gypsy in George Morland’s *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman*

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George Morland’s painting *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman*, 1792 (Fig. 11.1) is one of the most enduring images of English landscape at the end of the eighteenth century.¹ It is one of four paintings commissioned by the Hon. Charles Stuart (1753–1801), fourth son of the Third Earl of Bute, Prime Minister between 1762 and 1763. Stuart was a successful officer who had fallen out with his senior commanders after questioning the conduct of the war in America. The painting reworks the theme of military charity seen in Edward Penny’s *The Marquis of Granby Relieving a Sick Soldier* of 1764 in a bid to acknowledge Stuart’s military career; in fact the two paintings are almost exactly the same size.² Contemporary accounts say that Morland finished the painting ‘in about a week’.³ Stuart’s father Bute had died in London on 10 March and Morland may have decided to finish the painting in time for the Academy’s deadline for exhibits on 5 April, where it would have been noticed on account of its patron.⁴

Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman was part of larger commission which included *The Gypsies Tent* and *Happy Cottagers* (both 1790; private collection) and *Evening: the Sportsman’s Return* (1792; location unknown).⁵ Both pairs offer what was meant to be a pleasant contrast between a family gathered round a cottage door and a family of

1. This essay draws on David’s work on race, which I first encountered in a stimulating course he taught at UCL called *Representing Others*. I am very grateful to David for his unwavering support of my study and work, and for fostering the far-sighted, collegial, and vibrant intellectual atmosphere that helped make the History of Art department at UCL an unrivalled place to encounter not only British art but the discipline as a whole.

Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, ref. no.1786. *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* is P134 in David Winter’s catalogue of Morland’s oil paintings; D. Winter, *George Morland 1763–1804*, PhD thesis (Stanford University, 1977), p.191.

2. *The Marquis of Granby Relieving a Sick Soldier* (Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, ref. no. WA1845.39) was shown at the Society of Artists exhibition in 1765 and a mezzotint was published by Robert Sayer in 1769 (British Museum, London, ref. no.1870,1008.2601), and again in 1779 and 1786. *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* is 101.6 by 137.2 cm, and *The Marquis of Granby* is 101.6 by 127 cm.

3. G. Dawe, *The Life of George Morland with Remarks on his Works*, London, 1807, p.119.

4. See *The Public Advertiser*, Monday 2 April 1792, which also announced that the exhibition would open on 30 April.

5. *Gypsies Tent* and *Happy Cottagers* are P41 and P42 in Winter’s catalogue: Winter, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.172. They were engraved by Joseph Grozer in 1793 (British Museum, London, ref. nos.1873,0510.2596 and 1873,0510.2599); *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* and *Evening, or the Sportsman’s Return* were engraved by Grozer in 1795 (British Museum, London, ref. nos.1870,0514.1653 and 1870,0514.1653). Grozer also engraved Romney’s portrait of Stuart (1779; Glasgow Museums ref. no.2240) in 1794 (British Museum, London, ref. no.1886,0617.77).



Fig.II.1 George Morland, *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman*, 1792. Oil on canvas, 101.6 × 137.2 cm (Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge)

Fig.II.2 George Morland, *Indian girl*, 1793. Oil on canvas mounted on panel, 21 × 22.9 cm (Yale Center for British Art, New Haven)



gypsies with their tent, and both aim to stir the viewer's feelings through the depiction of ragged but peaceable poverty. But *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* makes a more serious bid for the viewer's sympathy by celebrating dependence rather than independence. The more ambitious scope and tenor of the painting is heightened by the depiction of a dark-skinned girl in the centre of the picture who is silhouetted against the light foliage behind, and whose simple dress, youth and striking appearance are certainly meant to appeal to the viewer's feelings.

The girl seems to have been a successful inclusion because Morland painted an enlarged version of her in a painting currently titled *Indian girl* in the Yale Center for British Art (Fig. 11.2).⁶ David Winter's assertion that she is 'not an Indian girl, but a gypsy girl' is understandable but misplaced, since there were multiple associations between gypsies and 'Indians' from both Asia and North America in the eighteenth century.⁷ *Indian girl* is signed and dated a year later than *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* but this also does not resolve any questions about where the girl is from, and to try to do so would miss the point that these categories aren't exclusive. The key point is surely that Morland has given the girl a distinctive skin and hair colour, and unusual dress. Gypsies were often described as 'tawny' in the eighteenth century but the girl's colour is unique in Morland's work, even though he painted many pictures of gypsies. The painting seeks to establish a relationship between her skin colour and the viewer's response to the picture in the same way that Morland had done with his painting *Execrable Human Traffick, or The Affectionate Slaves*, shown at the Royal Academy in 1788 (cat. no.201; location unknown), and his largest and most ambitious work at the time (Fig. 11.3). No one who has written about *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* has mentioned the girl's unique appearance, which is odd

Fig.11.3 John Raphael Smith after George Morland, *Slave Trade*, 1791. Mezzotint and etching on paper, 48 × 65 cm (British Museum, London)

6. Yale Center for British Art, ref. no.B1981.25.455; the painting is P154 in Winter's catalogue: Winter, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.191.

7. Winter, *op. cit.* (note 1), p.191.

when we consider that quite a lot has been suggested about the painting's politics, and it is only recently that anyone has even discussed the significance of the fact that these are gypsies.⁸ It seems to me that the visual distinctiveness of the gypsies, and the girl's skin colour in particular, are key to understanding the picture. In this essay I will explore her representation and show how it helps us better understand the politics of landscape in this period.

In *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*, David Bindman showed how the relationship between ideas of human variety and ideas of beauty was framed in different ways, and that speculation on this relationship grew in intensity towards the end of the century.⁹ Little has been said about gypsies, but David's analysis of these debates, his focus on British and German writing in particular and his wish to avoid reading later attitudes back into the eighteenth century give us a good basis on which to launch such an investigation.¹⁰ I want to start by identifying two distinct (but not exclusive) discourses relating to gypsies around the time that Morland was painting *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* for Charles Stuart.

For Morland and his contemporaries gypsies could be considered beautiful in so far as they met the standards of picturesque subject matter. Broadly speaking, picturesque theory was a constellation of ideas about how objects might excite the visual sense and so raise pleasing sensations in the viewer, who in turn demonstrated their sensibility (helpfully defined by Ann Bermingham as 'not only a mode of feeling but also a way of seeing') in how they responded to such scenery.¹¹ The most significant manifestation of these ideas in regard to gypsies in the eighteenth century, although never explicitly tied to one particular reading of the 'picturesque', was Thomas Gainsborough's inclusion of gypsies sitting by the road or making a twilight campfire in numerous paintings from the 1760s onwards. Such images, tied to the language of sensibility, enabled people to appreciate the appearance of gypsies in circumstances which might otherwise have inspired fear. Describing gypsies in Spain but probably having his friend Gainsborough's paintings in mind, Philip Thicknesse wrote: 'They are extremely swarthy, with hair as black as jet; and form a very picturesque scene under the shade of those rocks and trees where they spend their evenings.'¹² For Gainsborough, as for Morland, gypsies could be and were picturesque in their own right, but, rather than forming the subject of 'fancy pictures', where individual figures were treated in isolation, they tended to form part of a larger scene where attention was given to the pictorial effects of a wider setting. A similar pattern can be seen in cottage door scenes, which Morland paired with his pictures of gypsies in his commissions for Charles Stuart.

The symbiosis of gypsies and their environment is a crucial point in their representation in the eighteenth century. Sarah Houghton-Walker has argued that with the repeal in 1783 of the Egyptians Act (1562) 'gypsies gain a greater aesthetic right to be in the landscape, and become legitimate parts of it', and she has shown how

8. S. Houghton-Walker, *Representations of the Gypsy in the Romantic Period*, Oxford, 2014, pp.233–39.

9. D. Bindman, *Ape to Apollo: Aesthetics and the Idea of Race in the 18th Century*, London, 2002.

10. It should be noted that the context of *Ape to Apollo* was work on the image of the Black in western art, and so not intended to include gypsies. The question of whether 'gypsy' is a distinct ethnic category or purely a social construction is still hotly debated: see the essays in N. Saul and S. Tebbut, eds, *The Role of the Romanies: Images and Counter-Images of 'Gypsies'/Romanies in European Cultures*, Liverpool, 2004.

11. A. Bermingham, *Sensation and Sensibility: Viewing Gainsborough's Cottage Door*, New Haven and London, 2005, p.1.

12. P. Thicknesse, *A Year's Journey through France and part of Spain*, London, 1789, I, p.332.

this is the case in *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman*, with the tent, for example, blending in to the hedgerow behind.¹³ But there are wider implications. As David Bindman has noted, aesthetics refers in its broad sense to the non-rational aspects of the mind, as well as, in a narrower sense, to beauty.¹⁴ The idea that gypsies had some aesthetic appeal could be extended to suggest that they themselves were of an aesthetic complexion, and that they acted according to instinct rather than reason. The magistrate John Langhorne struggled with the contradictory implications of this in the first part of his poem *The Country Justice* (1774). ‘The gipsy-race my pity rarely move’, he wrote, ‘but their strong thirst of liberty I love.’¹⁵ In other words he didn’t care for the fact that they inhabited the landscape and (in his view) caused trouble, but he could not but be moved by their impulse to live freely. The girl’s distinctive colouring in *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* is significant when seen in this light, since it not only serves to identify the family as gypsies rather than any other kind of itinerant rural group, it also explains their makeshift camp, and offers a possible defence of the sportsman’s regard for them, and prompts a similar response from the viewer.

A different framing of relationship between ideas of beauty and ideas of human variety, although one that rehearsed many common prejudices about gypsies, appeared in Heinrich Moritz Gottlieb Grellmann’s 1783 *Die Zigeuner*, translated by Matthew Raper and published as *Dissertation on the Gipsies* in 1787.¹⁶ Supporting contemporary views that human variety is not innate but is determined by climate, Grellmann set out to discover the ‘perfect philosophers’ stone’ of why it was that in spite of a prolonged residence in Europe these dark-skinned people ‘remain ever, and every where, what their fathers were – Gipsies’.¹⁷ Skin colour occupies a key place in his analysis. Not only is it outward evidence of a seemingly unchanging nature (‘Africa makes them no blacker, nor Europe whiter’), it is also the ground for a debate about taste, the perception of beauty and understanding the causes of variety.¹⁸ Grellmann argued that beauty was a matter of use: ‘Let me only ask if, as children, we have not at some time or other run affrighted from a Gipsy? The case is entirely altered, if we only divest ourselves of the idea that a black skin is disagreeable. Their white teeth, their long black hair ... their lively black rolling eyes, are, without dispute, properties which must be ranked among the list of beauties, even by the modern civilised European world.’¹⁹ He suggested that sensitivity to beauty and detachment from established prejudices and superstitions would enable a viewer to see that the difference between gypsies and white Europeans was not an inherent trait but was the result of upbringing. ‘Observe only a gypsy from his birth, till he comes to man’s estate, and one must be convinced, that their colour is not, so

13. Houghton-Walker, *op. cit.* (note 8), p.25; see also pp.197–209 for a detailed discussion of gypsies and picturesque theory; and pp.230–43 for a discussion of Morland’s and Gainsborough’s portrayal of gypsies.

14. Bindman, *op. cit.* (note 9), p.23.

15. John Langhorne, *The Country Justice: A Poem*, part 1, London, 1774, lines 181–82.

16. H.M.G. Grellmann, *Dissertation on the Gipsies, being an Historical Enquiry concerning the Manner of Life, Oeconomy, Customs and Conditions of these People in Europe, and their Origins*, trans. Matthew Raper, London, 1787. A short useful analysis of Grellmann’s *Dissertation* is given in Cristian Suci, ‘G.H.M. [sic] Grellmann and the Enlightenment’s discovery of the Roma’, *Studia Universitatis Babeş-Bolyai – Studia Europaea*, 53 (2008), 1, pp.189–200.

17. Grellmann, *op. cit.* (note 16), p.ix.

18. *Ibid.*, p.ix.

19. *Ibid.*, p.8.

much, owing to their descent, as to the nastiness of their bodies [such as not washing] ... Experience also shews us that it is more education and manner of life, than descent, which has propagated this black colour of the Gypsies, from generation to generation.²⁰ If the thrust of Grellmann's work was to show by means of linguistic analysis that the gypsies came to Europe from Hindustan, or northern India, he also found a significant role for aesthetic sensitivity in the quest to understand human variety, and explicitly acknowledged its value in overcoming long-standing prejudice while also confirming the 'modern civilised European's' cultural superiority to the gypsy.

The two different framings of the relationship between beauty and human variety in relation to gypsies that I have outlined here share some common features, the most important of which is that they were both presented as advice to magistrates or state officials. Langhorne's *Country Justice* was written by a Somerset magistrate to colleagues in Westmorland and Somerset. Grellmann's *Die Zigeuner* takes the 'reformation' of the gypsies as its central problem and starts by outlining the Habsburg Empress Maria Teresa (d.1780) and Emperor Joseph II's 'wise regulations ... for the management of these people'.²¹

Questions about beauty's relation to human variety allow us to understand the category of 'gypsy' as a historical category, both specific to a time and place, and contested within that moment and location. One way to do this, as Cristian Suciuc has recently argued, is to relate the history of gypsies to the evolution of western attitudes towards poverty and vagrancy.²² This can be put another way: given that some of the liveliest discussion on beauty focused on the landscape and state territory, how was race related to place and space?

Distinct conceptions of landscape frame and govern the discourse about gypsies sketched above: residual and local in English writing, networked and territorial in Grellmann's work. Perhaps the most well-known English literary representation of gypsies in the eighteenth century was *The Life and Adventures of Bampfylde-Moore Carew, commonly called King of the Beggars*, which describes a Devon gentleman's 'entering into a society of gypsies' and subsequent life as wanderer in Somerset and Devon.²³ John Barrell has suggested that Carew's *Life and Adventures* and its 'particular account of the origin, government, customs, and laws of the gypsies' show a political utopia which is manifest in the way the landscape and its inhabitants are known only through personal experience and local knowledge.²⁴ This emphasis on local associations and customary relations helps explain why Langhorne took what to us may seem the remarkable step of taking gypsy society as a model for how the magistrate should have an interest in the welfare of the poor.²⁵ Grellmann's *Dissertation*, by contrast, conceived of landscape in an abstract sense as the terri-

20. *Ibid.*, p.10.

21. *Ibid.*, p.xv. Grellmann's subsequent work was all on the political economy of central Europe and *Die Zigeuner* should be seen in this light.

22. Suciuc, *op. cit.* (note 16), pp.199–200.

23. A helpful summary of the publishing history of Carew's *Life* is given in J.S. Berson, 'The Memoirs of Bampfylde-Moore Carew: additional plagiarisms and dateable events', *Notes and Queries*, 57 (2007), 4, pp.456–64.

24. J. Barrell, 'Afterword: moving stories, still lives', in G. MacLean, D. Landry and J.P. Ward, eds., *The Country and the City Revisited: England and the Politics of Culture, 1550–1850*, Cambridge, 1999, pp.231–50; the quotation is from *The Life and Adventures of Bampfylde-Moore Carew, commonly called King of the Beggars*, London, 1793, title page.

25. J. Langhorne, *The Country Justice: A Poem*, part 2, London, 1775, lines 1–10.

tory of a state. If judgements of beauty were not subject to the rational analysis needed in addressing questions about economy and trade, for example, they still fell within the purview of a specifically cosmopolitan mentality that in its modernity transcended ties to any one place.

Such different conceptions of landscape were modelled on different aesthetic formulations which resonated with distinct political traditions. It stands that they both conceive of 'human variety' in regard to different criteria. English writers tended to admire the gypsies' love of liberty and to see this as congruent with certain kinds of landscape and ways of looking. Concerns about itinerancy were highly localised. But to a 'modern civilised European' gypsies represented a problem of knowledge and of classification guided by the imperatives of political economy. In Grellmann's work this is represented above all by skin colour. Black skin denotes residual habits and a refusal to reform. The solution is to study gypsies more closely in order to better know and reform the people who live within the state's borders, and mould a population 'whose extraction is not at all discernible in their colour'.²⁶

The formulations of the relationship between beauty and human variety I have described here are a tiny selection of the range that David Bindman has explored in more detail especially in his work on the representation of national identity, and on race, aesthetics, and the image of the Black in western art. Uniquely, with gypsies, these relationships were located in historical attitudes towards poverty and vagrancy and found expression in different conceptions of landscape. Morland's *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* seems at first glance to be fully in agreement with the attitudes evident in English writing. John Barrell suggests that Morland's painting is an exemplary instance of how a painter could 'extend ... the range of aesthetic interest in the poor' in order to 'extend the sympathetic range of his admirers, who were certainly up to a point willing to have it extended'.²⁷ Donna Landry and Stephen Deuchar suggest that viewers would also have been reassured by the sportsman's actions, while Sarah Houghton-Walker takes more account of the fact that the sportsman is giving money to gypsies whom he may later choose to drive off his land, and thinks Morland may even be 'mocking' and 'laughing' at the sportsman's pretensions to charity which, she suggests, are belied by the prominence of his gun on the right of the picture.²⁸ However, I want to suggest that the distinctive colouring of the gypsy girl in the centre of the picture, and the conspicuous swarthinness of the other figures, signify that conceptions of landscape in which benevolence finds a natural place were coming under pressure in the 1790s because, while it may be the case that ideas about picturesque beauty accorded nicely with a growing interest in human variety, it is also true that attention to skin colour was characteristic of a kind of observation that relied on distance and abstraction rather than residual familiarity. In simple terms, Morland's attention to skin colour in the picture shows that the gypsies are regarded as vagrants in a landscape which stretches beyond the bounds of personal acquaintance. Far from showing the naivety of the sportsman, I think it shows that this specifically local encounter is taking place within a

26. Grellmann, *op. cit.* (note 16), p.10.

27. J. Barrell, *The Dark Side of the Landscape: The Rural Poor in English Painting, 1730–1840*, Cambridge, 1980, p.105.

28. D. Landry, *The Invention of the Countryside: Hunting, Walking, and Ecology in English Literature 1671–1831*, Basingstoke, 2001, pp.21–22, 139–40; S. Deuchar, *Sporting Art in Eighteenth Century England: A Social and Political History*, New Haven and London, 1988, pp.155–56; Houghton-Walker, *op. cit.* (note 8), pp.237–39.



Fig. 11.4 Thomas Heaphy, *Credulity*, 1808. Watercolour over graphite on paper, 61.1 × 46.1 cm (British Museum, London)

wider, national landscape, and that the sportsman is representative of a distinctively national character, just as the gypsies, while picturesque, also represent the ‘other’. I don’t want to suggest this reveals anything about Morland’s own views. Instead I think it shows how the terms in which it was possible to conceive of gypsies were changing. In what we might call a more ‘modern’ conception of landscape, in which national and financial imperatives transcended local attachments, a relationship is established between vagrancy and race.

A quick look at another representation of a gypsy can help clarify the point here. Thomas Heaphy’s watercolour *Credulity*, 1808 (Fig. 11.4) shows a maid preparing to hand over a coin to a gypsy to read her fortune, having neglected her duties in order to read a letter from her lover and no doubt excited to know the fate of their

relationship.²⁹ Heaphy's fortune-teller is strikingly beautiful, with dark skin and jet black hair. She is not entirely alone: the thief stealing from the cupboard may be her accomplice and the presence of an equally dark-skinned child suggests there may be other gypsies nearby but, rather than part of a family group which gathers round a fire under the rocks at twilight, this is a group which travels (though the two activities are not exclusive). The fact that the fortune-teller makes a living by telling fortunes replaces the more benign (though no less prejudicial) 'type' of gypsy woman who sells her body, with a more malignant image of active vagrancy that preys on other people. The fortune-teller is recognisable as a gypsy but, rather than being a familiar part of the landscape, this gypsy represents a group and a culture that is alien to the maid and her employers. The presence of children in pictures of gypsies is important in this regard because they recall stories about the gypsies' traffic of children which, then as now, shaped contemporary perceptions of Roma in a way they did not for other races whose colour was thought to be inherent or formed over many generations.

David Solkin suggests that *Credulity* is a picture about deception and that this is signified by the maid's 'failure to read the outward appearance of the fortune-teller as evidence of the gypsy's true character'.³⁰ If the maid lacks discretion, it is less the common good sense shown by kind domestic servants in large houses in Carew's *Life and Adventures*, and more the knowledge of, and distance from, superstition that is required in modern civilised life, in which organisation of time and space bring problems such as foreign vagrancy in its wake. There is every suggestion that Morland's sportsman is as alert to these dangers as the maid is ignorant: doubtless his independence affords him the means to observe the world and its changes from a suitable vantage point. Both Morland's and Heaphy's representations of gypsies are premised on a similar conceptions of landscape and national identity which enjoyed a symbiotic relationship with ideas about beauty and human variety.

In this essay I have tried to show that the skin colour of the girl in *Morning, or the Benevolent Sportsman* is key to understanding the painting and to grasping how not only landscape but movement within it, is inscribed with race, and how racial distinctions, in turn, were formulated in part through conceptions about landscape and ideas about beauty. I have also argued, less explicitly, that Morland's representation of race is broader than has hitherto been recognised, and that fruitful analysis of his work need not take his own attitudes as a starting-point.³¹

29. British Museum, London, ref. no.1946,1012.1.

30. D. Solkin, *Painting out of the Ordinary: Modernity and the Art of Everyday Life in Early Nineteenth-Century England*, New Haven and London, 2008, p.95.

31. On Morland's representation of Africans see especially M. Gamer, 'George Morland's *Slave Trade* and *African Hospitality*: slavery, sentiment and the limits of the abolitionist image', in E. McGrath and J. M. Massing, eds., *The Slave in European Art: From Renaissance Trophy to Abolitionist Emblem*, Warburg Institute Colloquia, 20 (2012), pp.297–320.