



## THE SOCIETY OF DILETTANTI

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**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**



William Say (English, 1768-1834)  
After Sir Joshua Reynolds, British,  
1723-1792  
*Members of the Dilettanti Society,*  
1817-1821  
Hand-colored mezzotint  
Private collection  
VEX.2008.2.41

### GETTY EXHIBITION REVEALS RITUALS AND REVELRIES OF EXCLUSIVE BRITISH MEN'S CLUB

#### *Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit: The Society of Dilettanti*

At the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa  
August 7–October 27, 2008

*"Seria Ludo" (Serious Matters in a Playful Vein)*

- The Society of Dilettanti

LOS ANGELES—In 1734, a group of young British gentlemen, all alumni of the Grand Tour in Italy, formed a dining club in London. Calling themselves the Society of Dilettanti (from the Italian *dilettare*, to take delight), this close-knit association transformed classical antiquity from a private pleasure to a public benefit by sponsoring archaeological expeditions, forming collections, and publishing influential books on ancient architecture and sculpture.

*Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit: The Society of Dilettanti*, on view from August 7–October 27, 2008, at the J. Paul Getty Museum at the Getty Villa, presents the Society of Dilettanti as connoisseurs—of statues, sexuality, and the science of antiquity. Showcasing the Society's initial century, most of the works are on display for the first time in the United States, and many of them have never been seen before by the public.

Drawn primarily from the collections of the Getty Research Institute (GRI) and the Society of Dilettanti in London, over 100 objects will be on view including oil portraits, sculptures, drawings, caricatures, artifacts, and rare books that tell the story of the Society, whose cultural ambitions flourished in an atmosphere of Dionysian revels and aesthetic refinement. "The Library

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of the Getty Research Institute holds an archive of exceptional drawings commissioned by the Society, including rare examples of the work of John Samuel Agar, regarded as among the finest ever made of sculpture," said Claire Lyons, co-curator of the exhibition and curator of Antiquities at the Getty Museum. "We soon recognized that many antiquities, sculptures and paintings in the Museum's collection can also be linked to the 18th-century Dilettanti. This offers us a fruitful opportunity to display these collections together, and to explore a widely influential but little known network of artists, architects, and their aristocratic patrons."

The exhibition's companion publication, *Dilettanti: The Antic and the Antique in Eighteenth-Century England* was written by Bruce Redford, co-curator of the exhibition and professor of Art History and English at Boston University. "Convivial social intercourse was the Society of Dilettanti's *raison d'être*, but cultivating the public taste for classical antiquity was its primary mission. Ultimately, they set a fresh course for the field of classical archaeology," says Redford.

Generous sponsors of expeditions to Greece, the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, and the Middle East—regions then still largely unknown to Continental travelers—the Society published lavish folios that set unprecedented standards for objective archaeological research. In 1762, the Society underwrote the three-year sojourn of painter James "Athenian" Stuart (1713–88) and architect Nicholas Revett (1720–1804) in Athens, where they measured, excavated, and drew the city's classical monuments. Stuart and Revett's findings were presented in *The Antiquities of Athens*, an imposing three-volume publication that inspired Greek Revival architects and designers for the next century. Important books underwritten by the membership also circulated the observations of teams sent out to map ancient lands and explore ruins in Ionia, Baalbek, Palmyra, and Attica.

Membership in the Society was far from all scholarly fieldwork. Meeting in taverns to discuss "those objects which had contributed to their entertainment abroad," they elevated "convivial intercourse" to a high art. Echoing the Roman poets Virgil and Horace, their drinking toasts and mottoes signaled the Society's priorities: "*Seria Ludo*" (serious matters in a playful spirit), "*Res est Severa Voluptas*" (pleasure is a serious business), and "*Viva la Virtù*" (long live the fine arts). As the English novelist Horace Walpole (1717-1797) waspishly observed, "The nominal qualification [for membership] is having been in Italy, and the real one, being drunk."

Ribald and profane, the Society nurtured a lively curiosity for ancient erotica, piqued by the sensational finds of sexually explicit art in Herculaneum and Pompeii. They made a subversive contribution to the interpretation of ancient mythology and religion with *A Discourse on the*

*Worship of Priapus*, which drew from reports of a phallic cult in southern Italy. Designed both to inform and to titillate, this daring treatise argued that all art is rooted in religion, and all religion in sexuality. The exhibition ***Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit*** includes what scandalized critics termed "obscene" artifacts, installed in an intimate, dimly lit gallery evoking the "*museo segreto*," or a cabinet of erotic curiosities.

Taking inspiration from such groups as the libertine Hell Fire Clubs, the esoteric Freemasons, and the Arcadian Academy in Rome, the Dilettanti carried out traditional rituals in rooms hung with witty portraits by George Knapton and Sir Joshua Reynolds. The president draped himself in a scarlet toga and sat in a mahogany armchair called the "*sella curulis*," after the official chair occupied by Roman consuls. Other officers included an "arch master" and an "imp" who sported a tail. Suitably decorated with sensual and suggestive imagery, a mahogany "Tomb of Bacchus" and balloting box were used to conduct business and to collect fines as "face money" for failure to present a portrait. During the Society's early years, the most colorful members were Sir Francis Dashwood (1701–1781), 11th Baron le Despencer, who was Chancellor of the Exchequer (1762–1763) and the founder of the notorious Hell Fire Club; and Charles Sackville (1711–1769), 2<sup>nd</sup> Duke of Dorset, an impresario of Italian opera in London.

The Dilettanti's reputation for revelry and riot was tempered by their stature as "arbiters of fashionable virtù." The last of their monumental publishing enterprises, *Specimens of Antient Sculpture*, features collections of Greek and Roman art created by such prominent members as author Richard Payne Knight (1751-1824), Charles Townley (1737-1805), and Thomas Hope (1769-1831). Hope's collection is also explored in *The Hope Hygieia: Restoring a Statue's History*, on view at the Getty Villa through September 8.

Celebrated connoisseurs, Dilettanti members established and enlarged some of the finest antiquities galleries in England, including the collections at Castle Howard, Shugborough, Towneley Hall, Lansdowne House, Woburn Abbey, and Rokeby Hall.

Members of the Dilettanti emerged on the wrong side of history in the aesthetic disputes over the controversial 1816 acquisition of Lord Elgin's Parthenon sculptures by the British Museum, and as a result the Society's prestige suffered a serious blow. The Dilettanti nevertheless revolutionized the study of classical architecture and sculpture, eastern Mediterranean topography, and ancient religion, setting the stage for the great archaeological endeavors of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

With 60 members, today's Society of Dilettanti still counts among its ranks distinguished figures from the world of the arts and culture including collectors, museum directors, art historians, authors, and aristocrats who have inherited great collections of paintings and sculpture. The Society meets five times a year at Brooks' Club in London for dinners which are celebrated with traditional rituals, regalia, and toasts dating back to the eighteenth century. Vacancies in this "men only" group arise on death or retirement and are filled through an election in which each member can propose or second a candidate.

Current members include artist David Hockney, continuing a tradition of distinguished artist-members which began with George Knapton and includes Sir Joshua Reynolds, Sir Thomas Lawrence, Sir Martin Archer Shee, Lord Leighton, and John Singer Sargent. With the aim of reviving its original mission to support projects connected with archaeology and the arts, the Society established a charitable trust in 1977 and makes grants to cultural institutions, research centers, and young scholars of classical art and architecture.

**"*Grecian Taste and Roman Spirit*"** brings together objects from across the Getty to illuminate a singular episode in the history of classical archaeology and neoclassical taste," said Michael Brand, director of the J. Paul Getty Museum. "The Getty Villa's classically inspired architecture provides the perfect setting and a vivid reminder of how Greek and Roman art has resonated, due in no small part to Dilettanti collectors and explorers."

"We are very grateful for the generous loans that the Society of Dilettanti has made available," adds Thomas Gaetgens, director of the Getty Research Institute. "Their cooperation allows us to view our own archive through the enlightened eyes of travelers rediscovering ancient Mediterranean sites for the first time."

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