

Images of Mai

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The pencil drawing of the face of Mai, or Omai, done from life by the illustrious English portrait painter Sir Joshua Reynolds and held in the National Library of Australia, is the best physical likeness of Mai that exists. As we observe the face across more than two centuries we see a young, undoubtedly Polynesian man with a broad nose and sensual mouth, eyes directed towards some unseen object, perhaps dreaming of his return to his home.

Mai's objective in coming to England was not only adventure (and it was a courageous venture since neither of those who had previously gone with the Europeans, Aoutourou with Bougainville nor Tupaia with Cook, had returned alive), nor simply to improve his status among his fellow countrymen. What he intended, in embarking on this amazing journey, was to obtain the means to repel the invaders of his island, Raiatea, from which he had been exiled as a child. From his face we can see why Mai was a favourite in England, for his open and even ingenuous gaze reflects something of the calm demeanour and good nature, which he showed to his hosts while there. His popularity in England is well documented with many commentators noting his 'natural' good manners, especially in his attentions to ladies, that he attended banquets but never drank to

excess, and learned to ride, play chess and cards. Young and adaptable and coming from a highly socially stratified Polynesian society, he was able to conform to English society in a way that perhaps the proud priest, Tupaia, his mentor, would not have done had he survived the voyage to England with Cook.¹

The pencil drawing is a study for a larger portrait painted by Reynolds in 1775 or 1776. The latter full-length portrait, showing Mai barefoot, wearing a robe and turban yet in a stance which conveys aristocratic authority, was exhibited by Reynolds at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1776. It was described by contemporaries who knew Mai as 'a strong likeness' and as depicting the subject 'Omiah' (as he was also known) '... in the habit of his country'.² The painting has always been considered one of Reynolds' finest portraits and an important painting in eighteenth century British art. Professor Joseph Burke writes: 'for a memorable moment the classical and romantic tendencies of the eighteenth century are fused in perfect reconciliation, so that the picture becomes a kind of summation'.³

The painting was later engraved by Johann Jacobé and thus widely circulated.⁴ The fact of the engraving may indicate why Reynolds made the portrait because,

as Nicholas Penny, curator of a major Reynolds retrospective suggests, there were occasions when Reynolds may have done a portrait of someone famous: for example, the writer Laurence Sterne or an actress such as Kitty Fisher, for the purpose of an engraving being produced to satisfy public curiosity and interest.⁵ The painting of Mai does not seem to have been commissioned (although it is possible Sir Joseph Banks, a close associate of Reynolds, may have suggested it) because it was still in Reynolds' studio in 1796.



Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792)
Omai of the Friendly Isles 1774?
 pencil drawing; 26.5 x 20 cm

This was not Reynolds' only painting of representatives of other races. He painted South Asian and African servants in his portraits of British colonial magnates; and in the early 1770s undertook two studies of a young black man and in the mid-1770s of a young Chinese Wang-Y-Tong. These are, however, more informal portraits with none of the patrician poise and presence he gave Mai in the finished painting.⁶

The Reynolds drawing of Mai is important in its own right as a fine work of art and for its revelation of the subject but also as a rare example of Reynolds' preliminary drawings. The artist seldom did preliminary drawings, preferring to work in oils directly onto canvas. An oil sketch of Mai by Reynolds exists in the Yale University Collection, but the finished painting is much closer to the pencil drawing, and it may be that Reynolds did the oil sketch first and, unsatisfied with the results, turned to the pencil to achieve a closer likeness. Another oil sketch by Reynolds, sometimes called a portrait of 'Omai', with the subject wearing a pink turban adorned with a crescent, seems to be one of the studies mentioned above of a young man of African origin done prior to Mai's arrival in England.

Reynolds was one of the most sought after portraitists of his day and his clientele were the rich, the aristocratic and the famous. In the same Royal Academy exhibition in which the Mai portrait was shown, was Reynolds' identical size painting of a young woman, Georgiana, Duchess of Devonshire, an 'Empress of fashion' among the aristocratic younger set. Reynolds' intention in portraits was not to 'copy' nature (nor is he known for his psychological insights into character) but to create a picture which would win respect in its own right. Forced to earn his living as a portrait painter, he was, as Penny points out,



William Parry (1742–1791)
Sir Joseph Banks with Omai, the Otabeitan Chief, and Doctor Daniel Solander 1775–1776
oil on canvas; 147.5 x 147.5 cm
Private Collection, by kind permission of Nevill Keating Pictures Ltd

an ambitious man who wanted to raise the status of painting in England. His portraits could, as contemporaries conceded, combine truth with fiction, realism with imagination in depicting a subject.

The works by Reynolds were not the only portraits of Mai done in England. Almost immediately on his arrival, an illustration appeared alongside an article in the London magazine of 1774, which depicted Mai wearing a flowing robe with his right hand extended to show the tattoos and holding a wooden headrest—perhaps a symbol of rank—a pose remarkably similar to Reynolds' later portrait which, however, omits the headrest.⁷ A contemporary print of Mai being presented by Sir Joseph Banks to the King and Queen, which occurred very soon after his arrival, also shows him wearing the robe but carrying a triangular shaped hat.⁸ In 1774 the painter Nathaniel Dance did a drawing which was later engraved by Bartolozzi.⁹ In these depictions, he is also wearing a robe and carrying the headrest and also a feather whisk. A further painting, this time with Banks and the Swedish scientist Dr Daniel Solander, by William Parry, a one-time student of Reynolds, was probably painted in 1776. Here Mai wears a robe almost identical to the Reynolds robe. In all these depictions except for the Reynolds painting, Mai has his black hair loose and flowing over his shoulders.

The Parry painting is historically important in showing three key protagonists of South Seas scientific exploration, for Banks and Solander had accompanied Cook's first voyage. If Mai is not quite being portrayed as an ethnographic specimen, then certainly he is seen very much as Banks' protégé. Nevertheless, the painting is given a different dimension by the fact that Mai turns his head to look at the audience, emphasising his individuality and humanity. In the Reynolds

painting the tattoos on the hand of Mai are prominent, but are missing in the Parry painting. From the suggestive pose, Banks indicating Mai's hand, it may be, as one scholar has noted, that the tattoos were painted in top glazes of colour and have been accidentally cleaned off in restorations in the past.¹⁰ While in the visual depictions of Mai in England he was always shown wearing a robe, in fact while there, it seems he adopted European dress. From his return voyage with Cook to Huahine he is shown in a number of works by Webber wearing European dress.

The question of dress is a significant one because it helps unlock something of the personality of the subject as well as images of the exotic in England at the time. The white robe that Mai wears in the Reynolds painting has variously been described by art historians as a Roman toga, Oriental, African, and even as fancy dress. Nicholas Penny calls the painting Reynolds' only portrait of a man in classical costume, and David Mannings states that 'Omai wears an entirely imaginary garment and a turban, which gives him a vaguely Indian appearance'.¹¹ Leonard Bell has argued that the various literary and visual depictions of Mai, including the Reynolds painting of Mai in the 'grand manner', are the product of the minds of those who met him and that, in the case of this portrait, the image was Reynolds' creation and Mai was 'clay in Reynolds' hands'.¹² Commentators on the painting have almost invariably attributed the costume to either Reynolds' imagination or Reynolds making the subject more 'exotic'. Adding to the tendency of historians to see the painting as orientalising the subject are the slightly mysterious location and the rather romanticised landscape with palms, the bare feet and the turban. The display of the tattoos on his hand can be seen as emphasising the exotic, though not the oriental.¹³

A number of historians of the Pacific, however, agree that Mai's garments in the Reynolds painting are, in reality, within the normal range of Tahitian dress.¹⁴ A remarkably similar turban is seen in drawings made in Polynesia by Hodges.¹⁵ Pacific historians believe the drape and thickness of the cloth and particularly the sash and turban are *tapa* (cloth made of bark). White *tapa* was, as Mai well knew, an indication of high rank. It is probable that Mai brought *tapa* with him; he might have obtained it from Banks or he could have used European cloth worn in a similar fashion or mixed with *tapa* to look like a Polynesian robe. While Banks could have suggested the wearing of the robe when he took charge of Mai's English debut and meeting with the King, equally Mai must have felt it was appropriate to pose as both exotic and highborn, especially in a meeting with the King. The robe, and particularly the extra cloth in the Reynolds portrait, may have been intended by Mai to enhance his claim to be of the aristocratic, high-ranking *ari'i*. Thus it seems that far from the robe necessarily originating in some conception of Reynolds of wanting to make his subject more exotic, Mai would have had as strong an idea of how he wished to be portrayed as some of Reynolds' high-ranking English clients, who had their clothes delivered to the studio. That the costume and pose suited both artist and subject seems unquestionable.

The Reynolds painting is highly revealing on two counts. First, it presents the assured place that Mai had won for himself, at least temporarily, in English society—to be painted by one of the outstanding portrait painters of the day and exhibited along with a painting of the Duchess of Devonshire at the Royal Academy. Second, it almost without question reveals a willing participation on the part of Mai in a masquerade of identity. This portrait portrays him as he

wanted to be portrayed—a high-ranking member of his own society with an assured place in that society—a rank it seems that he was not, in reality, able to claim and a place which subsequent events would prove the young adventurer was not able to achieve, despite all the attempts of his English sponsors to leave him settled and secure.



Francesco Bartolozzi (1727–1815)
after Nathaniel Dance (1735–1811)
Omai, a Native of Ulaietea, Brought into England in the Year 1774
by Tobias Furneaux
London: Publish'd according to Act of Parlt., 25 October 1774
engraving; plate mark 54.5 x 33 cm

NOTES

- ¹ Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723–1792), *Omai of the Friendly Isles* (1774?), pencil drawing, 26.5 x 20 cm. National Library of Australia (T2711 NK9670). The date given, of possibly 1774, seems less likely than a later date of 1775 or 1776. Mai was not, of course, from the Friendly Isles but from Raiatea.
- ² Algernon Graves and William Vine Cronin, *A History of the Work of Sir Joshua Reynolds*. 4 vols. London, 1899–1901, vol. 2, p. 708.
- ³ Quoted by David Mannings in Nicholas Penny (ed.), *Reynolds* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson/Royal Academy of Art, 1986), p. 272. The oil by Reynolds has for a number of years been in the Castle Howard Collection, Yorkshire, after it was bought by Frederick, Fifth Earl of Carlisle in 1796.
- ⁴ Johann Jacobé, engraver (1733–1797), *Omai, a Native of the Island of Ulitetea [i.e. Ulitetea]*, mezzotint, plate mark 63 x 38.4 cm. London: John Boydell, 1 September, 1780. National Library of Australia (U6876 NK4832).
- ⁵ See Penny, *op. cit.*, p. 35.
- ⁶ David Mannings (ed.), *Sir Joshua Reynolds: A Complete Catalogue of His Paintings, Plates*. New Haven and London: The Paul Mellon Centre for Studies in British Art/Yale University Press, 2000. I am grateful to Guillard Sutherland for access to the plates to sight these images.
- ⁷ Page, engraver, *Omiab, a Native of Otabeite, Brought to England by Capt. Fournieux [i.e. Fournieux]*, engraving, plate mark 19 x 11.5 cm. [London]: London mage [i.e. magazine], August, 1774. National Library of Australia (S6538A). An engraving after a Hodges drawing done on the voyage also depicted Mai.
- ⁸ Unknown engraver, *Omiab the Indian from Otabeite Presented to Their Majesties at Kew by Mr Banks & Dr Solander, July 17, 1774*, engraving, 11.1 x 13.9 cm. [London: 1774?]. National Library of Australia (U5390 NK10666).
- ⁹ Francesco Bartolozzi (1727–1815), after Nathaniel Dance (1735–1811), *Omai, a Native of Ulaietea, Brought into England in the Year 1774 by Tobias Fournieux*, engraving, plate mark 54.5 x 33 cm. [London]: Published as the Act directs, 25 October 1774. National Library of Australia (U6879 NK327).
- ¹⁰ William Parry (1742–1791), *Sir Joseph Banks with Omai, the Otabeitan Chief, and Doctor Daniel Solander 1775–1776*, oil on canvas, 147.5 x 147.5 cm. Private Collection. As with Reynolds' engagement books for the same period, those of Parry are also missing for these years but there seems reason to see a connection in the two works since Parry was a former student of Reynolds. Banks was certainly involved in the Dance drawing being engraved by Bartolozzi. The Parry painting went to a private collection in Wales (where Parry's family came from). Joseph Banks wears a sombre dark suit while Solander is seated at a table wearing a red coat and yellow waistcoat. I am grateful to Nevill Keating Pictures Ltd on behalf of a Private Collection, UK, for information on this painting. For the important suggestion that the tattoos may have once been there I am grateful for information supplied by Angela Nevill.
- ¹¹ Penny, *op. cit.*, p. 25, and Mannings, *op. cit.*, p. 272. Scholars of Reynolds' work agree his aim with costumes was deliberately to make them as unspecific as possible to avoid painting rapidly changing fashions. There are also accounts of Reynolds asking subjects to try on a variety of costumes. Similarly, while he had stock poses (and the Omai painting corresponds to poses in other full-length aristocratic portraits) he also was sometimes inspired by the moment to produce an unusual pose. His most relaxed and intimate portraits are of friends or actresses rather than the aristocracy who were his patrons: for example, the charming informal pose of the actress Mrs Abington as 'Miss Prue' in the Mellon Collection at Yale.
- ¹² Leonard Bell, 'Picturing Omai', in James Ross, Linda Gill and Stuart McRae (eds), *Writing, a New Country: A Collection of Essays Presented to E.H. McCormick in his 88th Year*. Auckland: J. Ross, 1993, pp. 140–151.
- ¹³ Harriet Guest in 'Curiously Marked: Tattooing, Masculinity,

and Nationality in Eighteenth-Century British Perceptions of the South Pacific', in John Barrell (ed.), *Painting and Politics of Culture: New Essays in British Art, 1700–1850* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, pp. 101–134), notes the similarity to South Seas costumes from Parkinson's Voyage as well as conceptions of oriental and classical drapery, and draws an important distinction between the oriental and the exotic. She sees Reynolds' emphasis on displaying Mai's tattooed hand as a 'distinction that demarcates the spectacular exoticism of the Tahitian's stance from the patrician authority it might also seem to indicate' (p. 111). Nevertheless, this adding of the tattoos would not have disturbed Mai.

¹⁴ I am grateful to Bronwen Douglas for pointing out the references below and for the information in the text on Tahitian dress. See Cook's *Voyage of the Endeavour* (ed. Beaglehole. Cambridge: The Hakluyt Society at the university press, 1968), pp.125–126, and Sydney Parkinson's *A Journal of a Voyage to the South Seas* (London: Printed for Stanfield Parkinson, 1773), p. 14, for a Tahitian dressed in a similar way but without the extra cloth wrapped around him, which

Cook attributes to 'some of the better sort such as can afford it, but more especially the women'. Mai could have mixed patterned or other European cloth with tapa, as Pacific Islanders were known to be adventurous in appropriating fashion.

¹⁵ See, for example, the red chalk drawing of *Potatow* by William Hodges in the Mitchell Library Collection. Reynolds' portrait was not the only Tahitian work exhibited at the Royal Academy exhibition in 1776, as there were two Tahiti paintings as well as landscapes of New Zealand by Hodges, and William Parry may have exhibited a fanciful work on the Chief Mourner of Otaheiti, which must have been based on the work of artists from the voyages. Parry did not exhibit his own portrait of Mai in the exhibition. Also exhibited was probably a Webber portrait of Cook, but not the portrait recently acquired by the National Portrait Gallery of Australia. It is ironic that one of England's greatest navigators was portrayed by a little known artist, while the young Polynesian was portrayed as an aristocrat by perhaps the finest portrait painter of his day.



John Cleveley (c.1745–1786), *A View of Matavai Bay* 1780?
watercolour; 50.7 x 69.8 cm