

# T O M A S S O



**Francis Cotes R.A. (1726-1770)**

## 24. Portrait of a Gentleman

Pastel on paper laid on canvas

81 x 67.9 cm (31 <sup>7</sup>/<sub>8</sub> x 26 <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> inches)

Identified by a Label on the Reverse as "Mr Gouch", possibly William Villa Real (1729-1759)

A British artist celebrated for his work in pastels and oils, Francis Cotes was a Founder Member of the Royal Academy of Arts. He rivalled Joshua Reynolds and Thomas Gainsborough in portrait painting before his untimely death aged 44.

Born in London, the son of an apothecary, Cotes trained with the portrait painter George Knapton. He then set up his own portrait studio, working chiefly with pastels, and quickly became the preeminent British artist in this medium. Cotes recognised the commercial potential of having his works engraved and sold as prints, which helped to further popularise his works.

In the late 1750s, Cotes also began painting in oils and by 1763 had started to employ Peter Toms, a specialist drapery painter and future Royal Academician who also worked with Joshua Reynolds. From this point on, the clothes worn by his sitters would typically be painted by Toms, while Cotes concentrated on the figure and composition.

In 1767, Cotes was commissioned to paint Queen Charlotte with her infant daughter Charlotte, the Princess Royal. The resulting portrait was hung by King George III in his bedchamber at Buckingham House. The following year,

Cotes was one of the leading artists who petitioned the King to approve the formation of a Royal Academy of Arts, becoming a Founder Member. Cotes was proud of his new title, usually adding “RA” to his signature thereafter.

Cotes exhibited 18 portraits in two years at the Royal Academy’s annual exhibitions. He died suddenly in 1770 at just 44 years old, after drinking a potion that he had believed would cure him of an illness, thought to have been kidney or gallstones. Cotes’ fellow Royal Academician Mary Moser wrote that “many a tear will drop on his grave, as he is not more lamented as an artist than a friend to the distressed”.

The present portrait is signed by Cotes and dated 1753. The sitter is identified as “Mr Gouch” or “Gootz”, “a Spanish gentleman”, by a nineteenth-century label on the reverse of the board that protects the canvas (top left). The label is handwritten in black ink, and records how a Portuguese exile gave the portrait to the notary William Jacobson in Plymouth, and how the latter gifted it to Mrs Derwent Coleridge. The text is transcribed in a later, type-written label also on the reverse (bottom centre). Mrs Derwent Coleridge (d. 1887), was born Mary Simpson Pridham, the daughter of John Drake Pridham, whose wife was a first cousin of William Jacobson. Mary Derwent Coleridge was the wife of Rev. Derwent Coleridge (1800-1883), the son of the celebrated poet Samuel Taylor Coleridge (1772-1834). A stencilled Christie’s stock number on the reverse – GP270 – leads to the catalogue for the auction of the property of Edward Coleridge Gair (1904-1987), which took place in London on 24th March 1987. The present pastel was lot 62. Mr Gair was the son of George Herbert Gair (1871-1919) and Margaret Eulelia Coleridge (1878-1960), who was a descendant of Mary Derwent Coleridge.

The circumstances of how William Jacobson came to be in possession of the present portrait in Plymouth are fascinating if incomplete. The label states it was given to him by a Portuguese exile, and in 1829 Don Miguel, Regent of Portugal, visited Plymouth, which subsequently gave asylum for several months to three thousand of the adherents of Don Pedro of Brazil. Our Portuguese exile would likely have been amongst them, but how the portrait came into his hands in the first place is open to speculation. The label identifies the sitter, Mr Gouch or Gootz, as a Spanish gentleman. Records for the family name Gooch reveal that a lady named Elizabeth Sarah Villa Real Gooch (born 1757), died in Plymouth in 1807. She was the daughter of William Villa-Real, the scion of an important family of Jewish merchants originally from the Iberian Peninsula, who died, aged 30, in 1759. The fact that Elizabeth Sarah Villa Real Gooch was from a family of Spanish or Portuguese descent, that she died in Plymouth, and that she married a William Gooch in 1775, suggest she may be the link between the sitter in the present portrait and the Portuguese exile who gifted it to William Jacobson in Plymouth. What remains to be established is whether the sitter was Elizabeth’s father, William Villa-Real (which would be plausible if we consider his age and the date on the portrait) or a relative of her husband William Gooch, the second son of Thomas Gooch, Baronet of Benacre Hall in Suffolk, incorrectly identified by the label as “a Spanish gentleman”.

### **Literature:**

N. Jeffares, Dictionary of Pastellists before 1800, p. 12