

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - *Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1*

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

Aedes Althorpianae.

THE HALL.

ON entering the house, you are immediately made acquainted with what was, about a century ago, the ruling passion of its noble inmates. The sides of this Hall are covered with paintings by the pencil of the once famed, and yet not despicable, *John Wooton*; descriptive of the pleasures of THE CHASE. To the left, covering the whole side, there is a lively representation of a *Burst*. Reynard is seen in the distance; the dogs are in full chase; the huntsman winds his horn; the whoop and halloo are given: the horses are about to be put into a full gallop; and a numerous field of sportsmen brings up the rear. Among these sportsmen, no one makes a more conspicuous figure than *Charles*, the *second Duke of Marlborough*, and grandfather of the present duke—who, at that time, was owner of the mansion. He is riding upon a gray horse, in red breeches and waistcoat, with a dark blue jacket flapping in the wind as he gallops at full speed. He holds his whip a little like a truncheon; so that, taken altogether, and judging from the present fashion, the dress and attitude would be considered rather *à la militaire*. Two shepherds, in the foreground, and in shadow, appear to be giving intelligence of the course of the fox. Upon the whole, this is a very joyous and animated representation of the subject; and as it occupies the entire width of the Hall, twenty-four feet, it will not be considered as upon a very diminutive scale.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE HALL.

Opposite, and of equal dimensions — is the companion to the preceding. It may be called, in its way, a *Riposo*. The chase is over: reynard is slain, and held aloft by the huntsman, while the dogs scramble up his knees for the tempting prey. To the left of the picture, in the foreground, is a group — drawn and executed with great spirit and truth, as the subjoined copy attests:



The lower figure, to the left, is the *Honourable John Spencer*, grandfather of the present Earl. The central figure is that of *Charles, Duke of Marlborough*; who makes so conspicuous an appearance in the composition just described; and the third

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE HALL.

3

figure, to the right, is that of *Lord Vane*, who used to hunt with the Duke. To the right of the above, is an excellent group of three gentlemen, two on horseback, the other dismounted, and talking to his companions. The hither mounted horseman, turning round, and looking at the group above described, is, with his horse, very naturally and admirably executed. Again, to the right, are various groups, unconnected with each other, and perhaps too widely scattered apart; but a dismounted gentleman—with his hands behind him, holding a horsewhip in one of them, bending forward—with his gloves under his left arm, to examine a horse's near foot, shewn to him by a groom in a striped jacket—must not be passed over without especial notice and commendation. Several dogs, oppressed with heat and thirst, from the length of the chase, are coming to drink at a running stream. One gentleman, on horseback, is leaping this brook in a very gay and airy manner. Two, on horseback, in the middle ground, are quietly discoursing about the glories of the field. In the distance, is a group of horses without their riders. A village upon a hill, and a river to the left, occupy the back ground. Upon the whole, this is one of those pictures, which, however deficient in a general good effect of light and shade, cannot fail to please, from the truth and spirit with which most of the detached, or individual parts, are executed. It is a true sporting field of the time of GEORGE II.

On each side of the door, opposite the entrance-door, is a large picture of a horse and groom; having no further merit to recommend them than that they cover so many square yards of wall or wainscoat.

Over the door, leading to the staircase, and opposite the door of entrance, is a small picture—of about six feet by four—of *Dogs breaking loose from the kennel*. It has really great merit. The dogs are running and tumbling over one another, in a perfectly natural manner, advancing towards the huntsman, who is by the side of a gray horse. Above, is a bright, clear sky, indicative of a fine day's sport. Beneath the larger pictures, first described, there is, to the left, a horse as large as life—with an inscription of "*Sore Heels*:" two boys are by the side of a basket of hay. Again, to the left, in a corner, is a group of

dogs, with a black servant, stooping : a French horn is suspended to the bough of a tree, and a magpie is perched upon a pillar. Below the large hunting-piece, to the right, is a horse, of the size of life, called *Brisk*, drinking out of a trough ; while a groom is drawing fresh water, which runs into it, from a well. To the right of this, in the corner, is the *Earth Stopper* ; an old fellow with a gray beard, and a spade in his right hand. He is caressing a favourite dog, who looks up to him, and licks his beard. A dead fox lies upon some pieces of wood above : five dogs are in the back ground. The whole of the size of life. Wooton is much to be preferred in his figures of a small size. His large horses and dogs look as if they were made of pasteboard.

On each side of the entrance-door—and therefore behind the spectator on entrance—are two early pieces by *Stubbs* ; which are clever and interesting—as early specimens of the master. To the right, is the portrait of a horse called *Romulus*, with the date of 1777. There is a power of touch in this piece, which marked *Stubbs* through life—and who has been called, by one of the most knowing of modern artists in this department, “the Emperor of horse-painters.” The colouring and expression of the face of the groom, or jockey, who holds *Romulus* by the bridle, has considerable merit. Opposite, and on the left side on entrance, is a much better performance, by the same master, of a hunter called *Scape-Flood*. The shape of the animal is full of grace and power ; and his countenance is vigorously expressed. The groom is, in my humble estimation, a masterpiece in its way : perfect nature : the vacant expression, yet coupled with care and anxiety about the animal—and the tonsure of his hair by the village barber—are as evident, as they are correctly executed. In the horse, may be traced the rudiments of the future excellence of the painter. The size of each of these two paintings, is four feet by three.

This Hall is thirty-one feet three inches in height, by twenty-four feet and a half in width, and thirty-three in length. The ceiling is coved ; having octagonal ornaments, with roses in the centre. The freize below consists of the heads of dogs and foxes—arabesques and capriccios—the whole painted in white. Before passing through the door which faces the visitor on his

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE HALL.

5

entrance, and which conducts him to the *Great Stair Case*, I must request him to turn with me through the door to the left; and advancing, again to the left, to the further end of a corridor, to accompany me through the entire suite of the ground apartments — comprehending **THE DINING ROOM, FAMILY DRAWING ROOM,** and five large rooms devoted to **THE LIBRARY.**

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - *Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1*

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

[6]

THE DINING ROOM.

THE Dining Room at Althorp, which occupies the first three windows of the ground floor, seen in the View of the House, prefixed to the first volume of this work, was considerably enlarged by the present Earl Spencer. Its dimensions will be found in the plate of the ground plan of the house. Upon a rich and dark-crimson paper, the following interesting Pictures are suspended.

PORTRAIT OF SOFONISBA ANGOSCIOLA.*—Painted by Herself. The ANNEXED ENGRAVING will give the most correct notion of the beauty and simplicity of this composition. The picture is among the most precious in this collection, and must on all accounts be considered a very rare and estimable production. We observe upon it, the coeval inscription of IUSSU PATRIS. When Vasari wrote the first part of his celebrated work upon the *Lives of Painters*, he had little knowledge of the productions of this illustrious Artist. In a subsequent part, he has enlarged upon his previous sketch; and I make no apology to the reader for presenting him with a very literal version of the *whole* of what he has said concerning SOPHONISBA and her family:† Walpole,

* The name is variously spelt in Vasari. The artist herself writes it as above.

† “But Sophonisba, of Cremona, daughter of M. Amilcaro Angusciola, has with more care, and with a better grace, than any other lady of her time, practised the art of painting: for she not only knew how to draw, colour, paint from nature, and copy excellently from the works of others, but has also composed some most rare and beautiful things herself. From which circumstance Philip, King of Spain, having heard from the Duke of Alva of her talents, sent for her, and had her honourably conducted into Spain, where he placed her about the Queen, with a large pension, and with the admiration of all that court. And therefore it is not to be wondered at that M. Tommaso, a Roman gentleman, sent to the Duke 'Cosimo, besides a picture by the divine

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE DINING ROOM.

7

in his *Anecdotes of Painting*, vol. ii. p. 97, edit. 1765, notices this very picture; as also does Pilkington, in his *Dictionary of*

Michel Angelo, in which is a Cleopatra, another picture by Sophonisba, of a girl laughing at a boy, who is crying; she having placed before him a basket full of lobsters, one of which has bitten his finger. The beauty and truth of this painting cannot be too much praised; and therefore, in memory of the talents of Sophonisba, (Italy having few of her productions, on account of her residence in Spain,) I have introduced the mention of it in my collection of drawings. We may therefore say with truth of her, like the divine Ariosto,

“ Le Donne son venute in eccellenza

“ Di ciascun’ arte ov’ hanno posto cura.”

Vasari, Pt. i. p. 174. *Edit.* 1568.

“ But the Scholar who did him [Bernardin Campi*] the most honour, and who excelled greatly in painting, was Sophonisba Angusciuola, of Cremona, with her three sisters. These virtuous young women were the daughters of SIGNOR AMILCAR ANGUSCIUOLA, and of the Signora Bianca Punzona, both noble families of Cremona. Speaking, then, of the Signora Sophonisba, (of whom I related some few particulars in the life of Properzia of Bologna, not then knowing more of her,) I said in that place, that I saw this year, in Cremona, at the house of her father, a well executed picture of her performance, containing the portraits of her three sisters, in the act of playing at chess, and with them an old housekeeper; all done with so much care and diligence, that they appear really alive, and only to want the power of speech. In another picture, painted by the same Sophonisba, is represented the Signor Amilcar, her father, who has on one side of him one of his daughters, her sister, called Minerva, who excelled in literature and painting; and on the other, his son Asdrubal, their brother: these figures are also so well done, that they appear quite to breathe.† In Placentia are to be seen, painted by the same hand, at the house of the Archdeacon of the cathedral, two most beautiful pictures: one contains the portrait of the Archdeacon himself, the other of Sophonisba: both these figures almost appear to speak. Sophonisba, having been, as was before mentioned, placed, by means of the Duke d’Alva, in the service of the Queen of Spain, where she now is enjoying an excellent pension, and much honoured, painted a great number of wonderful portraits and pictures; the fame of which productions caused the Pope Pius IV. to signify to Sophonisba, that he desired to have from her hands the portrait of the aforesaid Queen of Spain; and Sophonisba having complied with his wish, as speedily as was possible, sent the portrait to Rome, writing to his Holiness a letter in the following terms:

* Vasari is in error in calling her a disciple of Giulio Campo.

† This picture was in the Borghese Gallery at Rome. See Baldinucci, *Notizie*, 1550-1580. p. 157. *edit.* 1688, 4to.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - *Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1*

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

8 THE DINING ROOM.

Painters,* when the portrait was at Wimbledon. Why the late Mr. Bryan, in his Dictionary of Painters, has chosen to omit the mention of this—probably the most valuable of Sophonisba's

“ HOLY FATHER,

“ I heard from the most reverend Nuncio of your Holiness, that you desired a portrait from my hands of her Majesty the Queen, my mistress. And as I accepted this undertaking, considering it as a mark of peculiar grace and favour, having to serve your Holiness, I asked permission of her Majesty, who most willingly, and with great pleasure, granted it, thereby acknowledging your Holiness's protection towards her. I avail myself of the opportunity of this gentleman's going, to send it to you: and if, by my exertions, I shall have satisfied the wishes of your Holiness, it will give me infinite consolation. It only remains to say, that if, with the pencil, it were possible to represent to the eyes of your Holiness, the beauties of the mind of this Queen, you could behold nothing more wonderful. But of that which is in the power of art to represent, all my endeavours have been exerted to convey to your Holiness a faithful representation. And with this end, with all reverence and humility, I kiss your Holiness's feet. Your Holiness's most humble servant,

Madrid, September 16, 1561.

“ SOFONISBA ANGOSCIOLA.”

“ To which letter (the portrait having appeared to him so very wonderful and beautiful) his Holiness returned the following answer, accompanied with presents worthy of the many virtues of Sophonisba.

“ POPE PIUS IV. WELL BELOVED DAUGHTER IN CHRIST,

“ WE have received the portrait of the most serene Queen of Spain, our dearest daughter, that you have sent us. It has given us the greatest satisfaction, as much on account of the person it represents, (for whom we have a paternal regard,) as well as for the religious virtues, and other fine parts of her mind; and also from its having been so diligently and beautifully executed by your hands. We thank you for it, and assure you that we shall keep it among our most precious things: commending this your great talent, which, however wonderful, we understand is among the least that you possess. And with this end, we again repeat our blessing: that our Lord God may preserve you.

“ *Rome, October 15, 1561.*”

“ This testimony is sufficient to demonstrate the talents of Sophonisba.”

Vasari, Pt. iii. p. 561-3. *Edit.* 1568.

* Pilkington, after Baldinucci, says that by continual application to her profession, she lost her sight; and it is recorded that Vandyke, having had an opportunity of conversing with Sophonisba, used to say, that he received more beneficial knowledge of the true principles of his art from one blind woman, than by studying all the works of the greatest masters in Italy. She died in the year 1626, and in the 93rd of her age.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

THE DINING ROOM.

9

pieces—it is difficult to conceive. The only other acknowledged specimens of her talents, in England, is the *Marriage of St. Catherine*, in the collection of the Earl of Pembroke, at Wilton; and “a small head of Sophonisba, in a round,” in Lord Ashburnham’s collection. The present picture was purchased by Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough, for seven hundred guineas; a price, of very uncommon occurrence a century ago. This interesting picture is here engraved for the first time.*

A CALM, by ALBERT CUYP.—The OPPOSITE ENGRAVING will afford the best notion of the tranquillity which reigns throughout this enchanting picture. The predominant colour is a deep or sombre gray, relieved nevertheless with frequent little flashes of light, which are always to be found upon the surface of the sea. The gleam of sun-setting, to the left, affords a fine contrast to the mass of dark clouds which is rolling away. The water is of the most delicious transparency. Altogether, this picture is deserving of the highest praise; and has never been before engraved. It belonged to Sarah, Duchess of Marlborough.

PORTRAIT, by TITIAN.—This portrait, which is worthy of the great artist who painted it, is that of LUIGI CORNARO, a noble Venetian. Cornaro was born in 1467, and died in 1566. He was naturally of a weak constitution, and of an irritable temper, both of which were made much worse by every youthful excess of which a man could be guilty. At forty years of age, rapid infirmity obliged him to have recourse to a complete reform of life and to adopt the most rigid abstinence. This salutary determination restored his health, and softened and tranquilised his temper; and he was enabled to reach his hundredth year in

* It may perhaps be considered idle to indulge in conjectures respecting the occasion, or the period, of the execution of this portrait of Sophonisba; but, from the inscription upon it, mentioned above, I think it not altogether improbable, that it is the portrait of herself which she painted for *Annibale Caro*, and which her father, after he had sent it to him, almost immediately required Caro to return. The reader will find two rather interesting letters on the subject in Baldinucci. Sophonisba is said to have been a most sweet singer, which sufficiently accounts for the attitude and action in the picture. The figure of the old woman, I have little doubt, is that of the domestic represented in the game at chess, mentioned in p. 7.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-05726-4 - *Aedes Althorpianae: An Account of the Mansion, Books, and Pictures, at Althorp, the Residence of George John Earl Spencer, to which is Added a Supplement to the Bibliotheca Spenceriana: Volume 1*

Thomas Frognall Dibdin

Excerpt

[More information](#)

comfort and content. The portion of sustenance which he allowed himself daily, was twelve ounces of solid food, and fourteen ounces of wine. From the Collection of Robert, second Earl of Sunderland.

A WOMAN'S HEAD, by PAUL VERONESE.—A pleasing and sweetly coloured picture, in excellent preservation. From the same Collection.

A MADONNA AND CHILD, by CARAVAGGIO.—A pretty gipsy-faced woman and her child. A good example of the vigorous colouring and strong effect of light and shade of this master. From the same Collection.

PORTRAIT, by TITIAN.—An admirable portrait of one of old Cornaro's grandsons. In the famous picture of the Cornaro family, in the possession of the Duke of Northumberland, this young man is there represented as one of the group of grandchildren behind the old men. Bought at Rome, by the present Earl Spencer.

A FARM YARD, by HONDEKOETER.—A magnificent and well painted picture of various fowl. From the Duchess of Marlborough's Collection.

A HEAD OF A WOMAN AS PSYCHE.—A noble specimen of the Roman School. By whom painted is not decided—but no one can doubt that the artist, whoever he may have been, ranks very high among the great masters of that school. Bought at Rome, by John, first Earl Spencer.

A BOY'S HEAD. An antique encaustic painting. The inscription in gilt letters, upon the mahogany frame by which this curious treasure is surrounded, is as follows; "An Ancient Encaustic Painting, found on the walls of a sepulchral Chamber near Beneventum; first opened for the gratification of *Georgiana, Countess Dowager Spencer*, and cut out from thence, under her inspection, in 1793, with the permission of *Ferdinand IV. King of Naples and Sicily*." Without such an authentic