



The Paston Treasure Teacher's Pack

Supporting material and ideas for teachers using The Paston Treasure as part of the Take One scheme.

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The Paston Treasure, c.1670



Introduction to the painting

The painting

The Paston Treasure was commissioned by Sir Robert Paston in the mid 1670s and depicts objects from the family's collection. It is likely that the painting was made by a Dutch artist visiting Oxnead Hall, the Paston family home near Aylsham in Norfolk. We know this because the painting fits into the tradition of Dutch and Flemish still life painting.

It displays the Paston family's learning and wealth at the same time as it reminds the viewer of the fragility of life. The musical instruments and the song book held by the girl indicate the refined pastime of a cultured family. The peaches, grapes and oranges would have been luxury items and the lobster suggests a sumptuous lifestyle. The animals and the slave boy are "exotic" additions to the picture, although whether they were a part of the Paston household is questionable. The girl, on the other hand, is most likely Robert Paston's daughter Mary, who died of smallpox in 1676. The passing of time and inevitability of death are symbolised by the clock, the hourglass and the snuffed out candle.

The objects in the collection were gathered by Sir Robert and particularly his father, Sir William Paston. Sir William most likely made acquisitions on a long journey through Europe

to Italy and then on to Cairo and Jerusalem. The collection consisted of over 200 objects and included many natural curiosities made into decorative art objects, such as the mounted seashells and ostrich eggs. The painting depicts a collection of objects from all around the world: a packet of tobacco from America, the parrot from Africa and the porcelain dish from Asia (China). This globality is further emphasised by the prominent position of the globe.

The collection was sold shortly after the painting was finished because of the Pastons' failing finances. The objects spread around the world again: the strombus shell with the enamelled mount is in the Norwich Castle collection, the nautilus shell behind the globe is in the Prinsenhof Museum in Delft and the flask held by the boy is in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.

Further Background Information

There are many things to look at in this picture and many layers of meaning.

Wealth:

Gold and Silver – One purpose of this painting is to display the Pastons' wealth. Most of the gold and silverware was made in Holland and Germany, countries renowned for their goldsmiths. Intricately made vessels were high fashion items. The Pastons owned more than 200 such pieces.

Dress and Jewellery – The little girl in the picture is dressed like an adult, in the fashion of the day. She would have been corseted from an early age to mould her figure. Her family's wealth is indicated by her silk dress trimmed with gold braid and her jewellery.

The young man is a slave and wears an exotic version of Classical Roman dress. His silk-trimmed tunic resembles a centurion's breastplate and he wears a chain set with pearls, emeralds and rubies or garnets. Enslaved servants were frequently dressed in elaborate liveries, underlining the wealth of their 'owners'.

Food – The exotic fruits show a luxurious lifestyle. Grapes, oranges and peaches had to be imported or grown in a hothouse. They were gradually becoming more available but were still expensive. To possess a hothouse or an orangery was fashionable. The Pastons may have had one of their own at Oxnead Hall.

Musical

Instruments - Music was essential entertainment for social occasions. It was an important accomplishment for well-born ladies and the little girl



would have had a private music tutor. Families of rank would hire musicians whenever they entertained guests.

Musical instruments were another symbol of gracious living. The pochette, or pocket violin was commonly played by a dancing master.

Cabinets and Treasure Chambers:

Collecting – There were no public museums in the 17th century. Art objects were commissioned and collected by royalty and nobility as a sign of their learning and status. Collections were displayed in a special room known as a 'cabinet' or a 'schatzkammer' – German for 'Treasure Chamber'. The owners would invite their friends to visit, to admire and discuss their collections. The content of a collection was often very mixed, dependent on individual taste.

Natural History - Natural history specimens mingled with art objects in many connoisseurs' collections. The Paston inventories list ostrich eggs, exotic shells and other 'curiosities'.

Many of the vessels in the painting are tropical shells mounted in silver-gilt. There was a particular interest in such objects at this date as the world opened up and different kinds of specimens were seen for the first time. The foundations of modern science were being laid during this period.

Robert Paston and the Royal Society – Robert Paston was keenly interested in science. He was a founder member of the Royal Society. This



was founded in 1660 to discuss science and natural philosophy and to further scientific knowledge. Other founders included the most important intellectuals of the day: architect Christopher Wren, diarist John Evelyn and scientists Robert Hooke and Robert Boyle. They may well have visited Oxnead to view Sir Robert's collections.

The World

International trade – Objects from around the known world are represented here; Africa (



parrot); Caribbean (shells); China (porcelain); India (tortoise shell); Virginia (packet of tobacco). The globe is turned towards the East Indies. The British East India Company had the monopoly on these lucrative imports from outside Europe and the Pastons may well have invested in this company.



The Globe – The globe is prominent, indicating the worldwide scope of the collection and the learning of the Pastons. It was made by Willem Blaeu of Amsterdam in early-mid 17th century. Blaeu made the best globes

available at the time, for both craftsmanship and cartographical knowledge. Both Robert and William Paston travelled in Holland and either of them may have bought it from Blaeu himself. The view of this painting shows the East Indies, the 'Spice Islands' in the Pacific, centre of the spice trade.

Chinese Porcelain – The lobster in this picture is placed on a dish made of what looks like Chinese porcelain. Porcelain was another newly available luxury status symbol. The Portuguese, Dutch and the British East India Companies imported it, together with tea and silk. At this date relatively few people in England would have been familiar with porcelain, apart from royalty, the nobility and those involved with the East India Company. Its display here emphasises the Pastons' international connections and their sophisticated taste.

Animals – New pets were available as a result of increasing



non-European trade. They are depicted in sufficient paintings to suggest that they were fashionable novelties in royal and noble households. The monkey shown here is recognisable as a Vervet Monkey. The bird is a Vasa Parrot. In practice, many such animals would have died during the long voyage from Africa, or succumbed to the cold climate once they reached Europe.

People:

The Artist – The artist is unknown, but the painting is in the Dutch tradition. It is thought to have been painted by a Dutch artist called Pieter Gerritsz van Roestraten (c1630-1700) who was a pupil and son-in-law of Frans Hals. He came to England in 1666 and painted many still life pictures here. Some dispute the

artist's identity. Whoever he was, he must have painted this picture at Oxnead Hall, because of the very detailed depictions of objects we know to be real.

The Little Girl – There are many fascinating and mysterious aspects to the people in this picture. It is almost certain that this young girl is Mary Paston, Robert and Rebecca Paston's younger daughter. She died in 1676 of smallpox, aged around 10-12. She is holding roses and a songbook, on which the words are scarcely legible apart from two ominous references to 'death'.

The Young Man – This is the earliest known image of an enslaved African in Norfolk. He probably came from Guinea or Benin, the first places where a systematic British slave trade was established. His name is unknown, though slaves were typically given Classical names like Scipio or Caesar. His Roman-style dress suggests he may have been given a name like this. There are no death records in the parish at Oxnead referring to anyone who seems identifiable with this young man, so he was probably sold on somewhere else.

The Woman – Before its recent conservation this painting was x-rayed. Beneath layers of paint under the clock and the hourglass appeared a shadowy image of a woman. She was clearly in the original version of the picture, but painted out later. Cleaning has made her faintly visible once more. She is most likely to be Rebecca Paston, Robert's wife and Mary's mother.

Why was she painted out? See Time and Death.

Time and death:

Vanitas – A common theme in paintings of this period was the vanity of worldly things, a theme known as *vanitas*. Many of the objects in this picture have double meanings. The globe can symbolise worldliness, the flowers and fruit imply the ephemeral nature of life, as they are

in a state of perfection for such a short time. The precious vessels in the painting all seem to be empty, to suggest the 'emptiness' of riches.

Time – There are three timepieces in this painting: a clock, a watch and an hourglass. The clock and watch are expensive, high status objects, but why are there so many references to time?

In this period images of timepieces, like flowers and fruit, were symbolic

references to the transience of life. The sand has run through the hourglass, the watch and clock are depicted stopped at the moment in time. All these imply that 'time has run out'.

Death – Young Mary Paston's early death is the central theme to this picture. Her songbook refers to 'death's black hand', and she holds roses, the frail emblems of human life. The clock and the hourglass are positioned where Rebecca was, together with the extinguished candle. The lute has a broken string, the instruments lie unplayed. These imply silence and also death. This painting may have started out as having one kind of meaning, but the symbols of death suggest strongly that Mary died while it was being painted, altering the artistic emphasis.



Asking Questions

Possible questions to ask in front of *The Paston Treasure:*

Where is the ladybird?

What is around it?

Can you see similar objects?

Which things go together?

How would it be used?

What is it made from?

How are the instruments played?

How many shells? Animals?

Which things are living? How do we know?

If you could jump into the picture what would you see/hear/smell/ touch?

If the picture came to life what movement would they see?

Who are the characters in the picture? What kind of people are they?

What are they wearing? Are they wearing modern clothes? What do their clothes tell us about them?

What are they doing? Holding? Wearing? What might this tell you?

What can you say about these people? Why do you think that?

If you could ask one of them a question, what would it be?

What could be hiding in the picture? Behind the curtain? In the box?

What do you think is the most important object in the picture? Why? (Put objects in order of importance)

Why do you think so many objects are included in this painting?

Why do you think someone wanted to create a picture like this?

What would you add to the table? Why?

How does the picture make you feel?

What title would you give this picture?

Do the objects belong to rich or poor people? Is everyone in the picture rich?

Why would exotic fruit be a sign of wealth?

Whose things are they?

How has the picture been made?

Is it real?

Gallery Activities

Post-its

Give the children two post-it notes and ask them to write on each something they can see in the picture. Collect these up and use them as a way to start looking together.

Object handling bag (available on request)

This includes a selection of objects e.g. shells, containers that relate to the picture. These can be handed round and used as a resource to make links with the painting.

Gallery Treasure Hunt

Look for items that are from or like those in the painting around the museum. Take photographs of items in other galleries, particularly in the Natural History and Arts of Living galleries and ask the children to find them.

Make some keyhole viewfinders for the children to peep through.

Give the children one digital camera per small group and let each child take an image of some 'treasure' in the gallery/museum. Back at school the children could cut out and paste the objects onto a large table cut from card, write a justification of their choice and display as a think bubble next to the object of their choice.

On our website there is a selection of photographs to use as a 'Paston Treasure' hunt in the museum.

Developing lines of enquiry in the classroom

Treasure Collections

- Ask children to think about their own treasures including ones to do with emotions and feelings. Arrange these to make their own Paston Treasure. Think about why they would choose these objects. Describe 'My Treasured Objects'.
- Create a class, school or community treasure collection
- Make your own treasure item and explain in a letter where you found it and what it means to you. Put your finished item into a large treasure chest along with the letter.



Treasure Maps and Journeys

- Look closely at the globe in the painting. Look at maps of the time. Make your own maps (or a treasure map) and age the paper
- Look at ships and maps from the 17th century and compare with ships and maps today.
- Make model ships, investigate floating and sinking
- Create a three-dimensional treasure island.
- Plan a journey
- Create sea creatures



Objects from Around the World

- Research and name the shells, fruits and animals in the picture. Find out where they come from.
- Design things you can make from a shell
- Taste and smell different fruits
- Find out about hidden meanings and messages of flowers.
- Personification poems: Imagine what it might be like to be the objects in The Paston Treasure: how they might be feeling, what they may be saying, what they might do. Hot seat the objects.
- Create concrete poems using object shapes from the picture

Treasure Collectors

- Research local and family history of the Pastons relevant to the painting. What happened to them after the painting?
- Re-enact the Royal Visit to Oxnead Hall– host the King and his entourage. What would it be like to attend a banquet in the 1600s? What food would you eat? How would the table be laid?
- What is Oxnead like now? Who lives there?

For more details, visit the Learning pages at www.museums.norfolk.gov.uk

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