

*THE LEWIS WALPOLE SERIES IN
EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY CULTURE
AND HISTORY*



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The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist

THREE LIVES IN AN
AGE OF EMPIRE



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Prologue

ON LIVES AND EMPIRE



The evening of 10 December 1776 was exceptionally cold. It had been a trying winter for Londoners in more ways than one. News from across the Atlantic was getting worse every day, and no one seemed to agree on the best path forward. Some thought the American colonists were justified in their break for independence. Others believed that hanging was now not punishment enough. The weather didn't help. Yet, undeterred by it all, that night the members and students of the Royal Academy of the Arts scurried up the steps into Somerset House on The Strand for their annual prize-giving ceremony. Perhaps they were eager for some distraction from the splintering of their empire. Perhaps they wanted simply to find out who were the medal winners for that year and to listen to their president's seventh formal address.¹

The president, Sir Joshua Reynolds, was fifty-three years old in 1776. He had held his position as inaugural head of the Royal Academy for seven years. The audience was by now used to his low-toned Devonshire accent and his ruddy if commanding appearance. They were also used to the message with which he opened his address. "The first idea of art," he declaimed, is to show the "general truths" of humanity, which are all indisputably "universal." The artist should never privilege those quirks that make a sitter distinct from everyone else because that would draw attention to what makes humans disagree with one another instead of to what unites them.²

About halfway into his speech, the president, unusually, changed tack. He brought up the tricky issue of what artists should do when faced, nonetheless, with sitters who bore such pronounced quirks that they challenged his core idea of human universality. To illustrate the problem, Reynolds offered the examples of an ochre-daubed Cherokee and a tattooed Tahitian.

Most listeners in the room that night knew that Reynolds spoke from experience in invoking such examples. Just a few months earlier Reynolds had exhibited his portrait of Mai, the first Pacific Islander to visit British shores (who was really from the island of Ra'iatea but was thought by most Londoners to be from nearby Tahiti). A dozen years before, Reynolds had painted the portrait of a Cherokee visitor, equally celebrated, called Ostenaco.

Today, these two Reynolds paintings are rarely connected. They have met with starkly opposing fates. At the start of the twenty-first century the portrait

Figure 1. Somerset House, watercolor over pencil by Thomas Sandby, 1770s. Reproduced with permission from the Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018.

of Mai—grand, beautiful, idealized—caused a controversy when it sold to a foreign buyer for a record £10.3 million. At the time, this was the second-highest price ever paid for a British work of art. The controversy continued when the British government placed an export bar on the piece to prevent it from leaving the country, citing the portrait as a “national treasure,” an “icon of the eighteenth century,” and a “vivid testament” to enlightened multiculturalism. The export bar still applies, making Reynolds’s Mai the longest-detained work of art in British legislative history. The portrait of Ostenaco, by contrast, is seldom discussed. Smaller, quieter, more subdued, it has long been housed in an American museum as an ethnographic artifact.³

Back in Somerset House, though, during the dying days of Britain’s Atlantic-based empire, few would have questioned the connections between either the paintings or the sitters. Everyone remembered the visits by Ostenaco and Mai. Both had been popular arrivals, tracked by a burgeoning press and by substantial crowds who were just then learning the ropes of celebrity culture.

Ostenaco had arrived in London in the summer of 1762. He was in his late forties by then, a seasoned diplomat for the Cherokees with an even longer record as a distinguished warrior.⁴ He had been a chief prosecutor of the deadly Anglo-Cherokee War of 1760–61 but came now to secure the war’s termination with King George III of Britain. During his ten-week stay Ostenaco took in tours of London’s docks, cathedrals, jails, parklands, and tavern scene. He returned home more confident of the Cherokees’ relationship with the British, but he was not to know that the British were soon to find their status in America ripped to shreds from within. Ostenaco would become caught up in the subsequent settler revolution in complicated ways.

The Ra’iatean man, Mai, had come to Britain under less official auspices. He had made his way in 1774 by jumping on board the returning leg of James Cook’s second voyage to the Pacific. Cook, although reluctant, had conceded to his joining because he assumed that Mai might serve one day, like Ostenaco before him, as a kind of broker between Britain and a “New World” Indigenous society. For his part, Mai had no interest in diplomacy. He wanted simply to acquire the special firepower he had seen Europeans deploy sporadically in his home islands over the last six years. Mai was still a young man when he arrived in Britain—around twenty-one or so—and he enjoyed a longer stay than Ostenaco, returning after two years. He took in even more sights than his Cherokee predecessor had, attending theaters and museums in addition to the palaces and pubs. Mai too became embroiled in conflict upon

CHAPTER I

The Warrior-Diplomat

OSTENACO OF THE APPALACHIANS



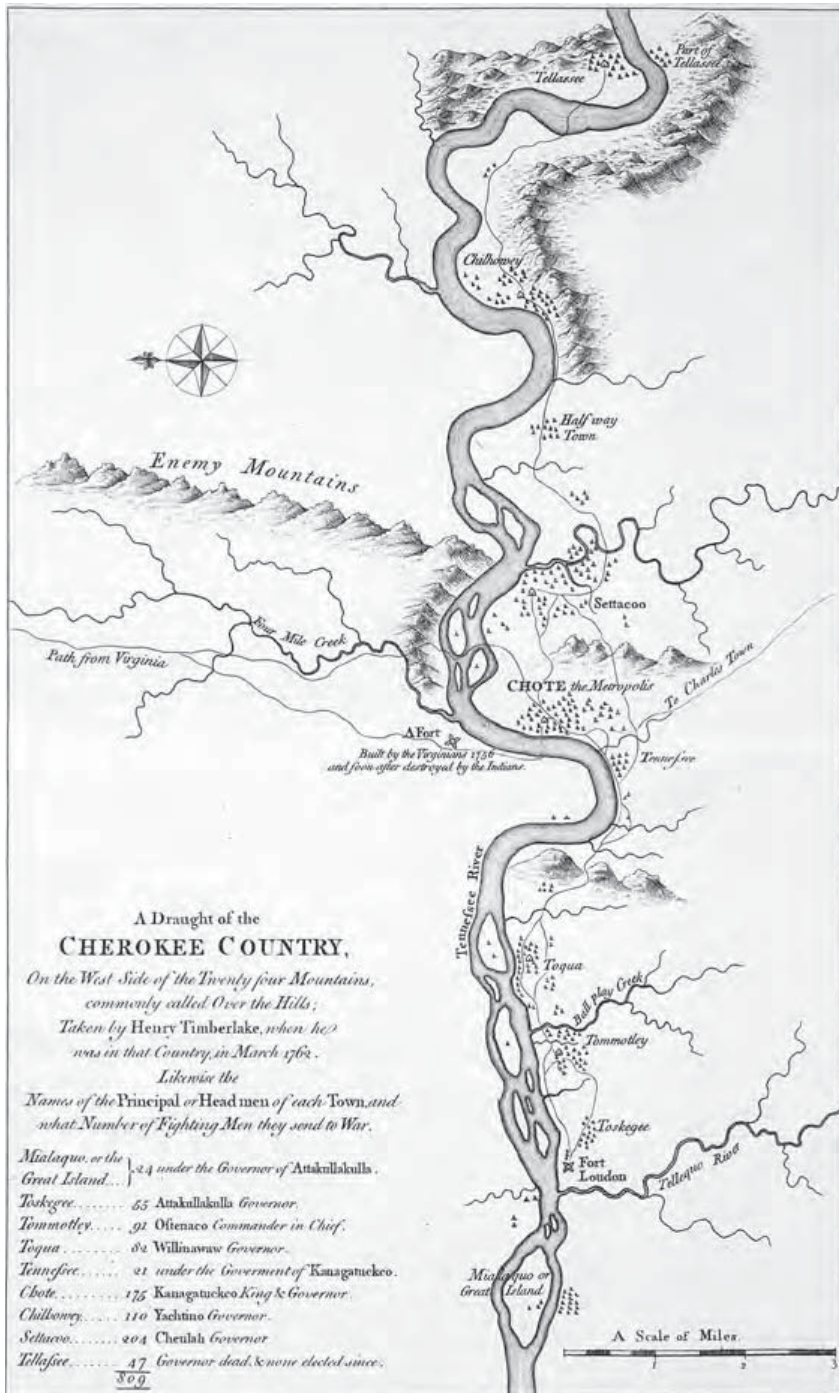


Figure 4. Copy of Henry Timberlake's Map of Cherokee Country, 1765. Reproduced courtesy of Old Salem Museums & Gardens.

who was profiteering off the spectacle of the Cherokees. Timberlake likened the experience to a sheep being accused by the “wolf of rapine.” He went on: “The sheep, a raw Virginian, who, ignorant of little arts, innocently believed others as honest as himself, and could never believe such impudence existed.”²⁶ Timberlake’s bluster notwithstanding, Egremont’s confidence in him never fully regained. The secretary would later entrust others with Ostenaco’s return arrangements.

Among those who assembled at the Suffolk Street address to gape at the Cherokees was another of Reynolds’s close friends, the writer Oliver Goldsmith. One day in late June, before Egremont’s edict, Goldsmith queued for over three hours to gain an audience with Ostenaco. When the two finally met, Goldsmith presented a gift to the utsidihi, who duly thanked him with kisses on both cheeks. The kisses transferred ochre all over Goldsmith’s face, which in turn prompted peals of laughter from the surrounding crowd. Goldsmith, a restless soul constantly in search of both edification and personal validation, found the encounter discomfiting. He didn’t like being laughed at. And the heavy makeup of the Cherokee went against his preconceived notion of Native Americans. To him, indigenes of the New World were meant to be simple, humble folks. Ostenaco’s facial decor made him look as vain and superficial as the British.²⁷

Despite his reservations, it was probably Goldsmith who first alerted Reynolds to the possibilities in a meeting with Ostenaco. The novelist and the artist dined together frequently. To Goldsmith, Reynolds was like a brother, and rather too soon Reynolds was to serve as Goldsmith’s executor. To Reynolds, Goldsmith was more complicated. He appreciated Goldsmith’s own close association with Johnson and their similar Toryish views, but he sometimes grew tired of Goldsmith’s relentless insecurity and competitiveness.²⁸

No doubt Reynolds saw that Goldsmith was interested in Ostenaco for what he promised his current literary project. For the last two years Goldsmith had been publishing faux letters in the *Public Ledger* periodical in the voice of a pretended Chinese traveler called Lien Chi Altangi. Each letter took a British building or industry or custom and, through Altangi’s foreign eyes, mocked its more absurd characteristics. This was a common technique in eighteenth-century writing, employed mostly famously in Montesquieu’s *Persian Letters* of 1721. Johnson had used it, in rather more cutting fashion, in his recent *Idler* piece when he posed as a Native American to decry the Seven Years’ War. On imperial politics Goldsmith was not as sharp as Johnson,

though in Letter XVII he had posed Altangi as being perplexed by both the British and the French for waging war over who could have “greater quantities of fur than the other.”²⁹ In meeting Ostenaco, Goldsmith perhaps sought a real-life Altangi to further his modest critique of Britain’s quest for empire.

Though close to some of the wittiest men of his era, Reynolds himself rarely indulged in satire. He was nonetheless clearly taken, like Goldsmith, with the chance to encounter a visiting Native American. No records explain how Reynolds secured Ostenaco’s sittings: his pocketbooks merely state that the “King of the Cherokees” came to his studio on 1 July.³⁰ In the grinding summer of 1762, with the war showing few signs of resolution, Reynolds may have been after a fresh but still serious way to reconfigure this seemingly endless campaign.

Ostenaco was not Reynolds’s first nonwhite sitter. Twice Reynolds had portrayed people of African heritage as additional figures in his paintings of whites. Back when he was twenty-five, before traveling to Rome, Reynolds had painted a white naval lieutenant in Plymouth posed with a black attendant. More recently his 1761 portrait of Keppel’s sister Elizabeth had also included a black servant.³¹ In both depictions the Afro-descended subjects appear beautiful, attractive, and certainly as human as their masters, but, notably, they also take up less space than the whites, they are positioned off to the side, and each has a face upturned in supplication. As neoclassical theory dictated, Reynolds was committed to the idea of universal humanity, but his two initial attempts at portraying nonwhites suggested that universality did not quite mean equality.

With Ostenaco, did Reynolds intend to convey a similarly delicate message? Give a human face to the injustice of imperial incursion but do so in such a way that ruffled no war-mongering feathers? If that was the hope, this time, for some reason, he could not quite pull it off. To the historian what is most remarkable about Reynolds’s portrait of Ostenaco is how its creator ever afterward hid it from view. Reynolds almost always worked to commission or on pieces designed to further his career. The Ostenaco portrait, though, he sold to no one and hung nowhere. For Reynolds to conceal it pointed to a judgment of failure on his part, even while, also intriguing, he did take care to store it.

Knowing the artist’s view on his portrait shapes our reading of it today. We can spot his usual combination of opinions. We note the sure signs to ideal military allyship in the confident bearing of Ostenaco’s stance, in the glinting gorget around his neck, and in the red and gold fabrics gathered about his body. At the same time, we note the subtle countersigns. The subject stares directly at the viewer in an unnerving manner. He holds an ambig-



Figure 10. Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Lady Elizabeth Keppel, 1761. Reproduced with permission from the Woburn Abbey Collection.

uous-looking implement. And his supposed robes of friendship are undeniably crumpled and ill-fitting. But Reynolds's rejection of his work intimates that here combination faltered. Did the artist think that the countersigns worked too powerfully? Were they, to him, too critical of the imperial position?

Possibly the portrait would have still passed muster with Reynolds's audience. His similarly ambivalent Orme, after all, had won over viewers of all stripes. We will never know since Reynolds prevented its reception either way.

It is conceivable that Reynolds put aside the portrait for aesthetic reasons rather than political ones. Like his famous second Keppel portrait, the Ostenaco painting mixes various attempts at what Reynolds called "general nature" with touches of "particular nature." Reynolds decided to omit Ostenaco's attested tattoos and ochre markings in an effort to make his face more universal, and much of the background is rendered as muted clouds in order to suggest any number of interchangeable places. These aspects, though, work alongside a nod to Ostenaco's specific hairstyle, an inclusion of uniquely Native American wampum, and at least some gestures to a mountain range and mountain foliage. Perhaps, then, Reynolds's indictment came instead from judging it too unstable in its balance of neoclassical principle and contemporary grounding? Was it too particular, too realist? Was it a rare glimpse into how Ostenaco actually appeared to some of his imperialist hosts, calmly staring down the British contortion to believe that empire was about Burkean liberty rather than Johnsonian theft? Again, a definitive answer is lost.

All we know for certain is that the painting was kept but not shown. Reynolds did credit it sufficiently to give it a title: *Scyacust Ukah*, a muddled, aurally impaired rendition of "skiagusta Ostenaca."³² But no one else was granted access enough to offer an opinion on its meaning. Storing the work indicated that Reynolds sought to remember only his own opinion, at some future date, when he might use it to ensure a later, more palatable depiction of how Indigenous people faced the British empire.

What Ostenaco made of sitting for a phiz monger is likewise hard to nail. No direct evidence survives. He could not draw on Indigenous practices of portrait painting since none existed in Cherokee culture. Paint was important in eighteenth-century Cherokee society, but as a substance to put onto faces rather than as one to represent them. In fact, an entire clan within the seven-clan kinship system in the era was devoted to paint. The Ani-Wodi, or Paint Clan, was responsible for creating the red ointment used by warriors when they set off for battle. Ostenaco would have commonly worn the Ani-Wodi's ochre-based paint across his forehead to signify his transition into warrior mode. To keep the markings refreshed, he carried small, hollow clay balls with him during battle, which he could break open to find dried ochre paint inside ready for mixing with water.³³

That said, Ostenaco had seen plenty of European-style portraits before. It had been King George III's portrait, after all, painted by Reynolds's rival Allan Ramsey, that had prompted his trip to Britain. He had also seen portraits adorning the walls of colonial government chambers in both Charleston and Williamsburg. He knew they were always of the most significant leaders in a society, intended also to remind future viewers of those leaders and their values after death. It would have seemed only fitting to Ostenaco that he would also garner a three-quarter length, two-dimensional representation. He was not to know that it never gained an audience.

Ostenaco may have been less thrilled about the rough, multiply reproduced images of him circulating around London during his stay. One of the roughest and most widespread depictions was a triptych of his full figure, heading a cheap broadside called "New Humorous Song on the Cherokee Chiefs." This squib retailed for just sixpence and included titillating verses on how smitten all British maidens were with the Cherokee visitors. The masthead claimed to portray the three Cherokee delegates, but they were all variations on other recent newsprint etchings of Ostenaco.



Figure 11. Masthead of engraving of H. Howard's *A New humorous song . . .*, 1762.
Retrieved from The Library of Congress.



Figure 12. The Three Cherokees, came over from the head of the River Savanna to London, 1762, engraving, London, 1762. © The Trustees of the British Museum.

Another popular image boasted “The Three Cherokees” as well as, lurking in the left margin, “their Interpreter who was poisoned.” This printed engraving included two different plagiarisms of Ostenaco as well as a sketch of “Ye Great Hunter, or Scalpper” (probably Cunne Shote) and a wild approximation of the deceased Shorey.

Not only were these scappier representations clumsy, they didn’t seem to Ostenaco very reverent about leadership or great values. They didn’t hang in frames on governors’ walls but were glued up on print shop windows or clutched in the hands of ordinary people on the street. Their only effect, in Ostenaco’s eyes, was to goad the crowds further in their passion to follow his party wherever it went. The Cherokees were growing tired of the impositions of celebrity.

Fortunately one other portrait from the envoy rose to meet official standards. Around the same time as Ostenaco sat for Reynolds, Cunne Shote sat for a much younger, aspiring artist, Francis Parsons. Parsons was a relative unknown in London art circles in 1762. He ran a studio further out from

Covent Garden. How he came to meet Cunne Shote remains, as in the case of Reynolds meeting Ostenaco, obscure. But his rendition did gain an elite viewership. He would show his Cherokee portrayal at the Society of Artists' exhibition of 1763, even while Reynolds continued to hide *Scyacust Ukah*.

In contrast to Reynolds's complex work, Parsons's portrait was a fairly straightforward take on noble savagery. Cunne Shote, rumored to be a sharp scalper, stands front-facing and bears a sizable knife. The blade's dramatically pointy tip, together with the shine of the British gorget, armband, and medallions, attracts the most attention. This is just as well since the facial expression on the subject is fiercely bland, conveying martial focus but little else. Here, simply, was a weapon in human form, safely swathed in the colors



Figure 13. Francis Parsons, *Cunne Shote Cherokee Chief*, 1762. Reproduced with permission from the Gilcrease Museum, Tulsa, Oklahoma, acc. no. 0176.1015.



Figure 27. Joshua Reynolds, pencil sketch of Mai, 1775. Reproduced with permission from the National Library of Australia, nla.pic-an5600097.

exercise in correction. It concludes not as a stereotype of a New World Savage but as a conglomeration of a wide range of stereotypes. The effect is so unusual that it avoids, mostly, all sense of cliché or parody.

Was it a success? It is hard to say definitively. For sure, Reynolds thought it more successful than his depiction of Ostenaco. He selected it to be one of the thirteen works he sent into the annual Royal Academy exhibition the following spring. He also hung it up for client viewing in his studio until his death.

But some questions lingered. On the issue of human sameness the portrait is not transparent. In an effort to get around the problem created in *Scyacust*



Figure 28. Joshua Reynolds, oil sketch of Mai, 1775. Reproduced with permission from the Yale University Art Gallery. Gift of the Associates in Fine Arts.

Ukah by Ostenaco's unnerving stare, Reynolds ensures Mai's gaze assumes the same look as those of all his other nonwhite subjects: out and away from the viewer. The effect seems to compound rather than clarify the sense of confusion. Does Mai's self-effacement tip the sense of a conglomeration of types over into, in fact, chaos?⁴⁸

On the issue of Britain's imperial status, Reynolds perhaps did better. He didn't simply rectify the whiff of Johnsonian skepticism in the Ostenaco portrait with a bit more Burkean defense. Instead, the Mai portrait, with its excess of idealization, distracts the viewer from thinking about the conflicting