

More Than a Gathering Place

Between 1703 and 1717 a series of portraits was painted in England that gave a signature identification to the Kit Kat Club and its members, which survives to this day. A portrait of each member of the Club was commissioned by the Duke of Somerset and they were presented to Jacob Tonson, publisher and Secretary of the Club during these years.

The painter was Godfrey Kneller, the foremost portrait painter in England between 1682 and 1723 and a member of the Kit Kat Club.

This essay will first address the history of the paintings and will then focus on Kneller who managed to achieve fame and fortune while negotiating the shoals of that turbulent period, which covers the Restoration through the Glorious Revolution and on into the Hanoverian reign, a period from 1676 when Kneller first came to England from Germany until his death in 1723.

In 1703 Jacob Tonson added a room to his house where the Club met at Barn Elms, London. Kneller's pictures measured 36" X 28" and were designed to hang on the walls in two rows. There was one exception to the rule of one portrait per member, because the Duke of Newcastle and his brother in law, the 7th Earl of Lincoln were pictured together in a larger painting that was designed to hang over the chimney-piece at Barn Elms. This picture is special for another reason. It is the only portrait that displays an example of the famous Kit Kat toasting glass. The earlier meetings of the Kit Kat Club and its possible predecessor, Order of the

Toast, were always understatedly described as “convivial “ with the invoice usually including a not insubstantial charge for broken glass.

Several sources refer to these dinners as a “ gathering place “. Given the men involved, their titles, and their influence on and their shaping of England, during the historic transition period of the forty years from the 1680’s to the 1720’s, it was more than a gathering place by any measure: the membership consisted of nine Dukes; nineteen other noblemen including politicians and soldiers; seven writers, and eight diplomats, country squires and gentlemen at large. They were, of course, all Whigs.

The size of the paintings differed from previous portrait sizes and allowed the painter to display head, shoulders and one or two hands in a short half-length. The sitter was turned to the left or right. The phrase Kit Kat became standard in describing future portraits of this size.

In 1725 John Faber Jr. engraved and published a complete set of Kit Kat pictures, thus assuring their continuing fame. He dedicated the engravings to Charles, Duke of Somerset. The dedication begins “ As this collection of prints owes its very being to your Grace’s liberality, in setting the example to the members of the Kit Kat Club of honoring Mr. Tonson with their pictures “.

In 1736 Jacob Tonson died and the paintings passed down through his family until 1944, when they were presented to the Nation by the National Art Collection fund. The portraits now hang in galleries created in a

partnership between the National Portrait Gallery and the National Trust at Beningbrough Hall in Yorkshire.

An account in Sir Richard Phillips's *A Morning's Walk from London to Kew*, published in London in 1820 gives a flavor of the Kit Kat meeting room. He found the ruins of the old gallery at Barn Elms while out walking and wrote: " here I found the Kit Kat room nearly as it existed in its glory. It is eighteen feet high and forty feet long by twenty wide. The mouldings and ornaments were in the most superb fashion of its age: but the whole was falling to pieces because of dry rot.

My attention was chiefly attracted by the faded cloth hanging on the room, whose red color once set off the famous portraits of the club, that hung around it. Their marks and sizes were still visible, and the numbers remained as written in chalk for the guidance of the hanger I read their names aloud "

I need to thank the archives department of the National Portrait Gallery in London for all their help and enthusiasm – apparently the archives department doesn't receive many inquiries from Americans regarding either the Kit Kat Club or the portraits. One of my objectives was to obtain copies of the prints. This turned out to be quite complicated since the files were not consolidated and there were many archive rules to be followed. The resultant process for obtaining copies included the archives department searching the files and bringing them to a central place with a copy machine, and an English friend who probably wished he hadn't answered the phone. We were all saved at the last minute when the archives department, in searching the files, discovered a misplaced brochure on the

portraits which includes copies of each portrait identifying the member. There is also a narrative which may well have come from a Miss Mary Ransome. There are some copies of the brochure up here if anyone is interested.

Researching the portraits led me directly to Godfrey Kneller. Kneller was the leading portrait painter of his time in England, having succeeded Peter Lely as Principal painter of the monarchy in 1682. He was the Principal painter for all subsequent monarchies until his death in 1723. At his best, he rivaled his predecessors Van Dyke and Lely and influenced the English artists William Hogarth and James Thornhill. Kneller painted the English monarchs from Charles II through George I AND a young Prince of Wales who would become George II. In all he painted ten monarchs. He was knighted by William III in 1682, received the title of Knight of the Holy Roman Empire in 1698, and was made a baronet by George I in 1715.

He converted his artistic abilities, timing, luck and connections into wealth and fame. His court favor and his general fame were large. Poets and writers who became part of his circle of friends lavished praise on him in their works, which did nothing to reduce an outsized ego that most of his friends seemed to accept as part of his “ package “. While not a politician, he seemed to have immense political skills in that he could balance Protestants and Catholics; Whigs and Tories; literary and trade; and royalty and commoners. His studio was a social gathering point where all willingly met for food, drink and conversation; and they came together, best of all, to praise Kneller as he and his assistants produced portraits almost in assembly line

fashion. His studio was, in fact, the place to be during this period of turmoil. More on this later.

Kneller must be viewed in two contexts in order to place his achievements in perspective.

First, the historical context of England from 1676, when he arrived, until his death. It was not a time for the faint of heart. It began with the restoration of Charles II following the death of Cromwell, with Charles returning to England from exile in the court of Louis XIV, his cousin. After Charles's death in 1685 his brother James ascended to the throne. James is best known for his belief in absolute monarchy and his attempts to restore tolerance for Catholics which he confirmed by naming Catholics to many of the highest positions in the Kingdom. This threatened the legal supremacy of the Church of England. Both of these ideas were opposed by Parliament and most of his subjects. This tension resulted in a struggle for supremacy between Parliament and the crown. Within three years he was ousted and the Glorious Revolution replaced him with his Protestant daughter Mary II and her Netherlandish husband William III. Upon William's death in 1702 (preceded by Mary), Anne, also a Protestant daughter of James II, became Queen. The death of her surviving child, the Prince of Wales, renewed fears of the throne returning to the Catholic Stuarts and resulted in the passage of the Settlement Act of 1701, making Sophia of Hanover, a granddaughter of James I and a Protestant, the heir to the throne upon Anne's death. Since she preceded Anne in death her son George, Elector of Hanover became George I of England when Anne died in 1714.

The events of this period established the government base upon which modern England and the British Empire were built. It was a time of political and religious turmoil, wars, both home and abroad, and general uncertainty. The dramatic changes of the period which influenced the future included the following:

- 1. The rise of identifiable political parties.**
- 2. The end of absolute rule of the monarchy.**
- 3. Parliament became the governing authority and controller of the purse strings.**
- 4. No monarch could be Catholic and Catholics were banned from Parliament.**
- 5. The role of Prime Minister began to evolve. Robert Walpole, 1st Earl of Orford and a Kit Kat member, was the first to fill that role.**
- 6. The end of France's role in influencing internal affairs in England.**

The second context was the world of portrait painting in England. Starting with Rubens in the early 1600s and continuing with Anthony Van Dyke, Peter Lely and Godfrey Kneller, foreign born artists were the Principal court painters. English artists served as assistants to these men and they filled in the background, sketched and completed paintings. It was not until Kneller's death that the Englishmen James Thornhill and William Hogarth assumed leadership of English painting, never to be relinquished to foreigners again.

Now to follow this remarkable man, Godfrey Kneller, in his rise to become the leading painter in England for over forty years.

Gottfried Kniller was born of an ancient family in the Hanseatic town of Lubeck in the duchy of Holstein on the 8th of August, 1646. His family first intended for him to enter the army and around 1660, as Charles II was returning to the throne in England, he was sent to the University of Leiden to study mathematics and fortifications. Consistent in character, in his later life in England he would remind his friends of this, indicating that the art world's gain of a brilliant artist was offset by the military's loss of a brilliant general.

During the 1660's his interests transitioned from the military to art, based, perhaps, on his exposure to the vibrant art occurring in The Lowlands. He was able to convince his father to agree to the change and in the year, 1668, or thereabouts he went to Amsterdam to study under Ferdinand Bol, the pupil of Rembrandt. There was an overlap of some three years for Rembrandt and Kneller and it is assumed that there was some level of contact because of Bol – Kneller does, apparently, refer to having received advice from Rembrandt. One source believes Kneller benefited from Rembrandt's influence and cites Rembrandt's *Portrait of the Artist* in the National Gallery in London as being a forerunner of the Kit Kat pose, head, shoulders and one hand in a short half-length, with the sitter turned to the right side.

Kneller returned to Lubeck where he continued painting. It was during this time that the Italian masters were becoming more popular throughout Europe. Demonstrating his lifelong instinct for career enhancing moves, sometime between 1670 and 1672 Kneller left for Rome. In Rome he first studied architecture under Giovanni Bernini, improving his abilities in design and proportion.

He then transferred to the studio of portrait painter Carlo Marrati (or Maratta) who had studied under Andrea Sacchi who trained him in the school and tradition of Raphael. Maratta was recognized as a master and he was a leading painter in Rome when Kneller entered his studio. He was patronized by Pope Alexander VII and Pope Clement XI. Perhaps more importantly he became Court painter for Louie XIV – which is another Kneller link to the English Stuarts.

After a year or more, Kneller moved to Venice to paint and to continue his studies in the Venice School. His talent for finding an influential party and leveraging his success through their patronage came to the fore in Venice. He became an immediate success painting portraits and historical pictures and was soon patronized by the Garstoni family who introduced him to Cardinal Bassadona whose portrait he painted. This was such a success that a copy was commissioned, and on completion was sent to the Vatican, where it still hung in the late 1940's. Based on recommendations from the Garstonis, other influential Venetian families also became patrons of Kneller. In Venice he received word that his father was ill so returned to Hamburg, near Lubeck, where he became a popular portrait painter.

All of this is background for what was to come in England. He was a talented painter who honed these talents in the major art centers of the day – the Flemish and Dutch School and the centers of Italian art – Rome and Venice. In England he confirmed his lifelong genius at finding patrons and influential friends and using that network and those relationships to achieve success. What will also be demonstrated in England is a propensity for luck and timing and a sense of survival.

This is displayed immediately when Kneller decides to visit England prior to returning to Italy. His father died in April 1675, and his principal patron in Hamburg gave him a letter of introduction to Jonathan Banks, a wealthy Hamburg merchant in London. In late 1675 or early 1676 Kneller, accompanied by his brother John Zachery Kneller, a minor painter, left for England by way of France.

Just a brief background on the England Kneller entered. Charles II, brought the customs and frills of the French Court to England, including the re-opening of theatres. John Dryden, a Catholic, was the leading literary figure of this period which was experiencing a blossoming of art and literature. London was still recovering from the 1666 Fire and Christopher Wren, ultimately a close friend of Kneller's (not surprisingly, they shared a friendship with Bernini of Rome) was erecting 54 churches throughout London while preparing the drawings for the new St. Paul's. There was constant tension and intrigue between the Stuarts and Parliament relating to, among other things, restoring or favoring Catholicism, funding of the monarchy, authority of Parliament and whether James II (brother of Charles) or the Duke of Monmouth (the illegitimate son of Charles)

was the rightful heir to the throne. Against this background, the rise of political parties began with the Whigs and the Tories emerging as opponents.

Along came Kneller in 1676 with his letter of introduction, speaking no English and wanting to polish his reputation as a portrait painter by studying Van Dyke. As will be seen this letter of introduction opened the door to the important relationships needed for success. His rise began when he painted portraits of the Banks family while he stayed at the home of Jonathan Banks. James Vernon, who later was the Secretary of State for William III, was a friend of Banks and visited often. Vernon asked Kneller to paint his portrait and was delighted with the result. As it happens, Vernon was also secretary to the Duke of Monmouth – you can guess where this is headed. Monmouth was impressed with Vernon's portrait and in 1679 sat for his own portrait. In the meantime, with other commissions coming in, Kneller decided that England might, in fact, be the place to make his fortune, so all plans to return to Venice were scrapped and he moved to a large house in Covent Garden, where he lived until 1702. Monmouth was so pleased with his portrait that he told his father, Charles II, about it, and guess who sat for Kneller at the end of 1679. At the time Peter Lely, the King's Principal painter, was commissioned to paint a new state portrait of Charles and Kneller was invited to come to Whitehall to paint the King as well in what had all the appearances of a bake off. Lely at the time was 61. Kneller finished his portrait before Lely had covered his canvas with the basic pigment. The King was impressed with both the speed and the quality of the portrait.

Within six years of arriving in England Kneller was named Principal court painter, a remarkable achievement. While he mostly achieved this based on his superior artistic ability his pathway was made easier by virtue of several events that resulted in the elimination of potential rivals, quite possibly through divine intervention. In November of 1680 Lely unexpectedly died at 62 at his easel while painting the portrait of the Duchess of Somerset. Ironically, John Greenhill, Lely's most promising pupil and a logical successor, had recently died of alcoholism. Gerard Soest, another leading portrait painter fortuitously died in 1681. His pupil, John Riley, a popular portrait painter and another potential rival of Kneller's had painted a portrait of Charles II during this period and received this verdict from the King ("Is this like me? Then odds fish I am an ugly fellow") – exit John Riley stage right leaving Kneller the only one standing. It gets better. Riley continued to be a popular painter and, in fact, in 1689 was named Joint Principal court painter along with Kneller by William III -- only to die, on cue, shortly thereafter, again leaving Kneller unchallenged.

In 1685 Kneller was sent to France to paint Louie XIV, who was then at the height of his powers. By the time Kneller returned, Charles had died and the throne had passed to James II. Monmouth invaded England, was captured, and beheaded. Amazingly, despite his close relationship with Monmouth, Kneller survived and remained Principal court painter. The tension between James and Parliament mentioned previously reached a point of no return resulting in the "Glorious Revolution." In 1688 William invaded England at Tobray, defeating James and resulting in the elevation of William and Mary to the throne in 1689. Ironically, Kneller was painting a

portrait of James II as a gift for the Catholic Samuel Pepys when news came of William's landing in England. Upon his defeat, James fled to France. He later invaded Ireland where he was eventually defeated at the battle of Boyne in 1690 and returned to France and the protection of Louis XIV his cousin.

As William settled in, Kneller found himself remaining in favor, painting John Churchill as well as other victorious generals. He painted Wren who was President of the Royal Society. His survival as Principal painter to the Protestant monarchy after serving two Catholic Kings seems to rest, at least partially, on his artistic ability, total disengagement from politics, AND his avowed atheism. In truth, he seems to have been particularly adroit at politics. Contrast this with John Dryden, who was removed from the position of Poet Laureate because he was Catholic and had been appointed by James.

It was at this time that Kneller was commissioned to paint the famous *Hampton Court Beauties*, twelve portraits including Mary II and her attendants. These were full length portraits as opposed to the seated ladies in Lely's *Windsor Court Beauties*. Lord Lansdowne, who knew all the ladies, immortalized the paintings in his *Progress of Poetry*. It was not the last time poets were to laud Kneller.

Kneller was knighted at the age of 45 in 1692 (Peter Lely had to wait a lifetime) and William presented him with the chain and medal bearing the King's head -- which appears in ALL Kneller's self portraits after this date as you might expect. He is described as "Principal Portrait Painter in Ordinary to the King". In 1698 Count

Wratistan, Emperor Leopold's Ambassador to England conferred on Kneller the dignity of Nobleman and the title of Knight of the Holy Roman Empire. In 1697 Kneller painted Peter the Great on his only visit to England.

The reign of William and Mary marks the emergence of Parliament as the governing authority. The Revolutionary Settlement established the sovereignty of Parliament over the rule of the monarchy. In the later period of his reign, after Mary died, Parliament forced William to replace his Dutch army with an English army. After the death of Anne's only surviving child, the Prince of Wales, The Act of Settlement was passed removing any chance of the monarchy returning to the Catholic Stuarts. This set the stage for tensions between the Jacobites and the supporters of the Hanoverians throughout the first half of the eighteenth century and resulted in the unsuccessful revolts of the Jacobites in 1715, 1718 and 1745.

Anne assumed the throne upon the death of William in 1702 and Kneller continued as the Principal painter of the Court. In 1702, because of the need for more space relating to the success of his studio he moved his London home from Covent Garden to Great Queen Street. In 1703 Kneller married Susannah Graves, a widow. During his lifetime she appears to have remained in the background running his households. In that same year he painted the Emperor of the Holy Roman Empire Charles VI, and he began painting the Kit Kat portraits. From 1702 to 1713, as part of the Grand Alliance, England was involved in the War of the Spanish Succession preventing Louis XIV from dominating Spain. It was during this war that Churchill became a hero with victories such as Blenheim. In 1709 Kneller

acquired a house in Twickenham, in West London, as a country home. He had the house torn down and his friend Christopher Wren designed a new house that was to serve as a studio as well. This was eventually named Kneller Hall upon his death. The house now serves as the Royal Military School of Music. In 1711, Kneller became the Director of the first Academy of Painting in London. This academy did not last and it was left to Sir Joshua Reynolds to found the Royal Academy later in the eighteenth century.

In 1714 Anne died and George, Elector of Hanover, succeeded to the English throne as George I. In 1715 Kneller was made a baronet by the King. During George's reign the powers of the monarchy continued to diminish as the modern system of parliamentary government led by a Prime Minister developed. Louis XIV died in the same year. Kneller continued with the Kit Kat portraits and began a series of portraits of prominent Admirals. During this period his studio continued to turn out volumes of portraits. He remained industrious until the end dying of a fever in November of 1723. He was buried in Twickenham.

Who was this man who painted ten monarchs and served as principal painter to the court for over 40 years; who rose to be a man of wealth and influence respected and sought out by aristocrat and commoner alike? His studio and home appears to have been the primary meeting place during this turbulent period. In fact, what he provided was a haven and refuge from the political and religious storms. His studio was also more than a gathering place.

There was no question of his vanity – that was acknowledged by his friends. Even Dame Edith Sitwell, from her lofty perch in the 20th century , piled on by referring to him as the “vain and acquisitive Kneller.” But he was also witty and would plead for praise and flattery from his friends while painting. He could be self deprecating if it served him and only if he originated the joke. He also seemed to be able to form close personal relationships with all these diverse people. He steered clear of political discussions and, as an atheist rose above religious differences. In truth, in the best traditions of the Kit Kat Club he was a Master of conviviality when it was needed as well as a masterful performer.

Quoting one source “ While he was boastful, vain and conceited he was also consistently witty which made him good company since all the wits, literary and nobility constantly flocked to his studio where, while he was drawing and painting, he would urge them to flatter him since it encouraged him artistically.” It was a participatory environment since observers in the studio were encouraged to comment on the sitters and the art. The fact that the wine flowed and the food never gave out also helped. His friends competed in their praise and gifts.

He was the darling of literary circles, especially the many poets who wrote about him constantly. Lines like “ live and die the Monarch of the art” and “Thou Kneller long with noble pride” were typical. His death occasioned a poem with an introduction and 20 verses. In fact, over time these poet friends produced a small body of work lauding Kneller.

To quote another observation “ So Godfrey Kneller lived with and through the literary world from catholic John Dryden to catholic Alexander Pope, holding in his studio and drawing room the balance of power as perhaps only an atheist and foreigner could do amid the bitter factions which arose through the new successions to the monarchy”.

He fed off of this environment. “ Painters of history, he observed, “make the dead live, and do not begin to live themselves till they are dead. I paint the living and they make me live”. And certainly they did. He lived in magnificent style and died leaving an estate worth £2,000 per year. Not only did he paint 10 monarchs (some many times – they would actually come to his studio to be painted) but, in addition, he painted all the stars in the universe – Dryden, Wren, John Locke, Pepys, Pope, Isaac Newton, the Kit Kat members and others.

What drove him was the desire for commercial success and to continue as the leading portrait painter – commissions were never turned down. He established the operation of his workshop studio with this in mind. There was a large team of specialized assistants, many of them foreign, organized for the mass production of fashionable portraits. Sitters were required to pose only for a drawing of the face, and efficient formulas were worked out for the accessories. He is said to have been able to accommodate as many as 14 sitters in a day. The average portrait turned out by his studio in this way was slick and mechanical (the heavy wigs then fashionable made for great monotony in male portraits). The same garments were used over and over by the substitute sitters. A portrait might be finished in two or three days.

Kneller was capable of work of much higher quality when he had a sitter of sufficient stature. He then spent a great deal of his time sketching and painting the subject's face not only to ensure the quality but to convey to that sitter their particular importance and status. This quality shows in his more famous paintings such as the monarchs, the Beauties and the Kit Kat portraits. At those times he was the equal of Van Dyke or Lely.

What he also created was an effective business model that was hard to compete with. The famous received quality work and their presence and Kneller's fame was an attraction that reduced the impact of lower quality work and kept the majority coming. He also kept his prices constant throughout the period.

As Horace Walpole wrote later, in the age of Hogarth and Reynolds, " Had he lived in a country where his works had been rewarded accordingly to the worth of his production instead of the number, he might have shown in the role of the greatest master – Where he offered one picture to fame, he sacrificed twenty to lucre."

Alexander Pope's narrative of his visit to his friend Kneller two days before his death bears witness to the indomitable spirit of Kneller. Pope wrote " I paid Sir Godfrey Kneller a visit but two days before he died; I think I never saw a scene of so much vanity in my life. He was lying in bed and contemplating the plan he had made for his own monument. He said he would not want to be buried with the rascals at Westminster Abbey. A memorial there would be sufficient and directed me to

write an epitaph for it. I did so afterwards and I think it is the worst thing I wrote in my life.”

In his will Kneller left £300 for his own memorial and though he was not buried in Westminster Abbey a monument by Rysback was erected to him there. It includes his bust and a profile of Lady Kneller on a medallion and is placed very high on the North wall of the choir behind the stalls. Underneath is Pope’s epitaph referring to Kneller’s “brave Thirst of Praise” and also borrowing from Raphael’s epitaph. He is the only painter who is commemorated in Westminster Abbey.

He is said to have produced between 5,000 and 6,000 pictures over his career. At his death there were 800 pictures being finished in his studio. The English portrait painters that followed included James Thornhill, William Hogarth, George Romney, Sir Joshua Reynolds, Thomas Gainsborough and Sir Thomas Lawrence. When compared to these masters and in light of the large number of average portraits produced by his studio Kneller’s stature as an artist was reduced over time despite the many quality portraits he had painted. Even his outsized personality and energy could not prevent this from happening once he had died.

But in his own words his goal was to live now. And that he did – in full measure.

