

EMMA  
HAMILTON  
DANCING



### EMMA HAMILTON DANCING

The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University

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Curated by John Cooper, Clare-Mellon Fellow

in the History of Art, Yale University

On 15 April 1801 news reached the Piccadilly residence of Sir William Hamilton of the glorious defeat of the Danish navy at Copenhagen by his wife's lover, Vice Admiral Horatio Nelson. Before an audience of aristocrats, actors, and previous lovers, Emma Hamilton began to dance the tarantella. "Sir William began it with her," wrote Nathaniel Wraxall, 1st Baronet, "and maintained the conflict, for such it might well be esteemed, during some minutes." Tired out, the septuagenarian was succeeded by the Duke de Nöia, a Neapolitan aristocrat, "but he, too, though nearly forty years younger than Sir William, soon gave in from extenuation." Lady Hamilton next summoned her maid, who presently retired from exhaustion. Still dancing, she called upon

Plate VI from Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg, *Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature at Naples* (London, 1797)

“a Copt, perfectly black, whom Lord Nelson had presented her on his return from Egypt,” and finished the dance with her. She sang, played castanets, and beat a *tambour de basque*. She reminded Wraxall of a Spanish dancer, an Indian dancer, a Delphic priestess. She entered into a “state of dissolution,” “overcome by the inspiration of Apollo.” She was like Semele, “as Correggio has painted her, after her interviews with Jove.”

On this night in London in 1801 Emma Hamilton was thirty-five. She was married to an aristocratic former ambassador and art collector, and she was the mistress of a glorious naval commander. Eighteen years previous, in 1783, she had been trafficked from England, where she had been kept by Charles Francis Greville, to Naples, where she married Greville’s uncle, the widower Sir William Hamilton. Her victory tarantella was performed seven years after the publication of engravings showing the series of expressive postures that came to be known as Hamilton’s “Attitudes.” And it was six years before the publication in 1807 of a new, satirical version of these Attitudes showing her drastically enlarged; two years before the death of her husband; four years before Nelson’s death at the Battle of Trafalgar; and fourteen years before her own obscure, penurious death in Calais, aged forty-nine.

Plate IV from Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg, *Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature at Naples* (Rome, 1794)





In an era of widespread social change and revolution in France, America, and Naples, the dancing of Emma Hamilton and her posing in attitudes provoked the cultural elite of Europe to strong and conflicted reactions. She was on the one hand a person of exquisite classical grace. Her Attitudes charmed poets and diplomats. “She lets down her hair,” wrote Goethe in 1787, “and, with a few shawls, gives so much variety to her poses, gestures, expressions [...] that the spectator can hardly believe his eyes.” On the other hand she was a gross embarrassment whose size and vulgarity the nobility scoffed at. She “is without exception,” sneered the 1st Earl of Malmesbury, “the most coarse, ill-mannered, disagreeable woman I ever met with.”

Biographers have claimed that Emma Hamilton first modeled provocative attitudes on the premises of Dr James Graham’s Temple of Aesculapius, or Health, which contained a Celestial Bed that childless couples could rent, and whose function was as thinly veiled as Hamilton probably was. In 1791 Thomas Rowlandson produced a cartoon showing Emma Hamilton performing attitudes in the Royal Academy life classes, stoking rumors of her having modeled there earlier in her youth. In London and Naples she modeled for George Romney, Angelica Kauffman, Thomas Lawrence, Joshua Reynolds, Benjamin West, and Élisabeth Louise Vigée Le Brun. In the studio she performed the roles of a bacchante, Nature, Medea, the Virgin, Sensibility, Miranda, Cassandra, and Alope among others. She was born into the lower class but spent most of her life among aristocrats.

Thomas Cheesman after George Romney, *The Seamstress*



Groomed first by Charles Greville, then by his uncle Sir William Hamilton in Naples, Emma Hamilton learned to read, write, sing, and dance.

It was in Naples that she learned, in particular, to dance the tarantella. “This dance,” wrote the theorist and dancing master Carlo Blasis, “is generally supposed to have derived its name from the Tarantella, a venomous spider of Sicily.” He continued: “those who have the misfortune to be bitten by it cannot escape dissolution but by a violent perspiration, which forces the poison out of the body through the pores.” Perhaps Blasis took this zoological explanation seriously. It is more likely, looking at images and his own voluptuous descriptions of the tarantella, that he understood that the “spider’s bite” was love, that its ecstasy was witnessed in public, and that the only way to sweat it out was to dance. It was in the act of dancing the tarantella that Thomas [Tommaso] Piroli, after Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg, depicted Emma Hamilton in the sixth plate of *Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature at Naples*, which Sir William Hamilton had published in Rome in 1794. Other editions followed, including a London publication as early as 1797.

This document is the first of its kind. It shows Emma Hamilton wrapped in shawls supported by a chair or steps, or with a child or antique vase, striking what came to be known as her Attitudes. There are twelve plates, each framed with a simple border, printed

Gaetano Dura, *Tarantella*

(in the Lewis Walpole Library copy of the 1797 London edition) on terracotta-colored paper. Goethe, who was the first to describe Hamilton's Attitudes in detail in 1787, wrote that a spectator of the Attitudes in Naples saw "what thousands of artists would have liked to express realized before him in movements and surprising transformations—standing, kneeling, sitting, reclining, serious, sad, playful, ecstatic, contrite, alluring, threatening, anxious, one pose follows another without a break." Romney's paintings of Emma Hamilton in London had shown the alacrity with which she carried images in her person. Like the ballerinas of the European stage, roles and images passed through her with ephemeral authenticity. She was everything. Horace Walpole put it succinctly: "Sir William Hamilton has actually married his gallery of statues."

The city of Naples in which Emma Hamilton developed her performance was full of attitudes. There were the attitudes of the *Lumpenproletariat*, or *lazzaroni*, posturing on the streets, the macaroni women and all manner of other working and resting women whom foreign men frequently depicted and named in their picturesque descriptions of the city. There were the attitudes of antiquity at Pompeii and Herculaneum, in view of whose ruins European men are often depicted in contemplative poses. There were the attitudes in the royal parks of Caserta, whose dark green ornamental bushes were populated with sculptures of allegorical nymphs, and whose *giardini inglesi*, which Sir William Hamilton himself had helped design, were

Sir William Hamilton, *Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honble. Wm. Hamilton*, vol. 3, plate 83



full of characteristic English botanical specimens. Inside the red and *stufa* gray royal palaces of the Bourbon dynasty, the attitudes of state were exhibited in large schemes of allegorical ceiling paintings showing the triumph and virtues of the Bourbon monarchs, or in the papier-mâché sculptures of gods and muses in the palace theater. In the nearby Piazza Dante, across the skyline of the edifices of Naples, was a series of twenty-six allegorical figures representing the virtues of Carlo III of Bourbon. In the Teatro di San Carlo, which adjoined the *palazzo reale*, there were not only the rococo attitudes of golden, plaster muses and *putti* but also, onstage nightly, the ephemeral attitudes of the great ballerinas of Europe.

Emma Hamilton performed all the time. Her deportment, dancing, and Attitudes, as everyone who wrote about her mentioned, were remarkable. There were some who admired her bearing and saw antiquity in it. “In her,” wrote Goethe, Sir William had “found all the antiquities, all the profiles of Sicilian coins, even the Apollo Belvedere.” Others derided her and were offended by her presence, especially later in her life when her figure changed. “Her person is nothing short of monstrous for its enormity, and is growing every day.” In response to that increase in size, James Gillray produced *A New Edition Considerably enlarged of Attitudes Faithfully copied from Nature and Humbly Dedicated to all admirers of the Grand and Sublime* in 1807. For the first time, this 1807 “enlarged” edition of the

Plate VI from James Gillray, *A New Edition Considerably enlarged of Attitudes Faithfully copied from Nature...*



B.I. *A Single Dance for a Young Lady* P.XVI

*Canary*

X.T. inv.

To my once Honoured Scholar Mademoiselle de Seyssel, Daughter to his Excellency the Marquis D'Aix, Envoy extraordinary from the KING of SARDINIA to the Court of GREAT BRITAIN, in the years 1726, 1727 & 1728. This PLATE is humbly inscrib'd by Her most obliged Servant Kellom Tomlinson.

Attitudes is presented here in a series of contrastive pairings with the 1797 London edition of the original engravings, both in the collection of the Lewis Walpole Library.

When Emma Hamilton danced the tarantella in 1801, she exhausted all the social classes in the household, dancing with a knight, a duke, a white maid, and a black maid. Dancing masters dealt with the whole social body in a like manner, for, according to John Weaver in 1721, “from the Regular or Irregular Positions and Motion of the Body, we distinguish the handsome Presence, and Deportment of the fine Gentleman, from the awkward Behaviour of the unpolish’d Peasant; we discover the graceful Mien of a young Lady, from the ungainly Carriage of her Maid.” Both dancing and striking attitudes revealed class in a particularly acute way. Weaver described dancing itself as “an elegant, and regular Movement, harmonically composed of beautiful Attitudes, and contrasted graceful Postures of the Body, and Parts thereof.” And indeed, both dancing and the striking of attitudes owed much to that other eighteenth-century means of class differentiation — pictures. The dancing master “ought to give his performers, as the painter does his pictures, proper attitudes, that may be regular, agreeable, and justly contrasted by contrary motions, and preserve the body carefully pois’d on its own center.”

Like the great classical ballet dancers of the age—Marie Sallé, La Camargo, and Mademoiselle Parisot—Emma Hamilton passed

Kellom Tomlinson, “A Single Dance for a Young Lady,” in *The Art of Dancing Explained by Reading and Figures*, plate XVI, book one

through the symbolic repertory of class from peasant girl to muse to goddess, wife, and widow. She held different attitudes. And perhaps it was because she spent her whole life performing that she ended it an outcast. The diarist and poet Melesina Trench, having seen the *Attitudes* performed in October 1800, expressed the paradox thus: “It is remarkable that, though coarse and ungraceful in common life, she becomes highly graceful, and even beautiful, during this performance. It is also singular that, in spite of the accuracy of her imitation of the finest ancient draperies, her usual dress is tasteless, vulgar, loaded, and unbecoming.”

Perhaps Hamilton was reviled because she, a lower-class woman, came dangerously close to creating and possessing symbols of power—the postures of antiquity in particular. At the time of the French Revolution in the 1790s, the Bourbon dynasty cracked down on growing radical stirrings in Naples, but in 1799 they boiled over. A French-backed revolutionary force of soldiers, intellectuals, and aristocratic republicans overthrew the Bourbons (who fled to Palermo) and declared the Parthenopean Republic. It was a short-lived revolution, and the King and Queen were reinstated within months. But it showed that the revolutionary Neapolitan world in which Hamilton performed—like that of France and America before it—was perforated by rapid changes of protagonist, power, and attitude. It was not that Emma Hamilton’s *Attitudes* were themselves influential in

changing the attitudes of the state, but that she embodied an impulse of change, a loosening, disruptive, democratizing force that upset conventional ties between people and power.

Emma Hamilton provoked contrastive reactions. She was seen both as the Rehberg and Gillray editions of the *Attitudes* represent her. Horace Walpole called her “Sir W. Hamilton’s pantomime mistress—or wife, who acts all the antique statues in an Indian shawl” and remarked upon the inconsistency that “people are mad about her wonderful expressions, which I do not conceive, so few antique statues having any expression at all—nor being designed to have it.” But Emma Hamilton was designed to have it. And in fact she had this facility with the copious expression of various attitudes from myth, class, and history so excessively that she spilled over the tight neo-classical lines of beauty into two realms that the eighteenth century furnished for such trespassers—satire and debt.

The penury and grace of the dancer in the late eighteenth century is figured across the selection of images exhibited here. The unstable conditions of work in theatrical dancing, the dispersed centers of patronage in Europe, the seasons, the velocity of taste, the destruction of theaters by fire, and bankruptcy—in short, the fluctuations of the market—were all projected on the radically inflated or constricted feet, ankles, legs, bottoms, waists, breasts, shoulders, arms, hands, necks, and heads of performers. They were also projected on



Samuel Alken after Thomas Rowlandson, *A French Family*

James Caldwell after Michel Vincent Brandoin, *The Allemande Dance*

Isaac Cruikshank, *A Peep at the Parisot with Q in the corner!*



the two bodies, one classical, one enlarged, of Emma Hamilton when she danced.

After the death of Nelson in 1805 at the Battle of Trafalgar, Emma Hamilton was denied maintenance by the state, quickly exhausted the income left her by Sir William, and fell heavily into debt and alcoholism. She escaped her London creditors and fled for Calais with her only daughter, by Nelson, Horatia. If she struck attitudes after 1805, they are not recorded. She died in 1815.



James Gillray, *Dido in Despair!*

## SUGGESTED READING

Fraser, Flora. *Beloved Emma: The Life of Emma, Lady Hamilton*. London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1986.

Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von. *Italian Journey, 1786–1788*. Trans. W.H. Auden and Elizabeth Mayer. [New York]: Pantheon Books, 1962.

Holmström, Kirsten Gram. *Monodrama, Attitudes, Tableaux Vivants: Studies on Some Trends of Theatrical Fashion, 1770–1815*. Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1967.

Jenkins, Ian, and Kim Sloan. *Vases and Volcanoes: Sir William Hamilton and His Collection*. London: British Museum Press, 1996.

Sontag, Susan. *The Volcano Lover: A Romance*. New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1992.



James Gillray, *La Walse. Le Bon Genre*

## CHECKLIST

All items are from the collection of the Lewis Walpole Library unless otherwise indicated.

### East Wall: Dancing

George Cruikshank (1792–1878)

*La Belle Assemblée, or Sketches of Characteristic Dancing*

Published August 31, 1817, by S.W. Fores

Etching with hand coloring

20.6 x 56.3 cm, plate mark

817.08.31.01++

William Heath (1794/5–1840)

*Minuet la cour*

Published August 12, 1817, by Thomas Tegg

Etching with stipple and hand coloring

24.8 x 35 cm, plate mark

817.06.06.01+

James Caldwell (1739–1819)

after John Collett (1725?–1780)

*The Cotillion Dance*

Published March 10, 1771, for Robert Sayer and John Smith

Etching and engraving with hand coloring

25.4 x 36.5 cm, plate mark

771.03.10.01+

William Heath (1794/5–1840)

*La Poule*

Published 1827, by Thomas McLean

Etching with hand coloring

26.2 x 37.8 cm, plate mark

827.00.00.18+

James Gillray (1756–1815)

*La Walse. Le Bon Genre*

Published 1810, by Hannah Humphrey

Etching with stipple and hand coloring

24.4 x 31.7 cm, plate mark

810.00.00.09+

James Caldwell (1739–1819)

after Michel Vincent Brandoin (1733–1807)

*The Allemande Dance*

Published March 20, 1772, for John Smith and Robert Sayer

Etching and engraving with hand coloring

25.6 x 36.2 cm, plate mark

772.03.20.01+

### South Wall: Emma Hamilton (*bap.* 1765–1815)

Richard Earlom (1743–1822)

after George Romney (1734–1802)

*Sensibility (Emma Hamilton as Nature)*

Published March 25, 1789, by John and Josiah Boydell

Stipple engraving and etching

37 x 29 cm, trimmed inside plate

Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, B1970.3.338

James Gillray (1756–1815)

*A Cognocenti contemplating the Beauties of the Antique*

Published February 11, 1801, by Hannah Humphrey

Etching with hand coloring

36 x 26 cm, trimmed sheet

801.02.11.01+

Thomas Cheesman (1760–1834/35)  
after George Romney (1734–1802)  
*The Seamstress*  
Published April 25, 1787, by John and Josiah  
Boydell  
Stipple engraving and etching, colored à  
la poupée  
54.5 x 45.3 cm, sheet  
Portraits H217a no. 1++

James Gillray (1756–1815)  
*Dido in Despair!*  
Published February 6, 1801, by Hannah  
Humphrey  
Etching with engraving and stipple with  
hand coloring  
25.2 x 35.8 cm, trimmed sheet  
801.02.06.01+

#### West Wall: The Attitudes

James Gillray (1756–1815)  
Four plates of the parodies from *A New  
Edition Considerably enlarged of Attitudes  
Faithfully copied from Nature...*  
London: Hannah Humphrey, 1807  
Quarto 75 G41 807, plates VIII, VI, II, X  
*Paired with corresponding original plates from*  
Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg (1758–1835)  
*Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature  
at Naples*  
Engraved by Thomas [Tommaso] Piroli  
(1750–1824)  
London: S.W. Fores, 1797  
Quarto 75 R266 797, plates VIII, VI, II, X

#### North Wall: Dancing in and around Europe

Samuel Alken (1756–1815)  
after Thomas Rowlandson (1757–1827)  
*An Italian Family*  
Published December 1785, by Samuel  
Alken  
Aquatint and etching with hand coloring  
38 x 48 cm, trimmed sheet  
785.12.00.01++

Isaac Cruikshank (1764–1811)  
*A Peep at the Parisot with Q in the corner!*  
Published May 7, 1796, by S.W. Fores  
Etching with hand coloring  
27.3 x 39.4 cm, trimmed sheet  
796.05.07.01+

James Gillray (1756–1815)  
*Modern Grace, or the Operatical Finale to  
the Ballet of Alonzo e Caro*  
Published May 5, 1796, by Hannah  
Humphrey  
Etching with hand coloring  
25.8 x 36.4 cm, sheet  
796.05.05.02+

Samuel Alken (1756–1815)  
after Thomas Rowlandson (1757–1827)  
*A French Family*  
Published November 5, 1792, by S.W. Fores  
Aquatint and etching with hand coloring  
38.6 x 49.3 cm, plate mark  
792.11.05.04++

Unknown artist  
*A Formal Ball*  
ca. 1815  
Telescopic peepshow of eight cutout printed  
panels and a backdrop with hand coloring  
14 x 16 cm  
Yale Center for British Art, GV1199 F58

#### Case 1

James Gillray (1756–1815)  
*A New Edition Considerably enlarged of  
Attitudes Faithfully copied from Nature...*  
London: Hannah Humphrey, 1807  
Bound with Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg  
(1758–1835)  
*Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature at  
Naples, 1794*  
Engraved by Thomas (Tommaso) Piroli  
(1750–1824)  
Yale Center for British Art, PN3205.R4 1807+  
Oversize

Richard Payne Knight (1751–1824)  
*An Account of the Remains of the Worship of  
Priapus*  
London: Spilsbury, 1786  
49 2404, frontispiece

Frederick Christian Lewis (1779–1856)  
after J. Arboin  
*A Fandango Dance at Minorca*  
Published November 20, 1803, by William  
Holland  
Etching with hand coloring  
26.8 x 38.1 cm, sheet  
803.11.20.01+

Gaetano Dura (1805–1878)  
*Tarantella*  
ca. 1851  
Color lithograph  
21.3 x 24.7 cm, sheet  
Yale University Art Gallery, Arts of the Book  
Collection Transfer, 2005.131.24

James Godby (fl. 1790–1810)  
after P. van Lerberghi (fl. 1801–1805)  
*Italian Scenery*  
London: Edward Orme, 1806  
Yale Center for British Art, Folio A 2009 11  
Copy 2, plate 6

James Gillray (1756–1815)  
Frontispiece and preface from *A New  
Edition Considerably enlarged of Attitudes  
Faithfully copied from Nature...*  
London: Hannah Humphrey, 1807  
Quarto 75 G41 807

#### Case 2

Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg (1758–1835)  
*Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature  
at Naples*  
Engraved by Thomas [Tommaso] Piroli  
(1750–1824)  
Rome, 1794  
Quarto 75 R266 794, frontispiece

George Murgatroyd Woodward  
(ca. 1760–1809)  
*Durham Mustard too Powerfull for Italian  
Capers, or the Opera in an Uproar, 1807,*  
in *Caricature Magazine*  
London: T. Tegg, 1808–1809  
Folio 75 W87 808, vol. 1, f. 62

Giovanni-Andrea Gallini (1728–1805)  
*Critical Observations on the Art of Dancing*  
London, 1765?  
53 G193B G13, title page

Thomas Wilson (fl. 1800–1839)  
*A Description of the Correct Method of Waltzing*  
London: Sherwood, Neely and Jones, 1816  
Yale Center for British Art, GV1761.W5.1816,  
foldout frontispiece

Kellom Tomlinson (ca. 1693–1754?)  
*The Art of Dancing Explained by Reading and Figures*  
London, 1735  
Yale Center for British Art, MT950.A2 T66  
1735+ oversize, plate XVI, book one

John Weaver (1673–1760)  
*Anatomical and Mechanical Lectures upon Dancing*  
London: J. Brotherton, 1721  
Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library,  
NLx20 721w

Unknown printmaker after J.B. Gearing  
*Elegant Attitudes for Fugel Men*  
Published February 13, 1804, by S.W. Fores  
Etching with hand coloring  
41.3 x 30.3 cm, plate mark  
804.02.13.01+

Unknown printmaker  
*Rostral Extravaganzas*  
Published December 3, 1788  
Etching with drypoint and hand coloring  
22.9 x 35 cm, plate mark  
788.12.03.02 impression 2

### Case 3

Sir William Hamilton (1731–1803)  
*Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honble. Wm. Hamilton*  
Naples: F. Morelli, 1766–1767  
Folio 715 H18 766, vol. 2, plate 22

Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg (1758–1835)  
*Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature at Naples*  
Engraved by Thomas [Tommaso] Piroli (1750–1824)  
Rome, 1794  
Yale Center for British Art, Folio AP1,  
copy 2, plate 6

Carlo Blasis (1795–1878)  
*Code of Terpsichore: the art of dancing, comprising its theory and practice, and a history of its rise and progress, from the earliest times*, translated by R. Barton  
London: E. Bull, 1830  
Watkinson Library, Trinity College,  
GV1590.B57 1830

Carlo Blasis (1795–1878)  
*Manuel complet de la danse*  
Paris: L. Laget, 1980. Reprint; originally published Paris, 1830  
Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University,  
GV1590 B644 1830a

Sir William Hamilton (1731–1803)  
*Collection of Etruscan, Greek, and Roman Antiquities from the Cabinet of the Honble. Wm. Hamilton*  
Naples: F. Morelli, 1766–1767  
Folio 715 H18 766, vol. 3, plate 83

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