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

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
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 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.
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**


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 36.3 cm, plate mark
$817.08.31.01++

William Heath (1794–1840)
Minuet la cour
Published August 12, 1817, by Thomas Tegg
Etching with stipple and hand coloring
24.8 x 35 cm, plate mark
$817.06.06.04+

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+

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+

All items are from the collection of the Lewis Walpole Library unless otherwise indicated.
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 H27a 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 35.5 cm, trimmed sheet
50.02.06.01+

**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
38.4 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 Operatival 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 Fandango Dance at Minorca
Published November 5, 1792, by S.W. Fores
Aquatint and etching with hand coloring
38.0 x 49.3 cm, plate mark
792.11.05.04++

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

Frederick [Friedrich] Rehberg (1758–1835)
Drawings Faithfully copied from Nature at Naples
Published November 5, 1792, by S.W. Fores
Aquatint and etching with hand coloring
38.0 x 49.3 cm, plate mark
792.11.05.04++

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 G4 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 Ra66 797, plates VIII, VI, II, X

**Unknown artist**

A Formal Ball
cia 815
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+

**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 R66 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
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

Carlo Blasis (1795–1878)
Codex 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, GV1590.857 1830
Sterling Memorial Library, Yale University, GV1590 B644 1830

Carlo Blasis (1795–1878)
Manuel complet de la danse
Paris: L. Laget, 1850. Reprint; originally published Paris, 1830

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

Giovanni-Andrea Gallini (1728–1805)
Critical Observations on the Art of Dancing
London, 1767?
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, MT1950.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, NL220 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
804.02.13.04+

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

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