

## SIR JOHN MEDINA'S PORTRAITS OF THE SURGEONS OF EDINBURGH

by

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*Dedicated to Peter Murray with affection and respect*

### SUMMARY

THE SET OF oval portraits of members of the old Incorporation of Surgeons which hangs in the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh was painted by Sir John Medina some time between about 1695 and 1710. Consideration of the general affairs of the Surgeons of Edinburgh in the late seventeenth century, and comparison with similar collections elsewhere suggests that these portraits were probably commissioned to mark the opening in 1697 of the New Hall and Anatomical Theatre, and are most unusual in constituting, like Kneller's more famous Kit-cat series, an extensive set painted to be hung together as a set, and all painted from life. Viewed from a sociological angle they testify to the surgeons' quest for improved status within the medical profession. Stylistic analysis suggests that the portraits may not all be by the same hand, while scrutiny of the inscriptions which they bear provides some clues to their chronology.

### INTRODUCTION

In 1721 the English antiquary, George Vertue, sorted and arranged some of his notes on artists who had worked in Britain. Among them was the Spanish-born painter, Sir John Medina, who had settled in Edinburgh at a date of which Vertue was uncertain. Scrupulous as ever, Vertue left a gap in his notes, hoping he would be able to fill it in later in the light of further information. Still, he was able to give a reasonably adequate summary of Medina's activity in Scotland, and in particular he referred to "The Picture(s) in the Surgeons Hall there of the present Professors, . . . excellently Done, where is his own picture, tis the best Collection of heads done by him . . .".<sup>1</sup> This set of oval bust-length portraits of members of the old Incorporation of Surgeons still hangs in the Royal College of Surgeons in Edinburgh, and constitutes, with Sir Godfrey Kneller's Kit-cat portraits, the most remarkable series of its type to be found anywhere in Britain.

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I would like to thank Sir Oliver Millar for his comments on an earlier draft of this article. Some of the material appeared in my thesis, 'Studies in British portrait painting in the eighteenth century . . .', submitted to the University of London in 1977. I am indebted both to the University of Aberdeen and to the Carnegie Trust for grants towards the cost of illustrating this article.

<sup>1</sup> George Vertue, *Vertue note books [The note books of George Vertue relating to artists and collections in England]*, Oxford, The Walpole Society, 1930–1947, vol 2, p. 133.

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Some of the questions we would like to ask about these pictures must, in the absence of documentation (which is extremely scanty), remain unanswered. For instance, there is no record of how much the artist received for each picture, nor do we know precisely when the series was started, or on whose initiative. And why were certain members of the Incorporation not included in the set? Other questions of a broader sort, while remaining open to further discussion, can at least be clarified to the point where we feel reasonably certain about them. Why was the series painted? Why was it discontinued after just a few years? To what extent does it constitute a unique set?

Let us begin by asking when and why sets of this kind were first assembled. The earliest institutions, as opposed to individuals, to build up sets of portraits in Britain seem to have been colleges, and we should distinguish two categories: portraits of founders and benefactors which were often painted posthumously, and portraits of members of the college, usually (though not always), like the surgeons, painted from life. The earliest examples of either category to survive, albeit in ruinous condition, seem to be the half-lengths at Cambridge of Lady Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, Foundress of Christ's College, and of Robert Dudley, Earl of Leicester, High Steward of the University of Cambridge 1563. They were given by Edward Grant, D.D., headmaster of Westminster School, in 1580.<sup>2</sup>

By the last decade of the sixteenth century it had become the fashion at Oxford to set up portraits in libraries, chapels, and lodgings. The idea seems to have appealed equally to the Physicians in London, to judge from the statute of 1596 which invites Fellows and even outsiders to hang up their likenesses or coats-of-arms on payment of £10 to the College.<sup>3</sup> It seems likely that a collection along such lines was begun, and after the Fire (1666) the new building was decorated on the facades with Quellin's statues of Charles II (royal patron) and Sir John Cutler (benefactor), while inside, portraits were arranged around that of Harvey, which had survived the holocaust.

At Cambridge we notice, from very early on, a tendency to use portraiture as a way of commemorating special occasions. The best-known example is the visit made to the University in March 1613 by the young Prince of Wales, afterwards Charles I. This is the only occasion when the University of Cambridge is recorded as actually commissioning and paying for a portrait, namely Robert Peake the Elder's whole-length, documented by a receipt dated 13 July 1613, and bearing an inscription stating that "We the Muses . . . have both welcomed you as our guest and painted you in humble duty."<sup>4</sup> About the same time William Cure the Younger's statue of the

<sup>2</sup> J. W. Goodison, *Catalogue of Cambridge Portraits: I—the University Collection*, Cambridge University Press, 1955, p. xvii.

<sup>3</sup> The Statute, in Latin, is printed in G. Wolstenholme (editor), *The Royal College of Physicians of London: portraits*, [the portraits described by David Piper], London, J. & A. Churchill, 1964. The substance of it is as follows: "Should any Fellow (or any other well-disposed gentleman not of our number, but from without) desire to have depicted within our College either his likeness or his family arms as a perpetual memorial he shall be freely allowed to do so, provided that he shall arrange for its execution at his own expense or at the expense of his friends, and provided also that he shall make a benefaction of the sum of ten pounds to the College. However, should someone occupy the presidency of the College for a period of three years he shall be permitted, should he so desire, to place either his likeness or his coat of arms within our College, but without any sum of money being required." I am indebted to Dr. D. P. Henry for his advice on this text.

<sup>4</sup> Goodison, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. 17.

Prince, posed rather similarly to Peake's oil painting, was set up on Trinity Great Gate.<sup>5</sup> Later acquisitions, for instance the statue of George I by Rysbrack, can often be related to specific events, in this case the king's gift, in 1715, of Bishop Moore's Library.

Marischal College, Aberdeen, although founded as early as 1593, seems to have acquired few if any portraits before about 1700. The collection was started at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and it is interesting to note that several portraits are recorded as being paid for by the college itself. *Bishop Burnet*, painted in 1723 by Andrew McIlvraith, cost, according to the college records, £69 6s. 0d. Scots. But there were also gifts. A portrait of the Founder, George Keith, Fifth Earl Marischal, was presented by Professor James Cattanach in 1744.<sup>6</sup>

Some of these collections were added to steadily throughout the following centuries, and in many cases this process continues today. Elsewhere, at Cambridge for instance, the process was much slower, and it is not entirely clear why this should have been the case. However, bearing in mind such exceptions as Marischal College, we can say that in nearly every case for which we have any evidence, such pictures and busts were gifts.<sup>7</sup> Sometimes they must have been commissioned with the express purpose of making such a presentation. In other cases the images seem to have been part of a private collection, and given to the college later, for reasons which are not always clear, though probably more often than not quite straightforward, for example to express gratitude or esteem. Dr. Richard Mead, whom we shall be mentioning again in connexion with the Edinburgh surgeons, owned two portraits of Harvey, and commissioned Scheemakers to make a marble bust from one of them, which Mead gave to the Royal College of Physicians in 1739. It is probably safe to assume that this was his intention from the outset.<sup>8</sup>

If it is unclear how the idea of building up such collections originated, we can follow the progress of the most important of these, that of the Bodleian Library at Oxford, because it is unusually well documented.<sup>9</sup> The Bodleian was opened in 1602 and the first portrait to be presented was the bust of Sir Thomas Bodley himself, given in 1605 by the Earl of Dorset, Chancellor of the University, who "sent it, carved to the life by an excellent hand at London." The same document records that the purpose of this gift was to perpetuate the memory of the Founder, and his generosity to the public. When Thomas James, the first Library-Keeper, resigned in 1620, this idea of building a series of commemorative painted portraits to hang in

<sup>5</sup> The entry in the Senior Bursar's Accounts for 1614-15 which establishes this statue as Cure's work is printed in R. Willis and J. W. Clark, *The architectural history of the University of Cambridge* . . . , Cambridge University Press, 1886, vol. 2, p. 487.

<sup>6</sup> University of Aberdeen MS notes by Professor William Knight, *Marischal College III*, p. 1287. See also E. A[rnott], *Description of the armorial bearings, portraits and busts in the Mitchell Hall and Picture Gallery, Marischal College, Aberdeen*, Albany Press, 1896, cat. no. 108, 128.

<sup>7</sup> The University of Edinburgh owned several portraits by the end of the seventeenth century; all were gifts. A whole set of royal portraits was donated in 1689 "for the ornamentation of the library." See D. Talbot Rice and P. McIntyre, *The University portraits*, Edinburgh University Press, 1957, p. xi.

<sup>8</sup> Piper, *op. cit.*, note 3 above, p. 210.

<sup>9</sup> For a full account see R. Lane Poole, *Catalogue of portraits in the possession of the University, Colleges, City and County of Oxford*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1912, vol. 1, from which I have drawn the material in this paragraph.



Figure 1.  
Self-portrait by Sir John Medina, 1708. Canvas, 77 by 64 cm,  
(This, and all the following portraits, except Fig. 10, are in  
the Royal College of Surgeons, Edinburgh.)

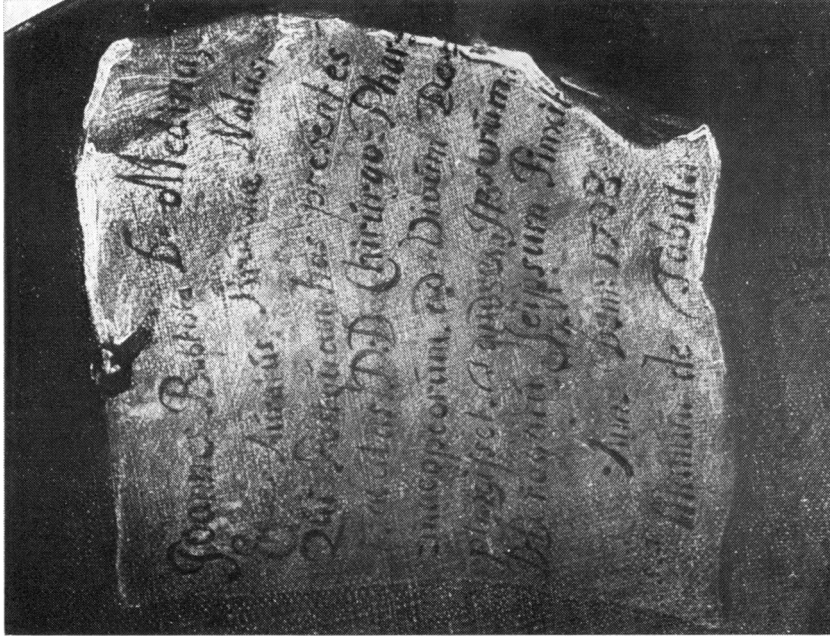


Figure 2.  
Detail of Figure 1.



**Figure 3.**  
**James Borthwick of Stow, by an unknown artist, c. 1655.**  
**Canvas, 77 by 65.3 cm.**



**Figure 4.**  
**Hew Broun, by Sir John Medina.**  
**Canvas, 77 by 65.3 cm.**



Figure 5.  
Dr. Archibald Pitcairn, by Sir John Medina. Canvas,  
77 by 64.7 cm.



Figure 6.  
David Fyffe, by Sir John Medina. Canvas, 77.5 by 65.4 cm.



Figure 7.  
John Baillie, by Sir John Medina. Canvas, 77.5 by 64 cm.



Figure 8.  
Walter Porterfield, by Sir John Medina. Canvas, 77 by 66 cm.



Figure 9.  
James Hamilton, by Sir John Medina. Canvas, 77.5 by  
64.7 cm.



Figure 10.  
Sir John Clerk of Pentuik, by Sir John Medina, 1700/01.  
Canvas, 77 by 64 cm. (Clerk Collection, Pentuik).





**Figure 11.**  
Henry Hamilton, by Sir John Medina. Canvas, 77 by 65.4 cm.



**Figure 12.**  
Adam Drummond, by Sir John Medina and an assistant,  
1707/08. Canvas, 77 by 65.4 cm.



Figure 13.  
Walter Potter, by Sir John Medina. Canvas, 77 by 65.4 cm.



Figure 14.  
John Monro, by William Aikman. Signed and dated 1715.  
Canvas, 77 by 65.4 cm.



**Figure 15.**  
**Robert Clerk, here attributed to William Aikman. Canvas, 76.3 by 64.7 cm.**



**Figure 16.**  
**Alexander Nisbet, by Sir John Medina and an assistant. Canvas, 77.5 by 66.6 cm.**

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the library was launched. Very often these portraits were given by the sitters themselves. Probably a variety of motives lay behind such gifts, but the outstanding one must surely have been the wish to join an already distinguished company. It is hard to say when this practice died out, but in the eighteenth century such portraits seem more often to have been donated by other people. However, as late as 1736 John King, Canon of Bristol, bequeathed his own portrait to the Bodleian. (It now hangs in the Examination Schools.)

And it was not always a question of bequeathing one's picture for posterity. Sir Hans Sloane, who did not die until 1753, gave his seated whole-length by Jonathan Richardson to the Bodleian in 1731, and was thus able to enjoy for many years his place amongst the great men of history.<sup>10</sup> Probably he did the same for the Physicians; his portrait by Thomas Murray was definitely in their possession by 1733, when Vertue noticed it.<sup>11</sup> Later examples include *Sir William Browne* presented by the sitter to the same college in his own lifetime, a signed and dated whole-length by Thomas Hudson.

In a few cases portraits were presented by the artist. There are several examples at Oxford, from the mid-seventeenth century onwards.<sup>12</sup> The Physicians, on the other hand, received no such gifts from artists before the late nineteenth century.

The majority of these college portraits feature what are usually described as "middle class" sitters: scholars, artists, musicians, and so on, but were hung alongside portraits of royal founders and patrons. The city companies, on the other hand, who controlled trade and industry down to the late eighteenth century if not longer, were always suspicious of royal interference, and their collections reflect this, for they tend to concentrate on their own membership and avoid more than minimal deference to the court. In other ways they are comparable institutions to the colleges, for their oligarchical form of government developed during the same period and along very similar lines.

We have seen that the Bodleian acquired its earliest portraits at the very beginning of the seventeenth century. The Merchant Taylors' Company of the City of London began its own well-documented collection of portraits of distinguished members about the same time.<sup>13</sup> An inventory taken in 1609 lists three such pictures, and although no record survives to show precisely when they were acquired, the portrait of Robert Dowe is inscribed with the date 1606. Now we know that Dowe did not die until 1612, and although there is no record of when his picture came to the Company, by far the majority of Company portraits were acquired during the lifetime of the sitter.

<sup>10</sup> The picture is signed and dated 1730. *Ibid.*, vol. 1, pp. 101–102.

<sup>11</sup> Vertue, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 4, p. 55.

<sup>12</sup> John Taylor's *Self-portrait*, signed and dated 1655, is perhaps the earliest at Oxford. The standing three-quarter-length of Edmund Halley by Thomas Murray was presented by the artist, and is recorded in 1713 as "lately placed in the Gallery" of the Bodleian. It was followed in 1721 by Kneller's *Self-portrait*, and by Thomas Wright's three-quarter-length of Joseph Bowles. This is inscribed with the artist's name and with the date "Nov. 1719". Thomas Gibson's seated three-quarter-length of John Locke was similarly given to the University by the painter in 1733. See Poole, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, vol. 1.

<sup>13</sup> The documents are in F. M. Fry, *A historical catalogue of the pictures, herse-cloths & tapestry at Merchant Taylors' Hall, with a list of sculptures and engravings*, London [privately printed], 1907.

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It must have been the precedent established by such institutions as the Bodleian Library at Oxford and the Merchant Taylors' Company of London that inspired the surgeons in Edinburgh to assemble their own collection of portraits. However, the set which now hangs in the Royal College of Surgeons in Nicolson Street is different, in significant ways, from these predecessors.

To begin with the portraits are all of the same format: bust-lengths on oval canvases. The major part of the set was the work of one artist, Sir John Medina, and was continued briefly by his pupil, William Aikman. None of them was paid for by the Incorporation; they seem to have been specially commissioned by the sitters, who must have paid the bills.<sup>14</sup> The rest of the portraits at Nicolson Street, by artists who range from Kneller to Andrew Geddes and Clarkson Stanfield, though interesting, are not really distinctive. Only in one isolated instance was an attempt made in a much later portrait to imitate the format of Medina's original set.<sup>15</sup>

It used to be thought that Medina settled in Edinburgh c. 1688–89, but we know now that he was still in London late in 1693, thinking about what must have been his first visit. According to Vertue, he made a brief visit first, and returned to London before moving to Edinburgh for good, taking his enormous family with him. Some time between settling in Edinburgh and his death on 5 October 1710 he painted the series with which we are concerned.<sup>16</sup>

The best-known portrait in the set is of course Medina's own self-portrait (Fig. 1) including a Latin inscription (Fig. 2) which has been variously transcribed. In fact it is not wholly legible, but it does tell us that Medina, after painting the learned surgeon-apothecaries from the life, executed his own portrait at their request to accompany the set, and this was in 1708.<sup>17</sup> If this can be trusted, then the set must have been started before Thomas Edgar, one of the sitters, died in 1703. But of

<sup>14</sup> The Minutes of the surgeons' meetings have been kept since 1581. A search through the books covering the years 1666–1708 discovered no record of any payments for portraits. I am grateful to Miss Dorothy U. Wardle, the College Librarian, for making the Minutes available to me, and to Miss Hannah Harkins, the Assistant Editor of the College Journal, for her comments on this section of my article.

<sup>15</sup> J. M. Barclay's portrait of John Gairdner, signed and dated 1867. There are, of course, other portraits by Medina in the College collection which are not ovals, but they are distinct from the set of Members: *James, Fourth Duke of Hamilton* (Honorary Fellow) signed and dated 1703, and *Lord Whitelaw* (Honorary Member).

<sup>16</sup> The exact date of Medina's move to Edinburgh remains uncertain. John Fleming, 'Sir John Medina and his "Postures"', *Connoisseur* 1961, 148: 24, suggests "the winter of 1693 or the spring of 1694." That he was in Edinburgh in the summer of 1694, is attested by the following receipt: "I John Medina picture Drawer Grants me to have received from John Hay in name of the Countess of Wemyss the sume of ffyfftie fyve pound sterling for Drawing fyve wholl and one half picture and discharged ye same witness my hand att Ed<sup>r</sup>. the fyfth day of July 1694 years. J. B. Medina." (Wemyss Castle Muniments, MS account book, p. 21; I am grateful to Captain and Lady Victoria Wemyss for letting me inspect this material.) This receipt is presumably in connexion with Medina's first visit to Scotland which Vertue says was for "less than one year" (vol. 1, p. 48), before he decided to move up with his family and settle permanently.

<sup>17</sup> The term *Equus Auratus* which occurs in the inscription means "gilded knight" or "knight with the golden spurs", and is also found inscribed on certain portraits by Kneller. Here it refers specifically to the knighthood conferred upon Medina in 1707 by the Duke of Queensberry, the Lord High Commissioner in Scotland. It recalls the old tradition whereby a knight was entitled to wear golden spurs. I am grateful to Mr. P. Ll. Gwynn-Jones of the College of Arms for his advice on this point.

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course this does not exclude the possibility that the set was started a few years earlier. I shall have more to say about this inscription in due course.

It may be possible to date the beginning of the series by relating it to the general affairs of the surgeons, and to the situation in which they found themselves in the late seventeenth century. Their historian, C. H. Creswell, has stressed the critical nature of the decade 1640–50.<sup>18</sup> Largely due to the initiative and energy of an apothecary, James Borthwick, a decline in numbers was halted and reversed, the teaching of pharmacy was introduced, and in 1647 the first regular place of assembly was rented in Dickson's Close. In a document of 1670 the Incorporation described itself as "anciently the chiefest and first trade of Edinburgh . . . and by their care and diligence in enacting good and profitable acts and orders among themselves, they are become in a flourishing condition and so useful to the whole nation . . .". It seems significant that the oldest portrait in the series, that of James Borthwick, should have entered the Incorporation c. 1655, during this period when the Calling revived from an ominous decline in its fortunes (Fig. 3).

The portrait of Borthwick is in an oval frame, just like the Medinas, but the still discernible coat of arms in the top right hand corner, cut in half by the frame, and the inscription which seems to be in the same type of script as that which is found on most of the later portraits (a point we must return to in more detail later on), makes it clear that it was cut at some date to fit an oval frame.

After three years in Dickson's Close, the surgeons moved to a house at the "foot of the Kirkhuech", near the old church of St. Giles. This turned out to be unsatisfactory, and during the 1650s they met in the rooms of members. Creswell notes that these frequent changes of quarters must have diminished the social status of the Incorporation, besides being a nuisance to its members.<sup>19</sup> In 1656 they bought a house and its surrounding site from the Town Council, and set about altering and rebuilding bits of it. But it is clear that a new building was needed, and in 1669 each member agreed to give or lend £100 towards this end. It is recorded that those who gave money were to have their names put up in the new building. There is no mention of portraits. Meanwhile meetings continued in the house which they had bought from the Town, in spite of the fact that it was slowly falling down.

In 1696 the Incorporation petitioned the Town Council concerning the supply of anatomical material. They asked for "the bodies of fundlings who dye betwixt the tyme they are weaned and their being put to Schools or trades . . .". The request was granted on condition the surgeons "shall befor the terme of Michallmas 1697 years, build, repaire, and have in readiness, ane anatomical theatre" where they were to give an annual public anatomy lecture. This was the necessary spur to action, and at a meeting held on 2 June 1696 a committee was appointed to see to the building of a New Hall. This was designed by James Smith, and the foundation stone was laid two months later. The Hall was ready by 29 September 1697, i.e. by Michaelmas as ordered.<sup>20</sup> The surgeons must have felt very proud of their New Hall, and may well

<sup>18</sup> C. H. Creswell, *The Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh . . .*, Edinburgh and London, privately printed for the College by Oliver & Boyd, 1926, p. 34.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 47. The following account of the meeting places is based on Creswell's chapter IV.

<sup>20</sup> The Hall was described by Maitland: "At the Southeastern Corner of the Highschool-yard, stands the Surgeons Hall, a beautiful Building, wherein is a Collection of natural Rarities, and a

have looked for some means of expressing this pride. They already owned a couple of portraits but nothing approaching a collection; indeed, as we have seen, they would have had nowhere to hang such a collection had one existed.

Let us assume, on the analogy of the University of Cambridge, that Medina's set was painted to commemorate a special occasion, namely the building of the surgeons' first properly designed meeting place. This puts the beginning of the series back to the last months of 1697 or early 1698. In addition to building a Hall, the surgeons had promised to give an annual public lecture, and the first public dissection mentioned in the Incorporation's records took place in November-December 1702. It lasted eight days, and the operators are recorded as James Hamilton, John Baillie, Alexander Monteath, David Fyffe, Hugh Paterson, Robert Clerk, James Auchinleck, and, on the eighth day the "epilogue" was delivered by Dr. Archibald Pitcairn.<sup>21</sup> Portraits of each of these pioneers hangs in Nicolson Street, with one curious exception, and this gap in the set brings us up against the first of a number of puzzles which complicate any full account of this group of portraits.

Monteath has been called "the leading surgeon of his day".<sup>22</sup> It was he who in 1694 obtained from the Town Council a promise, for dissecting purposes, of the bodies of prisoners who died in gaol, and other unclaimed corpses from the streets of Edinburgh. It was Monteath who held the highest office in the Incorporation—that of Deacon—at the time that the New Hall was being built. In addition he had more social leverage than most of his fellow members, being related to the Stuart line of the Earls of Monteath. Yet it is his face that is missing from the set of portraits at Nicolson Street. Of course, there are other surgeons known to us in the Incorporation who were not painted, but no-one of such importance. It is true that Monteath's Jacobitism may have contributed to the trouble he got into with the Town Council in 1699, for people were highly sensitive to questions of allegiance at this time. King William's first Scottish Parliament had met in Edinburgh in 1689, and Monteath was known to be a staunch partisan of the Stuarts.<sup>23</sup> Could this be a clue to his exclusion from the series of portraits? Hardly, for whatever the politicians thought of him he retained the respect of the surgeons, and besides, he was not the only Jacobite amongst them. Hew Broun, who together with his son James got into trouble with the local authorities for attending a Roman Catholic service in 1695, was another, yet his portrait was hung with the rest (Fig. 4). And the best-known face in the whole series was that of a Jacobite: Archibald Pitcairn, Professor of Medicine at Leyden and Edinburgh, M.D. of Rheims and of Aberdeen. His son Andrew was in the Jacobite rebellion of 1715 and owed his pardon and release from the Tower to the interposition, with Walpole, of Dr. Richard Mead. Mead was a Hanoverian, but he had been a pupil of the rebel's father at Leyden,<sup>24</sup> and, according to Vertue, a portrait

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Bagnio." (William Maitland, *The history of Edinburgh from its foundation to the present time . . .*, Edinburgh, printed by Hamilton, Balfour & Neill, for the author, 1753, p. 182.) He does not mention the portraits, but illustrates his remarks with a view of the Hall engraved after Paul Sandby's drawing.

<sup>21</sup> Creswell, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, pp. 193–194.

<sup>22</sup> J. Gairdner, *Sketch of the early history of the medical profession in Edinburgh*, Edinburgh and London, Oliver & Boyd, 1864, p. 23.

<sup>23</sup> See *ibid.*, p. 23; Creswell, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, pp. 97–98.

<sup>24</sup> J. Gairdner, *Historical sketch of the Royal College of Surgeons of Edinburgh*, Edinburgh, printed

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of Pitcairn by Medina was in Mead's collection.<sup>25</sup> Not only was Pitcairn's portrait included in Medina's set (Fig. 5), it was the only one to be engraved. Here Pitcairn's political sympathies may have helped, for the print was done by Robert Strange; it is undated, but was probably executed towards the latter part of Strange's early period in Edinburgh, before he fled to France in the bitter aftermath of Culloden.<sup>26</sup>

It is of course possible that there was originally a portrait of Monteath which has disappeared. There is a record of some oval frames being destroyed by fire, after being sent away for repair.<sup>27</sup> Although it is almost certain that the canvases were left in the Hall, and did not therefore perish in the fire, one wonders what happened to them without their frames. There is no record of which portraits they were.

The connexion between Dr. Pitcairn and Dr. Mead leads one to speculate further to what extent Pitcairn shared Mead's well-known enthusiasm for paintings. Perhaps it was he who originally voiced the idea amongst the surgeons of building up a set of their own portraits.

One further point may be made about the way the artist has *presented* his sitters, for it is by no means unimportant to consider the role adopted by a person who has his picture painted. The surgeons are not painted *as* surgeons. In the century which produced Rembrandt's great groups of surgeons gathered around a dissected corpse, Medina could have shown these men in action, singly or in groups. Indeed an example of this genre had been painted quite recently at Oxford by Richard Greenbury, and paid for in 1651.<sup>28</sup> Instead, Medina's subjects are painted as Members of the Incorporation, a point emphasized by the inscriptions on the canvases, which record the date not of the portraits, but of when each member was admitted, and the offices, if any, which he held. We are asked to remember them not for what they did, but for what they were; for their place in society. What was their place?

It had never been very high. Broadly speaking, it was the physicians who had long enjoyed the highest status amongst healers. They were fewer in number, well-read in the voluminous and esoteric Latin literature of the medical tradition, and did not

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for the College by Murray & Gibb, 1860, p. 20; *R.C.S. List of Fellows and Licentiates*, Edinburgh, printed for the College by George Robb, 1874 (Grangerized vol. in R.C.S. Library, No. 133.) Mead's letter to Walpole, quoted by Charles Webster at the Harveian Oration of 1781, is printed in Constance Pitcairn, *The history of the Fife Pitcairns . . .*, Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood, 1905, p. 391.

<sup>25</sup> Vertue, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 4, p. 14. Amongst the pictures listed in Medina's will as unfinished at his death was a "three quarter" (presumably a bust) of "Dr. Pitcairne not altogether finished." It was valued at £12. (Commissariat Edinburgh-Testaments, vol. 85, dated 16 March 1711. Transcription in the library of the Scottish National Portrait Gallery.) In addition to the oval in the Royal College of Surgeons, two further portraits of Pitcairn are recorded: one that belonged to Dr. William Pitcairn, President of the Royal College of Physicians, London, and descended to Sir Ralph Anstruther (still at Balcaskie); and one said by Constance Pitcairn, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, pp. 381–383, to be in the collection of George Kincaid Pitcairn of Littleborough, Lancashire, c. 1905. Apparently G. K. Pitcairn returned to Scotland some time before 1916, but I have not been able to trace the portrait further.

<sup>26</sup> See J. Dennistoun, *Memoirs of Sir Robert Strange, Knt.*, . . . London, Longman, Brown, Green & Longmans, 1855, vol. 1, p. 236, and vol. 2, p. 284, where the suggested date is "1747?". A. M. Hind, *A history of engraving and etching . . .*, reprint ed., New York, Dover Publications, 1963, p. 205, also discusses this print as an example of Strange's early production in Edinburgh.

<sup>27</sup> Creswell, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, p. 95.

<sup>28</sup> Poole, *op. cit.*, note 9 above, vol. 2, p. xxi.



normally administer remedies or use surgical instruments themselves, though they might supervise such treatment. The surgeons, by contrast, had long been associated with the barbers (not only because they used the same instruments but because the two crafts had, since medieval times, often been practised by the same people) and with the apothecaries, who were mere shopkeepers. That this contrast in status was keenly felt in the seventeenth century can be seen in the literature of the period. Consider for instance a book like *The compleat gentleman* (1634), in which Henry Peacham considers whether physicians can be ranked as belonging to a noble or a servile profession. He decides "it is an Art nothing servile and base, but noble and free." However, he quickly adds: "I heere intend no common Chyrurgians, Mountebancks, unlettered Empericks, and women Doctors . . . , whose practice is infamous, Mechanique, and base."<sup>29</sup> It is in the context of this kind of prejudice that the Edinburgh surgeons' assertion of status must be understood.

Another curious feature of the surgeons' collection is that the custom of presenting portraits was so short-lived. After Medina's death it was fairly quickly ignored. There is recorded an extraordinary Minute entered in the records of 1720 calling on five of the surgeons to have their portraits hung in the Hall, or at least to make the effort to have a sitting "before Whitsunday next".<sup>30</sup> Sanctions would be invoked to prevent them voting and taking apprentices if they did not comply. But there is nothing to show that any of them actually sat for a portrait, and no portraits are recorded. No sense of personal glory seems to have driven them as it had driven men like Sir Patience Ward of the Merchant Taylors' Company in London, who, just thirty years earlier had not been satisfied with his portrait and so had replaced it with first one, then another "improved" image. The sequence of events was as follows. The first portrait of Mr. Patience Ward, a modest half-length, was commissioned and paid for by the Company in 1673 and hung "amongst the pictures of the worthy Benefactors of this Society."<sup>31</sup> But in 1675 Ward was knighted at the Mayoral Banquet, and five years later the Company had to meet the cost of the very lavish pageantry which accompanied his inauguration as Lord Mayor. Ward now replaced his portrait with a whole-length one of more appropriate dignity. This was at his own expense. In 1687 he removed this one too, without apparently asking permission of the Company, and at a Court held on 7 March of that year the Clerk of the Company was instructed to "wait on the said Mr. Ward and request him to return the said picture . . . and to acquaint the said Mr. Ward that his compliance to this their request will be taken very kindly by this Court . . .". Eventually a new picture had to be commissioned, and the third and final portrait of the proud Sir Patience Ward was paid for by the Company in 1690–91, a life-size standing whole-length, wearing

<sup>29</sup> H. Peacham, *The compleat gentleman* . . . , London 1634 (Tudor and Stuart Library, introduction by G. S. Gordon, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1906), pp. 10–11. As late as 1757 judges in the common pleas decided that "a surgeon is an inferior tradesman" within the meaning of an act of William and Mary. (B. Williams, *The Whig supremacy, 1714–1760*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 2nd ed., 1962, p. 389.) On the relative status of physicians, barber-surgeons, apothecaries, etc., see Sir George Clark, *A history of the Royal College of Physicians of London*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1964, vol. 1, especially pp. 13–14.

<sup>30</sup> Creswell, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, p. 94.

<sup>31</sup> The documents quoted in this paragraph are drawn from Fry, *op. cit.*, note 13 above, pp. 80–82.

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a great wig and a scarlet furred robe with a lace collar, and displaying the Lord Mayor's gold chain and pendant badge.

This example is worth considering because it provides a glimpse of a personality, and documents the impact such a determined individual can have in this kind of context. We have detailed information of this sort on none of the Edinburgh surgeons. The majority are little more than names. It would be helpful to have *some* record of how they felt about their pictures.

#### STYLE AND ATTRIBUTION PROBLEMS

Having surveyed the historical background to Medina's *Surgeons* and considered the possibility that the series was begun as a direct result of the building of the New Hall, it is time to look more closely at the portraits themselves and consider them from the point of view of style. Broadly speaking, all these portraits, with their combination of realism and artifice, the way the strongly individualized faces are set glowingly into dark sketchy backgrounds and set off by drapery which is reduced to a few sweeping brushstrokes, could be described as Baroque. Looked at more closely they reveal a variety in the handling at least as great as that which we see in Kneller's Kit-cat portraits, a series produced over a period of nearly twenty years.

Is it possible that the differences in handling, the degree of roughness or "finish", were originally determined by where each portrait was intended to be hung? In his influential poem *De arte graphica* the French critic Charles Alphonse Du Fresnoy wrote that "works which are painted to be seen in little or narrow places, must be very tender and well-united with tones, and colours; the degree of which ought to be more different, more unequal, and more strong and vigorous, as the work is more distant . . .".<sup>32</sup> Du Fresnoy's work was published in a French translation in 1668 and in English (translated by John Dryden) in 1695.

Unfortunately we have no information about the original hanging of the portraits in James Smith's New Hall. Under the present arrangement they are distributed through Playfair's nineteenth-century building, some in the main hall, some in the corridor, and some on the stairs. The earlier arrangement would have been quite different but may perhaps be reflected in the way Du Fresnoy recommends. It might be argued that the more important members of the Incorporation would have had their pictures displayed in the best positions, and in that case we should expect for example, *Thomas Dunlop*, *James Hamilton* and *John Baillie* (Deacons), and *Walter Porterfield* and *David Fyffe* (Treasurers) to be among the more delicately handled portraits. Indeed, the portrait of Fyffe (Fig. 6) is delicately painted with small, quick strokes of the point of the brush, a manner reminiscent of Kneller around 1700 (cf. the oval *Duke of Gloucester* at Kensington Palace) but this is not true of *Dunlop*, *Baillie* (Fig. 7), *Porterfield* (Fig. 8), or *James Hamilton* (Fig. 9).

A more probable explanation might be found in Medina's own stylistic development over the period of time when the pictures were painted. His earliest datable portraits, painted in the early 1690s, show the brushstrokes smoothed out, especially around the noses and chins of his male sitters. Tonal transitions across cheeks and

<sup>32</sup> *De arte graphica*, translated by John Dryden: *The art of painting*, London, printed by J. Heptinstall for W. Rogers, 1695, p. 55.

foreheads are gradual. The three-quarter-length of his first patron George, First Earl of Melville, painted *c.* 1686/1693,<sup>33</sup> shows this early precise touch. The same approach is still evident in the three-quarter-length of James Ogilvy, later First Earl of Seafield, signed and dated 1695 (Scottish National Portrait Gallery). Dated portraits of ladies confirm this early smoothness, but naturally the artist would avoid visible impasto on the faces of his female sitters so the argument would have to depend upon male portraits.

A change can be seen in the three-quarter-length of Alexander, Lord Raith (Collection: the Earl of Leven and Melville) presumably painted before the sitter's death in 1698. Here we find a heavier, more painterly handling and a more "impressionistic" treatment of the wig. This forceful quality can be compared with some of the surgeons. The half-length of Sir John Clerk of Penicuik, Second Baronet (Fig. 10) which is datable to the years 1700/1701,<sup>34</sup> shows Medina's best manner, rich and vigorous in the application of paint and closely comparable to the finest of the surgeons, for instance *Henry Hamilton* (Fig. 11) with its lovely silver-grey colour scheme, *James Hamilton*, and *John Jossie*.

It is particularly difficult to account for the deterioration in the standard of craftsmanship shown in the portraits of Alexander Simpson and Adam Drummond (Fig. 12). Just how clumsy the execution of the latter is may be seen if it is compared with the similarly composed but so much more sensitively modelled portrait of Walter Potter (Fig. 13). Students of Medina's work as a whole have pointed to a general decline in quality during his last years in Edinburgh, and it may be that these portraits exemplify that drift. John Fleming has observed that his early works are his best; "Most of his later works are of mediocre quality and bear the clearest signs of his business-like and time-saving methods."<sup>35</sup>

While it cannot be ruled out that these two portraits may simply be unfinished, I am inclined to discount this because eighteenth-century taste did not allow unfinished pictures to be hung alongside finished ones. If we look at the fate of Kneller's Kit-cat portraits, we find that of three which we know to have been left uncompleted at the artist's death, two were not hung as part of the set in Tonson's house, while the third, the portrait of William Walsh, was finished by a later, unknown hand, in order that it could be hung with the rest.<sup>36</sup> Let us therefore consider more closely those "time-saving methods" referred to by Fleming.

Like all successful artists in this period, Medina relied on assistants and pupils. The degree of such reliance would obviously depend on the type of commission; so that a single small portrait for a valued customer, or even a pair of husband and wife like the fine half-lengths of Sir John and Lady Clerk already referred to (Fig. 10)

<sup>33</sup> Scottish National Portrait Gallery, Edinburgh (1532). Fleming, (*op. cit.*, note 16 above, p. 25) is incorrect in saying that this picture is dated 1691, though a similar portrait in the collection of the Earl of Leven and Melville is inscribed (not by Medina himself) with the date 1691.

<sup>34</sup> Presumably painted at the same time as the companion portrait of his wife whom he married in 1700 and who died the following year. James Hamilton's portrait is datable 1702/08; it is inscribed "Deacon" which office the sitter held 1702/03.

<sup>35</sup> Fleming, *op. cit.*, note 16 above, p. 25.

<sup>36</sup> See David Piper, *Catalogue of seventeenth-century portraits in the National Portrait Gallery 1625-1714*, Cambridge University Press, 1963, pp. 399-403; and J. D. Stewart, *Sir Godfrey Kneller*, London, National Portrait Gallery, 1971, appendix: 'The Kit-cat Club Portraits'.

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would not be delegated, whereas a larger picture, especially a life-size whole-length with a good deal of background and drapery to be filled in could reasonably be entrusted to assistants for the most part, leaving Medina himself to concentrate his skills on the face and hands. One cannot avoid the suspicion that so "business-like" an artist as Medina would not have felt obliged, once the series of portraits of the surgeons had been launched, to attend to each and every one himself, though he would certainly have retained a supervisory role. That he did in fact employ assistance in the execution of the surgeons' portraits cannot be proved, but the fact that the series was continued after his death by his most important pupil, William Aikman, lends weight to one's suspicion that he probably did so. Further evidence can be adduced from the fact that the inscriptions on the portraits do not all seem to be by the same hand.

The portrait of John Monro (Fig. 14) is signed by Aikman and dated 1715. It shows a precise treatment of form and a distinctive way of softening the edges, down the cheek and round the jaw, which is unlike Medina's bolder handling, but can be matched in Aikman's later portraits. Similarly, the inscriptions on this picture are in a slow, neat, regular hand. Medina's own script is, I believe, featured on his own self-portrait (Fig. 2); even after making due allowance for the different scale, one can see that it is quite different, less tidy, less evenly spaced, the paint being apparently thicker on the brush and applied in a heavier way so that the difference between thick and thin strokes emerges more conspicuously. What appears to be the same type of script is evident on the majority of the surgeons' portraits and is especially clear on the portraits of *Fyffe* (Fig. 6), *Baillie* (Fig. 7), and *James Hamilton* (Fig. 9), whom we have already singled out as office-holders. Aikman's type of script may perhaps be seen, though not very clearly, on another portrait in the set, that of Robert Clerk (Fig. 15).<sup>37</sup> Here the letters have been crowded into a small space just to the right of the sitter's dark wig, but close inspection reveals a slightly nervous jerk at the end of each stroke and we notice a distinctive way of lining up the numerals without the use of descending or ascending verticals which does not seem to occur in Medina's own inscriptions. Clerk's portrait is not entirely convincing as Medina's work; it lacks his bold, fluent touch. Now the sitter was actually Aikman's uncle, the recipient of numerous affectionate letters from the young painter which are now deposited in the Scottish Record Office. It seems quite likely that the execution of his portrait could have been left very largely to his nephew.

Having sorted the majority of these inscriptions into two sets, a large group which must be Medina's own and a couple (only one certainly) in Aikman's hand, we are left with three portraits which do not fall easily into either category. The flowing script on the background of *Thomas Veatch*, contrasting with the rough handling of the portrait itself, is not unlike Aikman's lettering, yet the head is unmistakably by Medina. Having painted the head, the master has presumably delegated the lettering to an assistant. In two more cases, *Alexander Nisbet* (Fig. 16) and *Adam Drummond*

<sup>37</sup> My colleague Mr. Colin McLaren, for whose expert advice on these inscriptions I am very grateful, warns me that the inscription on Clerk's picture could well be by the same hand as those in the main group, which he agrees seem to be consistent and which I am assuming to be in Medina's own hand.

(Fig. 12), the inscriptions are curiously tight and fussy, in contrast both to Medina's and to Aikman's hands.

There are two further problems. First, we know that Aikman was not Medina's only pupil in Edinburgh, though he is the only one whose independent work can be identified and studied as a guide to the sort of stylistic variations we have noticed in the portraits of the surgeons. One of Vertue's main sources of information on Medina was Andrew Hay, who "from a small beginning in painting under Medina in Scotland set out for a Dealer," in which capacity, Vertue tells us, he made a good deal of money.<sup>38</sup> No examples of Hay's work as a painter are known but the surgeons have a record that after Medina's death in 1710 they had their portraits cleaned and varnished by his servant "Andro Hay", who was paid "a guinea of gold".<sup>39</sup> Could he have helped, earlier, to paint the surgeons? Is it his crabbed hand that lettered the background of *Alexander Nisbet* or *Adam Drummond*? And can we detect his brush in the weaker handling of either of those two heads?

The second problem in this area is that we do not know exactly when Aikman (returning the discussion to Medina's only clearly identifiable assistant) began to work for him. Vertue, who knew Aikman later in London, recalls that Aikman "was put young to Sr John Medina of whom he learnt the first principles of his art . . .".<sup>40</sup> But how young? In January 1701 Aikman was writing to his uncle, Sir John Clerk of Penicuik (brother of the surgeon), explaining his determination to become a merchant,<sup>41</sup> but a letter dated 27 February 1703 refers to a picture he had painted for which Sir John had paid him three guineas.<sup>42</sup> He was twenty-one by this time and in the light of Vertue's statement he must by now have been receiving instruction from Medina. Whether he was actually working for him on the surgeons' portraits is another matter. Further correspondence testifies to his visiting London in 1704,<sup>43</sup> and an early self-portrait at The Ross, Hamilton, very likely shows his style before he went to Rome in 1707.<sup>44</sup> Apart from this there is no real evidence of his activity as a painter until after his return to Edinburgh from his European travels in 1712.

A question mark should also be placed against the authorship of three more pictures in the series in addition to those already mentioned. (1) John McGill was not admitted to the College until 29 December 1710, i.e. two months after Medina's death. So his portrait cannot be Medina's work, but the tight handling and smoky tones are not entirely consistent with what we know about Aikman's style. (2) Thomas Edgar died in 1703.<sup>45</sup> His densely-worked portrait is also unlike Medina, none of whose characteristically loose brushwork and firm treatment of planes can

<sup>38</sup> Vertue, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 3, p. 125.

<sup>39</sup> Creswell, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, p. 94.

<sup>40</sup> Vertue, *op. cit.*, note 1 above, vol. 3, p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Edinburgh, Register House, *Clerk of Penicuik MSS: Aikman correspondence GD18/4568/8*.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, GD18/4571.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, GD18/4572.

<sup>44</sup> This collection includes two self-portraits by Aikman: one in Eastern dress which probably dates from after his visit to Smyrna c. 1711, and one which from the apparent age of the artist alone suggests a date before 1707, and which stylistically is closer to Medina than later self-portraits like the well-known one in the National Gallery of Scotland (167).

<sup>45</sup> *R.C.S. List of Fellows and Licentiates*, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, no. 97. His will was recorded at Edinburgh 11 August 1704.

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be seen here. The composition is weak, with the head set awkwardly on the body. If this were acceptable as Aikman's work, and if the surgeons were all painted from life as the inscription on Medina's self-portrait informs us, then this picture would have the additional interest of being Aikman's earliest known picture. However, it could equally well be by an unidentified assistant working under the close supervision of Medina himself. (3) John Lauder's portrait seems likely to be another example of Aikman's work. The sitter was not admitted to membership until 1 July 1709; Medina's self-portrait was already in place by then, and the style of this picture—close to Medina but painted with smoother strokes and with an unusual amount of detail on the costume and perhaps even the suggestion of a cloudy sky behind the figure—is not entirely convincing as the master's work.

#### CONCLUSION

Having examined the historical background and analysed the portraits themselves, together with their inscriptions, some inferences may be drawn, however tentatively, about the chronology of Medina's *Surgeons*.

Following the building of the New Hall in 1697, the first portrait to be presented was probably that of the already eminent Dr. Pitcairn. This gift could have been made in 1699, about the time that his donation of eight medical books was recorded,<sup>46</sup> but in any case it would have been before 16 October 1701 when he was formally admitted to the Incorporation.<sup>47</sup> This would explain the odd fact that his portrait is the only one in the set not to be inscribed. The idea of a whole series of portraits was then launched, each one duly inscribed in the way we have seen. Among the first to queue up at Medina's studio would have been the new Deacon, Thomas Dunlop (appointed at the time the New Hall was opened, i.e. Michaelmas 1697). Gideon Eliot, who succeeded Dunlop as Deacon, probably sat for his portrait during his term of office, 29 September 1699–29 September 1701. Thomas Edgar's picture must, as already noted, have been painted before his death in 1703, and Henry Hamilton's picture before his appointment as Deacon in September 1704, for the inscription omits this title. The date of James Nisbet's picture can be narrowed down to the period between July 1705 (membership) and some time in 1708, when Medina's dated self-portrait was added to the completed set. For the same reasons, Adam Drummond's portrait should be datable to the few months between November 1707 and the execution of the self-portrait. Of course we cannot rule out the possibility that Medina did paint some of the surgeons after the self-portrait was finished, but it seems unlikely. The few that are definitely datable after 1708, like *John Lauder* and *John McGill*, do not seem to be his work.

Vertue, who of course never actually saw the surgeons' portraits praised them as "excellently Done". But one wonders whether the surgeons themselves are likely to have been very conscious of the sort of qualities that attract the modern eye to a fine painting. In short, did they value Medina's work *as art*, in our sense of the word, or just as a means of expressing their pride and sense of rank? Of course there can be no simple answer, but there is no doubt that, in this period, art was first and foremost

<sup>46</sup> Creswell, *op. cit.*, note 18 above, p. 68.

<sup>47</sup> *R.C.S. List of Fellows and Licentiates*, *op. cit.*, note 24 above, no. 133.

a servant of public policy. Portraits were hung as public gestures, implying definite claims to political allegiance, and social status. These implications could not be disregarded on aesthetic or other grounds. Sitters like Sir Patience Ward were clearly aware of this, and the institutions on whose premises portraits hung could not escape involvement. One example will make the point. Lely's whole-length of James, Duke of Monmouth, which the sitter had presented to the University of Cambridge to commemorate his election as Chancellor in 1674, was removed in 1683 and publicly burnt, as "being indecent in itself, and unbecoming the Loyalty of the University to Continue any marke of Honour to a person soe farre obnoxious."<sup>48</sup>

Medina's *Surgeons*, an extremely rare case of an extensive set painted as a set during the lifetime of the sitters, are, I suspect, the outcome of a specific impulse generated by the opening of the New Hall and Anatomical Theatre in 1697. This helps to explain why the custom of donating portraits fell so soon into abeyance. Nor do they seem to have had any real successors in eighteenth-century institutional portraiture. At first sight, a comparable set seems to be the one painted for Barnstaple Corporation by Thomas Hudson and placed in the Guildhall there in 1738. The subjects were local dignitaries, including a number of mayors, and the portraits were apparently paid for by a local magistrate named Rolle.<sup>49</sup> This was, however, a commission unrelated, as far as can be ascertained, to any particular local event, while at least one of the subjects, the Rev. Samuel Thomson, had died four years earlier, and his relatives "being at this time in possession of his likeness, it was placed in the Town Hall by the Corporation, as a mark of respect to his memory."

One thing seems certain, the Incorporation of Surgeons in Edinburgh did not pay for Medina's set. This contrasts with the practice of Marischal College in Aberdeen, and the Merchant Taylors in London, but agrees with the procedure of the London surgeons, where there is no evidence to suggest that the institution's own funds were used for buying portraits until the nineteenth century. In Edinburgh, the Incorporation of Chirurgeons, as it was called, became the Royal College in 1778. In London the same process did not occur until 1800. At that time, the English surgeons inherited pictures, including portraits, from the old Company of Surgeons, and since then they have received, in the form of donations, several eighteenth-century works. The collection already included such portraits as Closterman's *William Cowper*, and Hogarth's *Sir Caesar Hawkins*, there but is absolutely no record of who paid for these.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>48</sup> Goodison, *op. cit.*, note 2 above, p. xxvi.

<sup>49</sup> See J. B. Gribble, *Memorials of Barnstaple . . .*, Barnstaple, printed at the North Devon Journal Office by J. Avery, 1830, pp. 308–309. Additional information is provided by the following resolution quoted from the Borough records: "That the thanks of this Corporation be given to Henry Rolle, Esq., our Recorder, for his present of the pictures of the Corporation, and also to desire the said Mr. Rolle that he will be pleased to sit for his picture at the expense of the Corporation and that Mr. Mayor do the same." Mr. G. A. Morris, Head Librarian and Curator of the North Devon Athenaeum, drew my attention to these references. The portraits are all half-lengths in painted ovals, and are inscribed with the sitters' names.

<sup>50</sup> See W. LeFanu, *A Catalogue of the portraits . . . in the Royal College of Surgeons of England*, Edinburgh and London, Livingstone, 1960.