



Fame and Friendship: Pope, Roubiliac and the Portrait Bust (Waddesdon Manor)

Malcolm Baker

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No literary figure of the 18th-century was more esteemed than the poet Alexander Pope, and his sculpted portraits exemplify the celebration of literary fame at a period when authorship was being newly conceived and the portrait bust was enjoying new popularity. Accompanying an exhibition at Waddesdon Manor (The Rothschild Collection), this publication explores the convergence between authorship, portraiture, and the sculpted image in particular, by bringing together a wide range of works that foreground Pope's celebrity status.

Pope took great pains over how he was represented and carefully fashioned his public persona through images, published letters and the printed editions of his works. Examined alongside some of the most celebrated painted portraits of the poet, will be a selection of the printed texts which Pope planned with meticulous care. The core of the publication will consist of eight different versions of the same portrait bust by the leading sculptor of the period, Louis François Roubiliac.

The marble bust had long been seen as a form appropriate for the celebration of literary fame and Pope's bust in part imitates those of classical authors whose works he both translated and consciously imitated in his own poems. More than any other sculptor, Roubiliac reworked the conventions of the bust, transforming it into a genre that was considered worthy of close and sustained attention. Nowhere is this seen more tellingly than in his compelling and intense portraits of Pope. Based on a vividly modeled clay original, the variant marble versions were carved with arresting virtuosity, recalling Pope's own phrase, "Marble, soften'd into Life". At the same time, the image was reproduced by both the sculptor himself and by others, in a variety of materials.

Multiplied and reproduced throughout the 18th century, Pope's bust was the most familiar and visible sign of his authorial fame. At the same time, it was also used as a way of articulating friendship – a constant theme in Pope's verse - and all the early versions of Roubiliac's bust were probably executed for Pope's closest friends. By bringing together the eight versions thought to have been executed by Roubiliac and his studio, and a number of other copies in marble, plaster and ceramic, this publication will offer the opportunity to explore not only the complex relationship between these various versions but the hitherto little understood processes of sculptural production and replication in eighteenth-century Britain.

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