

The subject of this fine 1772 painting is optician John Cuff. **David Baker** recalls his life and times

There is soon to be a rare opportunity to view a beautiful painting of an 18th century optician's workshop that is not normally accessible to the public. *John Cuff and his Assistant* by Johan Zoffany is owned by the Royal Collection and usually hangs in the private apartments of Windsor Castle. But from March 10 to June 10 2012 it will be on show at the Royal Academy in an exhibition entitled Johan Zoffany RA: Society Observed. Who exactly, though, was John Cuff, and why should such a celebrated artist have painted him?

Cuff was born in 1708 to a watchmaker who was a member of the Broderers' Company. He was apprenticed in 1722 to James Mann, one of a family of optical instrument makers prominent in the Spectacle Makers' Company. Cuff himself was admitted into the freedom of the Company in 1729, giving 40 years' service to it, during which time he attended over 100 Court meetings, including a stint as Master in 1748.

He set up shop in Fleet Street, in 1737, under the sign of the 'Reflecting Microscope & Spectacles'. As well as optical instruments he made and sold barometers, thermometers and mathematical and other instruments. One of his innovations was an improved solar telescope. Cuff's big break came when this instrument was described favourably by Henry Baker, an influential Fellow of the Royal Society, in his extremely popular book *The Microscope Made Easy* (1742). The book also described and illustrated some of Cuff's microscopes, making him well-known in the field. In 1743 Cuff developed an all-brass compound microscope with the tube supported by a single pillar mounted on a wooden box foot which was so successful that it was widely copied, and similar designs became known as 'Cuff-type' microscopes.

Although Cuff was a frequent visitor to the nearby Royal Society and had a prominent advocate, and possibly patron, in Baker, he failed to garner sufficient support when put up for election that year. His business acumen was rather lacking, too. In 1750 he



John Cuff and his Assistant 1772; Artist: Johan Zoffany; The Royal Collection © 2011. Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II

Old Master in optics

was declared bankrupt but managed to continue trading with the proceeds from the sale of his household goods. Another commercial blow was the arrival next door to his premises of the brash, business-savvy optical instrument maker Benjamin Martin (described in *Maverick of Fleet Street, Optician* 22.07.11). Baker wrote to a friend, 'one Martin (a Man unknown to me) took a House adjoining to his, and by advertising, and puffing, and by the Mistakes of many who took one Shop for the other, did him much Disservice.'

Martin's willingness to 'borrow' from Cuff's designs and his flair for self-promotion soon drove Cuff away, if only to another part of Fleet Street.

For a year or so (1757-8) he ran a shop under the sign of the 'Double Microscope, three Pair of Golden Spectacles & Hadley's Quadrant'. He gave up keeping retail premises after further financial difficulties forced him to auction off his stock but continued to make instruments to order and take on apprentices, latterly at a workshop in the Strand.

At least his pre-eminence as an instrument maker was not in doubt; there are records showing payments were made to 'Mr Cuffe' on behalf of George III in 1770 and 1771 to provide him with such materials as a diamond, grinding tools, emery and six chucks for his lathe. His being known to the

Optical connections

King was probably how he came into contact with Zoffany, who, incidentally, was similarly poor with money despite his renown as an artist.

Johan Zoffany (1733-1810) was born in Frankfurt and served apprenticeships in Regensburg and Rome before arriving in London in 1760, the year of George III's accession to the throne. Largely through his acquaintance of the famous actor David Garrick, and his portraits of him – and the pieces he exhibited at the Society of Artists exhibitions, he came to the notice of the King's adviser, the Earl of Bute. Commissions from Bute finally led to a commission from the King and Queen in 1764 to paint their infant sons. With the patronage of the Royal couple, Zoffany had truly arrived.

Thanks to the support of King George, at whose prompting he was elected a Royal Academician, Zoffany was busier than ever with commissions and was making good money. But his profligate nature meant that he was using it even faster. It seems that the King may have been aware of this, giving him new commissions to help ease his financial worries. One of these may have been to paint the portrait of Cuff, although it has been mooted that Zoffany may have offered a portrait to Cuff in lieu of payment for optical services. The consensus view, however, is that it was either painted for or purchased by the King who, as mentioned above, supplied Cuff with funds for materials and probably purchased his microscopes.

The painting, dated 1772, shows the optician seated at a workbench grinding a lens on a treadle-operated lathe. He is wearing protective clothing against glass dust on his head and arms; his spectacles rest above his forehead. His bench and shelves are populated with tools, glass and pots. Behind him stands his assistant. Some questions linger: there is some doubt as to whether the optician is indeed John Cuff; assuming that it is, can his assistant and the workshop location be identified?

According to Oliver Millar's authoritative *The Later Georgian Pictures in the Collection of Her Majesty The Queen* (Phaidon, 1969), the painting was originally exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1772 under the title, *An optician, with his attendant*. It was subsequently described as *Two Old Men*, the sitter being identified variously as 'Mr Cuff' or 'Mr Cuffs', and later still as *The Lapidaries*. A now-invisible pencilled remark on the stretcher made around 1859 asserted 'Dollond the Optician in the Strand London' which has been taken to refer to Peter Dollond, Optician to the King, who perfected the achromatic telescope. But, as Millar notes, Dollond was born in 1731, surely too young to be Zoffany's subject.

Accepting Cuff as the sitter, then a list of his apprentices is known. The last of these was William Cox, whom Cuff turned over to another optician, Charles Lincoln, in 1771. Assuming that the painting took a year to complete, as Millar says is usual for Zoffany, Cox could be a candidate; but it is hard to imagine that the old-looking figure assisting Cuff is an apprentice. Perhaps he will never be identified with certainty. The workshop's location presumably is the place in the Strand, mentioned above, that he kept from 1764; but this remains to be confirmed.

To gaze at Cuff's image is to see a man who would die the year the painting was completed. At some point he had printed (and possibly wrote himself) *Verses Occasion'd by the Sight of a Chamera Obscura*, which was sold by Mrs Cooke in 1747. The following extract could stand as apt testimony to the craftsmanship and financial tribulations of both Cuff and Zoffany:

*Each wondrous work of thine excites Surprise;
And, as at Court some fall, when others rise;
So, if thy magick Pow'r thou deign to shew;
The High are humbled, and advanc'd the Low;*

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