The year before he died, celebrated explorer and botanist Sir Joseph Banks (1743-1820) disingenuously insisted: ‘I do not feel as if Vanity was a Prominent tree in my character’. Nevertheless, he vituperatively rejected the ‘intended Brittle Compliment’ of a commemorative Sévres vase because he disapproved of its proposed illustrations.

Over the years, Banks carefully monitored the images of himself which became available for public consumption. Recognising the propagandising power of visual representations, during his long reign as President of the Royal Society from 1778 to 1820 he influenced how he was shown in his own portraits, and commissioned paintings celebrating his colleagues’ achievements.

The earliest portraits of Banks, such as that by Benjamin West, from 1773, present him as a romantic young explorer. In contrast, the major oil paintings of the early nineteenth century, such as the one by Thomas Phillips (recently on loan to the National Library), depict a powerful statesman of British science. Nowadays, Banks is celebrated as one of Australia’s founding fathers, but he also played a key role in establishing science as an important public enterprise contributing to Britain’s domination of both the natural and the political worlds. By monitoring how his body was displayed, Banks influenced British perceptions of science and its practitioners, and helped to mould a prestigious status for men of science.

Portraits are particularly rewarding to study for this period, because people valued them as role models as much as for their resemblance to specific individuals. As one

Thomas Phillips (1770-1845)
Sir Joseph Banks 1743-1820 c.1808-09
oil painting: 35" x 45"
Reproduced courtesy of the Image Library, State Library of New South Wales
Phillips painted this dramatic figure of a powerful scientific administrator, a new social role that Banks helped to create.

(right) James Gillray (1757-1815)
The Great South Sea Caterpillar, Transformed into a Bath Butterfly
(London: H. Humphrey, 1795)
hand-coloured etching: 34.5 x 24.8 cm, plate mark
Rex Nan Kivell Collection
From the Pictorial Collection
By mocking Banks as a South Sea caterpillar adorned with the red sash and star of the Order of the Bath, James Gillray was making a political comment on the conduct of science.
prominent text (Jonathon Richardson’s *An Argument in Behalf of the Science of a Connoisseur*, 1719) explained, ‘All the fine arts have a double purpose; they are destined both to *please* and to *instruct*’. Portrait painting was traditionally regarded as an inferior form of art, but English artists of the eighteenth century contributed to its rapid rise in status. Benjamin Haydon judged English portraiture to be ‘one of the staple manufactures of the empire. Wherever the British settle, wherever they colonise, they carry and will ever carry trial by jury, horse-racing, and portrait-painting’. Furthermore, the demand for engravings expanded explosively towards the end of the eighteenth century. Cheap prints were widely sold in galleries, while articles in books and journals were increasingly illustrated with portraits. Through engravings, pictures of Banks reached wide audiences, and helped to counteract the impact of the numerous caricatures and scurrilous pamphlets which mocked his bids for status.

After his return from the Pacific in 1771, Banks was denigrated as a botanic dilettante rather than a serious man of science—as shown in the caricatures of the ‘Botanic Macaroni’ and the ‘Fly-Catching Macaroni’. As President of the Royal Society, antagonism crescendoed during the dissensions of 1783-84, when he was accused of incompetence and of discriminating against experts in physics and mathematics. Cruel caricatures reinforced the bite of satirical verses.

The National Library owns an extremely rare play, *The Philosophical Puppet Show*, by one of Banks’ adversaries hiding behind the pseudonym ‘Solomon Snip’. (Some printers specialised in selling vicious satires to victims eager to buy their silence, so Banks’ allies probably tried to suppress its publication. Possibly only three other copies survive today.) The play’s frontispiece presents Banks as a Punch-like doll in a robe trimmed with ass’s skin, perched on a wooden throne and exhibited as a fairground oddity alongside other human curiosities and his own bizarre specimens. Baron Beetle, Sir Christopher Crabtree and other sycophantic supporters cluster round the ‘bustling, quibbling, foolish, ignorant Sir Joseph Margin’, the proud but nearly illiterate collector of shells like the one on his jester’s cap.

Banks tried to ensure that more flattering presidential images were publicly disseminated. One of his favourite drawings by John Russell was widely reproduced, and Banks boasted that ‘men of Science ... have honor'd Russell’s Print with a Place in their apartments’. During his Presidency, many similar images appeared showing him as a soberly dressed and thoughtful man, very different from the caricatures that circulated.

Banksian iconography altered significantly in 1795, when King George III awarded him the Red Ribbon of the Order of the Bath. In response, only a few days after he was knighted, a cartoon by James Gillray was published, lampooning Banks, the South Sea caterpillar, for his transformation into a Bath butterfly. Gillray was using Banks to attack the scientific community he represented. Appearing in the wake of the French Revolution, this caricature articulated conservative fears of the dangerous political implications of scientific experiments—the shell by Banks’ left shoulder is a *bonnet rouge* of the French revolutionaries. Parodying the language of the *Philosophical Transactions*, Gillray described how this ‘New Bath Butterfly ... first crawl’d into notice from among the Weeds & Mud on the Banks of the South Sea ... it is notice’d and Valued Solely on account of the beautiful Red which encircles its Body, & the Shining Spot on its Breast’.

Membership of the Order of the Bath signified immense prestige, and the artists who drew or painted Banks with the star and red sash of the Order presented a presidential image very different from Snip’s of a decade. 
earlier. Widely available as engravings, these later portraits consolidated Banks' transformation into a statesman of science, the man decorated by the king for increasing Britain's international scientific, imperial and commercial standing. Banks' preferred artist for the occasion was Thomas Phillips, who painted him several times. Phillips made three virtually identical portraits, one copy of which was recently on loan to the National Library. The original, exhibited at the Royal Academy in 1809 and now in the State Library of New South Wales, was owned by Banks himself, while the third was commissioned in 1815 by the Royal Society of London, where it still hangs. The copy loaned to the National Library was painted in about 1810 for the eleventh Duke of Somerset, was hung for a time in the dressing room of his wife Charlotte (an enthusiastic correspondent of Banks), and was handed down through the family before being bought by a Sydney publisher in about 1940.

Banks was very concerned about his self-presentation in this portrait. The original was commissioned by a Spanish astronomer, Jose Mendoza y Rios, whom Banks had befriended. Leaning forward in his throne-like presidential chair, Banks exudes authoritative decisiveness. He has chosen to wear a luxurious black jacket, set off by lace at his neck and wrists, and a white silk waistcoat decorated—appropriately for a botanist—with small, coloured flowers. This quasi-royalty is emphasised by the coat-of-arms, the ceremonial mace and ink stand, and the overwhelming redness of the picture—the diagonal slash of

Banks' ribbon is matched by the leather chair back behind him and the elaborate velvet cushion on which he rests his arm.

Before it was exhibited at the Royal Academy, Banks wrote to Phillips specifying important details for this 'excellent Picture'. He suggested that the paper on the table in the centre front depict one of Mendoza's articles on astronomy. However, he asked that the far more prominent pamphlet in his hand be the recent Bakerian lecture by Humphry Davy, the electrical and chemical experimenter who strongly opposed Banks' hegemonic rule and succeeded him as President. At a time of dissent among disparate factions within the Royal Society, this portrait reinforced Banks' authoritarian control over what historians now call the Banksian empire by visually combining electrical chemistry, astronomy and botany. The image was engraved at least six times during the nineteenth century, and was often reproduced in books, popular journals and encyclopaedias, although the first engraving—by Nicholas Schiavonetti—was the only one that faithfully replicated the original.

For more than a decade, individuals and institutions commissioned...
Phillips, who steadily put up his prices, to produce further portraits of Banks. In 1813 he painted Banks in a different role, that of the country landowner. His red sash partially concealed by his military uniform, Banks holds the map of a fen drainage scheme and rests his elbow on official papers. In 1810, Phillips twice painted Banks in a less formal setting, but in an identical pose to that of the loaned National Library portrait. These sombre pictures render Banks older and less imposing; holding a stick in the place of Davy's paper, his bulk is no longer concealed behind a desk. No engravings were made of these portraits, with their suggestions of vulnerability. Shortly after Banks died, Phillips was commissioned to rework the loaned National Library image yet again, for London's Royal Horticultural Society, and this time he showed Banks sitting at his desk in Soho Square with a botanical drawing on the table.

Despite his long term in office, British biographers paid scant attention to Banks, who had contributed little original research and represented an old-fashioned style of science based on aristocratic patronage. Although he never travelled to the Pacific again himself, during his long presidency Banks manouevred the Royal Society into a position where it was partially controlling governmental funds to finance international expeditions.

Whereas early portraits of Banks present him as a youthful Pacific traveller, Phillips' portraits of him in his later years reverberate with the force of an influential scientific administrator who organised further voyages of discovery to augment Britain's commercial, scientific and imperial welfare. However, it is only recently that historians of science, predominantly from Australia, have come to appreciate the significance of this new role which Banks had helped to fashion.

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