

## **The Cult of the Celebrity: Omai, the Exotic and Joshua Reynolds**

This lecture I will look at the events that led up to Joshua Reynolds's portrait of Omai becoming an emblematic and iconic image representing Britain at the very height of its imperial powers. To explore this famous moment from history when two worlds collided I will explore the key players in Omai's story, his origins in Tahiti, his background and motivation to come to England, followed by his time in England and English society and his interaction therein.

I will then go on to look at Joshua Reynolds's ideas regarding his self image, his influences and how this related to his image of Omai. This will be followed by a look at what this portrait of Omai by Joshua Reynolds can tell us about 18th century English society, its perception or preconception of the Other or non-white European and how prevalent pseudo-scientific ideas in this period affected the way Omai was perceived and finally envisioned in Reynolds's painting. I will then look at what happened when Omai returned to the South Seas and impact of going back; can one ever go back what is the impact of returning? Finally I will speak about the legacy of the image we call Omai, which has become an enigma in its own right.

Short Reading list:

House, John, ***Impressionism for England: Samuel Courtauld as Patron and Collector***, (Yale University Press, 1994)

Kaeppler, Adrienne L., Head Curator, ***James Cook and the Exploration of the Pacific***, (Thames and Hudson, 2010)

Rendle-Short, Francesca, (Ed), ***Cook & Omai: The Cult of the South Seas***, (National Library of Australia, 2001)

Postle, Martin, (Ed), ***Joshua Reynolds: The Creation of Celebrity***, (Tate Publishing, 2005)