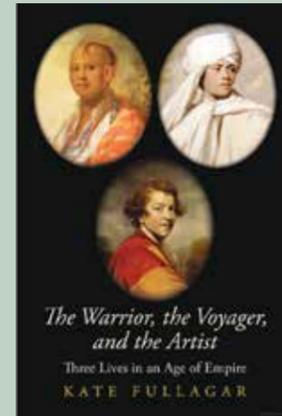


Readings

Mai, the voyaging Ra'iatean, in a 1775 portrait by Joshua Reynolds that is now highly controversial. Creative Commons



Readings



The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist: Three Lives in an Age of Empire

By Kate Fullagar, published by Yale University Press, New Haven, 2020. Hardcover, 306 pages, illustrated, index. ISBN 9780300243062 RRP \$66.95 Vaughan Evans Library 325.3410922 FUL

Traits and portraits

Three 18th-century worlds, melded in art

IN THE SUMMER OF 1776, as the American colonies declared themselves free of the King's domain, Sir Joshua Reynolds exhibited at the Royal Academy of Arts in London. As its President, Reynolds took the liberty of presenting 13 paintings for the season, predominantly portraits. Number 236 in the catalogue was entitled simply *Omah*.

Even within this single word, misrepresentations abound. The subject of the work was not 'Omiah', or even 'Omair', as he was commonly known in Georgian Britain. Mai was a 20-year-old venturer who had sailed to England aboard the former Whitby collier HMS *Adventure*. Born on Ra'iatea – an island neighbour of Tahiti – he had chanced upon James Cook's second Pacific expedition. When asked his name, the young man replied 'Omair' – 'I am Mai'. The misnomer survives to this day, thanks in no small part to Reynolds' portrayal.

Mai is one of a trio of 18th-century characters whose worlds, journeys and portraits are enfolded into Kate Fullagar's master work of historical empathy. Ranging from the 1720s until the close of the century, *The Warrior, the Voyager and the Artist* explores the overlaps of three dynamic realms.

The first was the Cherokee nation, both bounded and bruised by the encroaching British colony of Virginia. Here we meet Ostenaco, whom Fullagar terms a 'warrior-diplomat'. His formative years were characterised by bitter warfare with the nearby Creek people; he subsequently allied with the adjacent Chota. Fullagar's writing is at her richest here, drawing us into Native American beliefs and politics, including pragmatic attempts to parlay with the colonisers and their soldiery.

War and peace, friend and adversary, were never simple matters for Ostenaco. Somewhat self-appointed, in 1762 he elected to join two other Cherokee representatives on a mission to England. As Britain's global war with France began to wind down, the captured naval snow *L'Épreuve* conveyed them to Plymouth. Arriving in London, the Cherokee envoys became celebrated curiosities before earning an audience with George III.

During this English interlude, Ostenaco sat for a portrait by the rising Reynolds. It was not a success. Despite the potential audience appeal, Reynolds completed but did not exhibit this oil, which he titled *Scyacust Utah* – a poor transliteration of 'skiagusta Ostenaca', meaning 'war chief Ostenaco'. While the sitter's impressions are not recorded, Fullagar suggests Ostenaco appreciated that portraiture was 'always of the most significant leaders in a society, intended also to remind future viewers of those leaders and their values after death'.

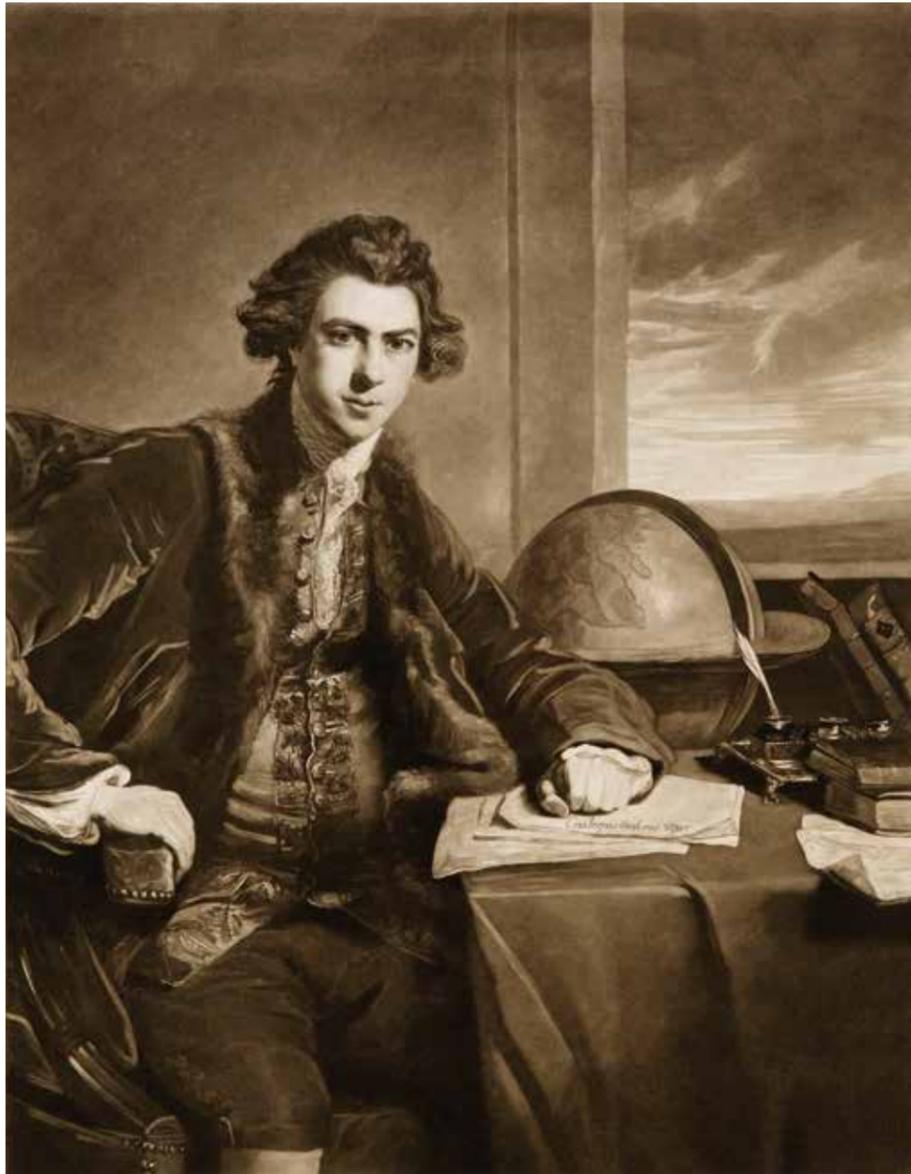
The Warrior, the Voyager and the Artist explores the overlaps of three dynamic realms

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Joseph Banks Esq, engraving from a 1774 painting by Sir Joshua Reynolds. Mai lodged with Banks after he arrived in London in 1774. National Maritime Collection ANMM 00004855

02

Ostenaco was a highly respected Cherokee warrior, but Reynolds was unhappy with this portrait and never exhibited it. Creative Commons



01



02

These were, of course, prime reasons for Reynolds to specialise in portraits. His successes – both artistic and political – help explain the artist's knighthood and his ascension to the inaugural presidency of the Royal Academy. Reynolds' sitters included Joseph Banks, famed for his HMB *Endeavour* voyage with Cook, and soon to become president of the parallel Royal Society.

Establishment art was no liberal salon, however. Reynolds' world was one in which the English army led the dissolution of Scottish autonomy, before Britain's combined arms forced the diminution of France's global empire. Yet even as the nation's military, commercial and diplomatic opportunities grew, this imperium was challenged by American truculence. By 1775 Reynolds' star was also wavering, with some growing 'tired of his constantly winning ways, the firmness of his dictates about what constituted proper art, the relentlessness of his social and professional successes'.

This was the time when Mai disembarked in Portsmouth. Arriving in 1774, he lodged with Banks and posed for Reynolds late the following year. Depicted in an inaccurate Orientalist turban and gowns, Mai's hands and wrists are spotted with tattoos. Rather than a realistic rendering of a venturesome Polynesian, Fullagar suggests that the final portrait is 'a conglomeration of a wide range of stereotypes'.

Kate Fullagar's book is a master work of historical empathy

Mai, like Ostenaco before him, pointedly sought the acquaintance of George III. In addition to his tattoos, Mai also bore the scars of being twice wounded by maritime marauders. The first projectile to pierce his body was blasted from the cannon of HMS *Dolphin*, lying off Tahiti in 1767. Mai's second scar was the result of being speared on Huahine five years later, during a Bora Boran attack in the name of the god 'Oro'.

These two encounters underpinned Mai's voyage to England, and his determination to return to Huahine. Four years with Britons had convinced him of the power of their weapons and the symbolic strength he anticipated as their ally. In 1777 Cook welcomed him aboard HMS *Resolution* for a third and final foray into the South Seas, where Mai acted sometimes as an interlocutor and elsewhere an interloper during contact with First Nations peoples.

Yet Cook scuppered Mai's hopes of being outfitted to lead a reprisal war against Bora Bora, leaving him embittered and vulnerable. Meanwhile, in Chickamauga, Ostenaco wearied of being courted by both revolutionary and Native American factions. 'Much as he had done at other key moments in his life', Fullagar empathises, 'Ostenaco turned what appeared to be a sad tale of Indigenous reaction to foreign forces into an Indigenous tale of deliberate, local creativity for a group's survival'.

The Warrior, the Voyager, and the Artist is an extraordinary achievement. Its creative prose is matched by exhaustive research and a generosity of spirit that accords its three protagonists equal validity, volition and voice. It draws us deep into parallel worlds that were increasingly entwined by the late 18th century, linking Pacific, American and British history in the decades before the First Fleet forced new encounters on Australian shores. While pitched at an academic audience, this book will appeal to many readers and well deserved its 2021 NSW Premier's History Award.

Reviewer Dr Peter Hobbins is the museum's Head of Knowledge.