



JOHN CLOSTERMAN (1660-1711)

Frances, Dorothy, Elizabeth and Gertrude Ashley-Cooper, the four sisters of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury

c.1701–02

Oil on canvas

33 1/4 x 50 3/8 in. (84.5 x 128 cm)

PROVENANCE

Commissioned by Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1671–1713), for St Giles House, Wimborne St Giles, Dorset, c.1701–02;

Presumably by descent;

Sotheby's, London, 21 November 1979, lot 103 [as 'Portrait of Four Ladies, in a wooded landscape, one playing a mandolin'];

Anthony Mould Ltd., acquired from the above;

Private collection, U.K.;

Hansons, Derbyshire, 2 April 2026, lot 84 [as 'After Sir Godfrey Kneller, Portrait of four ladies arranged in a landscape'];

Philip Mould & Company, London, acquired from the above.

LITERATURE

'Accounts 1711–1719', schedule/inventory of St Giles House, 1713, The National Archives, PRO 30/24/22/6; Richard Pococke (1754), in James Joel Cartwright (ed.) (1889) *The Travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke, Successively Bishop of Meath and of Ossory, during 1750, 1751, and Later Years*. London: Camden Society, pp. 137–138; Malcome Rogers, (1983) 'John and John Baptist Closterman: A Catalogue Of Their Works', *The Volume of the Walpole Society* 49, 1983, no. 135 [as 'Unknown Women'].

PHILIP MOULD

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This lyrical group portrait is a magnificent example of English Baroque art and exemplifies John Closterman's mastery in colour and composition.

Until recently, the identities of the women in this portrait had been lost. Recent research, however, has identified them as Frances, Dorothy, Elizabeth and Gertrude Ashley-Cooper, sisters of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, one of the most influential moral philosophers of the early eighteenth century. Shaftesbury was Closterman's most important patron at this date and commissioned a series of family portraits from the artist when he returned from Italy in 1699. The portraits were painted for display at Shaftesbury's impressive country seat, St. Giles House in Wimborne St Giles, Dorset, and are among Closterman's most distinguished works.[1]

Closterman was born in Westphalia and settled in England in 1681, where he was employed as a drapery painter in the studio of John Riley before working independently. He soon established a flourishing career among the wealthy English aristocracy and in 1696 was invited to the Spanish court, where he painted portraits of the King and Queen. Soon after, he embarked on a tour of Italy and Spain, likely supported by Shaftesbury. [2] Closterman and Shaftesbury's relationship was evidently closer and more intellectually collaborative than the conventional portraitist-patron relationship. Writing from Rome in 1699, Closterman responded warmly to his patron's plan for a family portrait, and to the prospect of working at St Giles, where the two men might develop its conception together.[3] Although the family portrait never materialised, it was replaced by a group of significant works in which Shaftesbury and his immediate family were immortalised through portraits rich in philosophical and classical allusion. This is especially apparent in the best-known work from this group, the famous double portrait of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury, with his brother Maurice [fig. 1]. As dedicated Neoplatonists, they both believed the material world reflected a higher reality, and that visible things could be understood as manifestations or symbols of invisible truths. The temple behind them is dedicated to Apollo, the god of the liberal arts, and



Fig. 1 | John Closterman, *Maurice Ashley-Cooper; Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury*, c.1700-1701. National Portrait Gallery, London.



Fig. 2 | John Closterman, *Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury with an unidentified attendant*, c.1701-02.

they gesture upward toward a break in the clouds, referencing the light of knowledge. A further portrait of Shaftesbury wearing philosopher's robes with an unidentified attendant reasserts his commitment to the pursuit of knowledge [fig. 2], and another portrait of Maurice in hunting dress with a groom and horse further references the importance of nature in leading an enlightened life. A portrait of Catherine Bowyer, Lady Ashe, shown in a landscape setting as St. Cecilia [fig.3] was also perhaps part of this group and was either commissioned by Shaftesbury or given to him by the sitter for his interior scheme.[4] Within this series, the present work, in which the sitters are enveloped by nature and surrounded by classical allusions, fits comfortably.

In Rome, Closterman was immersed in ancient history and its relics, and the subsequent Shaftesbury portraits show how readily he translated this newly acquired visual vocabulary into portraiture. The double portrait of the Earl and his brother has been connected by several scholars with the celebrated antique group now known as the San Ildefonso Group, which Closterman would have encountered in Rome [fig. 4]. And in the present work, the reclining figure in green may have been influenced by what was then known as Cleopatra, and now identified as the Sleeping Ariadne, in the Vatican Belvedere [fig. 5]. Her pose recalls the long classical tradition of the reclining nymph, in which the female body became associated with springs, fountains and personifications of nature. Although identifying each sister is difficult due to the lack of comparative iconography and recorded life dates, it is assumed that Frances was the eldest and therefore likely the reclining figure at the centre. Dorothy, the second daughter, is almost certainly playing the lute. This identification is further supported by a portrait by Jonathan Richardson inscribed 'Mrs Hooper' (Dorothy married Edward Hooper in 1700), which shows a sitter with physiognomy similar to the woman shown here in blue.[5]

Shaftesbury's surviving House Book records Closterman as his guest at St Giles from 9 August until 24 September 1701, perhaps longer.[6] Crucially, the same records establish that Shaftesbury's brother Maurice and his three unmarried sisters were then staying at St Giles, and



Fig. 3 | John Closterman, *Portrait of Lady Ashe as Saint Cecilia*, c.1700-01

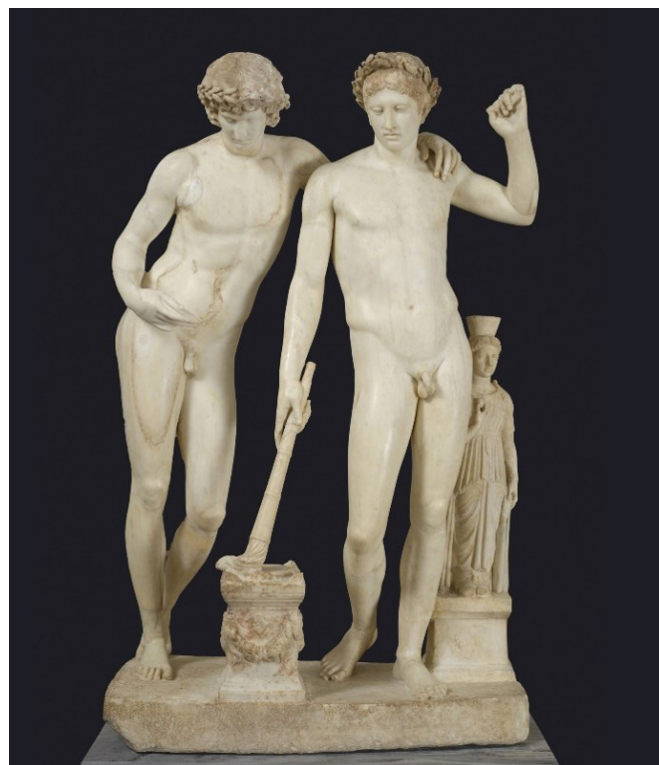


Fig. 4 | San Ildefonso Group comparison with John Closterman, *Maurice Ashley-Cooper; Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury*, c.1700-1701.

his married sister Dorothy and her husband Edward regularly dined and stayed at the house.[7] At the same time, alterations were being made to the house specifically to accommodate pictures. In October 1701, a bricklayer was paid for finishing the windows of the 'Picture-room', and painters were paid the following month.[8] A letter of 1702 from the Countess of Rutland records Shaftesbury's wish to extend his family gallery: portraits of his relations were to occupy a room described as "finely & nobelly adorned", and he hoped that the Duke and Duchess of Rutland would themselves sit to Closterman.[9] By the 1713 inventory, the family portraits were recorded in the 'Great Room', whose contents included portraits of the first and second Earls, the recently deceased 3rd Earl, his brother Maurice and "his 4 sisters all in Frames in the Wainscott".[10]

A further description of the collection made more than half a century later provides further insight into how the present work was originally displayed. When the traveller Richard Pococke visited St Giles on 6 October 1754, he noted among the family pictures the four daughters of the present Earl's grandfather, associated with "the emblems of one of the four elements", with "Latin poetry under them" relating to the same subjects.[11] We can therefore assume that beneath their original setting were inscriptions, added by the 3rd Earl or later, to further reflect the intellectual interests that prompted the commissioning of this important group of portraits.

At present, we do not know who consigned the present work to auction in 1979; however, just seven months later, the 10th Earl of Shaftesbury sold a significant group of family paintings removed from St Giles at Christie's. These included Closterman's celebrated double portrait of the 3rd Earl and Maurice, which is now in the collection of the National Portrait Gallery, London.

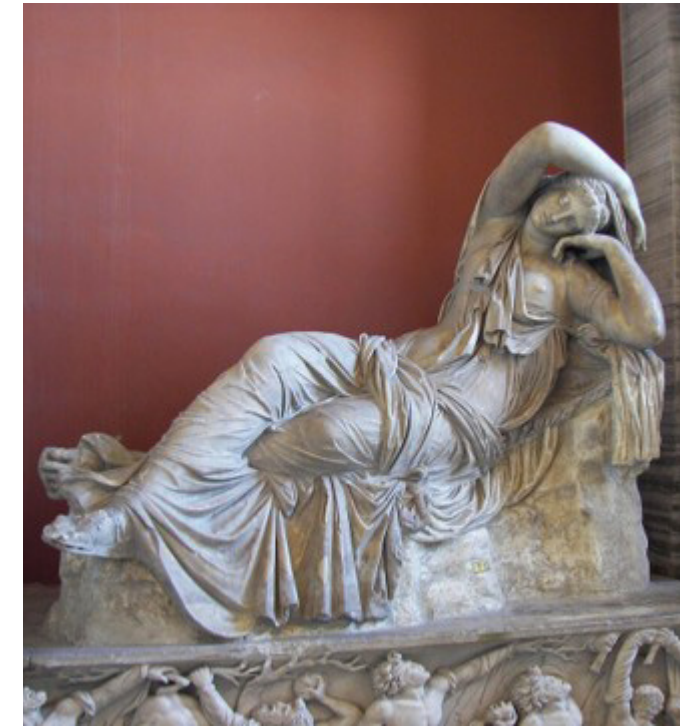


Fig. 5 | Sleeping Ariadne. Vatican Museums.

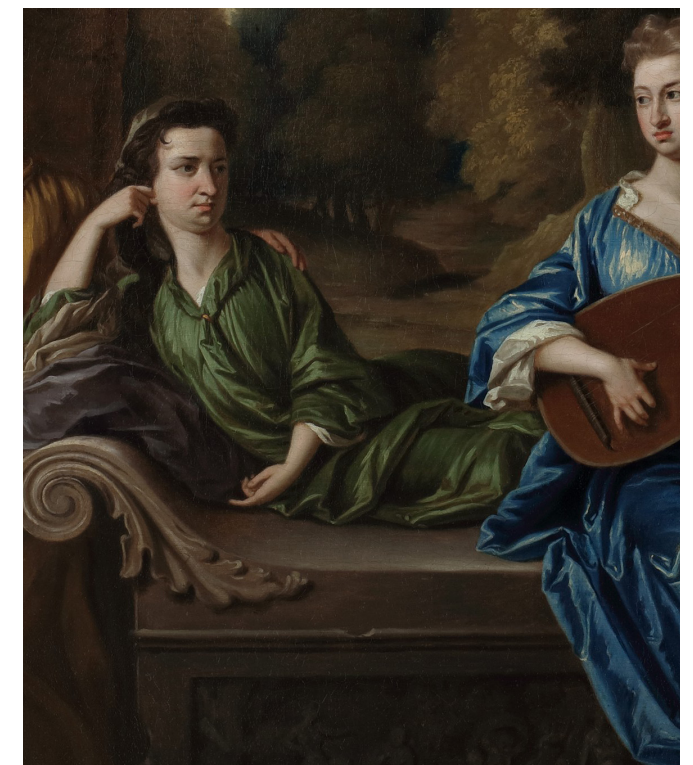


Fig. 6 | John Closterman, *Frances, Dorothy, Elizabeth and Gertrude Ashley-Cooper, the four sisters of Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury*, detail.

[1] For further information on the commissioning of these works, see Patrick Müller, The Shaftesbury Project ‘Portraits’. *Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg*. Available at: <https://www.angam.phil.fau.de/fields/enst/lit/research/shaftesbury/biography/portraits> (Accessed: 08.08.2026).

[2] ‘John Closterman’, *The National Portrait Gallery*. Available online: <https://www.npg.org.uk/collections/search/person/mp06797/john-closterman> (Accessed: 18.09.2026).

[3] Malcom Rogers, (1983) ‘John and John Baptist Closterman: A Catalogue of their Works’, *The Walpole Society*, 49, p. 259.

[4] Malcom Rogers, (1983) ‘John and John Baptist Closterman: A Catalogue of their Works’, *The Walpole Society*, 49, p. 239.

[5] Sold Crescent City Auction Gallery, New Orleans, 20 September 2025, lot 458.

[6] Anthony Ashley-Cooper, 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury (1701–1703), in Jackson-Holzberg, Müller, and Uehlein, (eds.) (2020) *Shaftesbury: Standard Edition. III. Correspondence*, vol. III/3. Stuttgart-Bad Cannstatt: frommann-holzboog. Available at: https://www.frommann-holzboog.de/sites/fh/files/public/downloads/leseprobe_shaftesbury_band_iii_3.pdf (Accessed: 9 August 2026).

[7] Ibid, p.31.

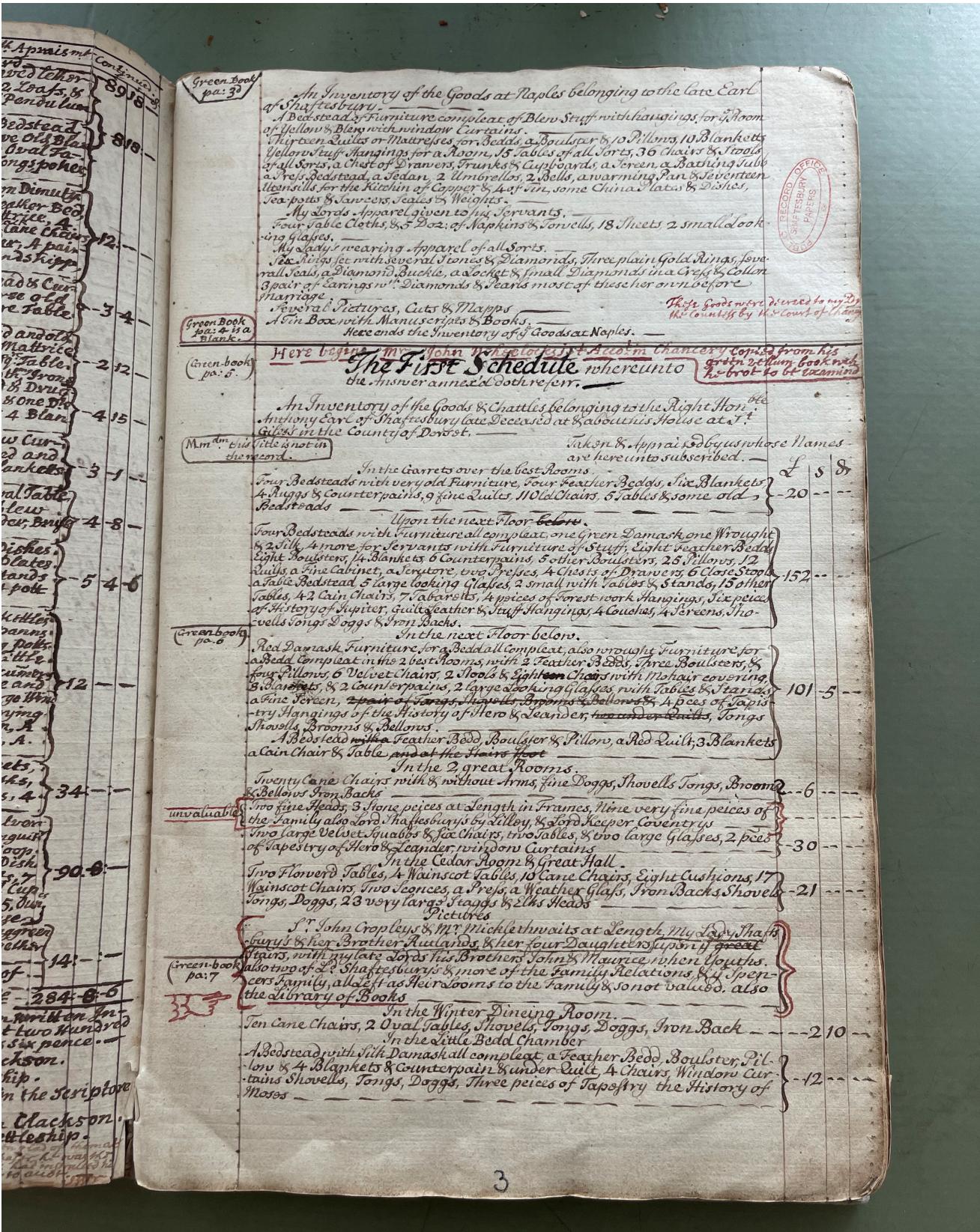
[8] Ibid, p.33.

[9] Ibid.

[10] Shaftesbury Muniments, SG/13, p. 7.

The National Archives, PRO 30/24/22/6, ‘Accounts 1711–1719’, schedule/inventory of St Giles House, 1713.

[11] Richard Pococke (1754), in James Joel Cartwright (ed.) (1889) *The Travels through England of Dr. Richard Pococke, Successively Bishop of Meath and of Ossory, during 1750, 1751, and Later Years*. London: Camden Society, pp. 137–138.



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