

Jane Austen's world at the Ashmolean

Jane Austen lived from 1775 –1817. Georgian society forms the backdrop to her novels which involve a range of characters from the middle and upper classes. Her novels deal with a range of subjects including the historical context, fashion and clothing, social hierarchies, the role and status of the clergy, gender roles, relationships, marriage and the pastimes of well-off families. Jane Austen's brief life and writing career coincided with one of the most transformative eras in British history, marked by revolution abroad and unrest at home. The signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, the year after Austen's birth, signaled the start of the American Revolution, followed in the next decade by the beginning of the French Revolution in 1789. For the next two decades, Britain was engaged almost without cease in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars of 1793–1815, one of the most significant conflicts in British history. Austen would also have witnessed the start of industrialisation in England. Outside the privileged world of her novels, a third of the country's population lived on the verge of starvation, spurring food riots across the countryside and fear of the spread of revolution. Her novels often explore domestic concerns over property, money and status that highlight the changing social landscape of late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century England.

Galleries containing relevant objects from the time

Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts. Explore paintings and objects from Austen's time.

Gallery 44: European Art. Discover how grand country houses would have appeared at the time.

Gallery 5: Textiles. Look at examples of textiles and fashion including Indian shawls.

Gallery 40: European Ceramics. Find a dessert table set for a fashionable dinner.

Gallery 50-51: Oil Sketches. See paintings of landscapes including works by Constable.

Gallery 35: West Meets East. Many people and some of Austen's characters made their fortunes through trade.

Gallery 5: Textiles

1. Portrait of a Young Woman

Gioacchino Serangeli (1768-1852) WA 1971.387



This portrait from around 1807-10 shows fashionable dress of the time. There are frequent references to fashion in Austen's letters and novels. The sitter appears to wear a highly fashionable white muslin dress and yellow Indian shawl. In *Northanger Abbey*, there are references to spotted muslin and Mrs Allen mentions a 'delicate muslin' dress which is at risk of being torn.

Gallery 5: Textiles

2. Kashmir shawl, Kashmir, India early 19th century EA 1958.74



By the 1800s Kashmir (cashmere) or Indian shawls had become a high fashion item in Europe. During the late 18th and early 19th centuries, an unprecedented number of Indian cloths and quality fabrics were exported to Britain. An authentic Indian shawl was highly prized for its quality, cost and prestige. Lady Bertram in *Mansfield Park* talks about buying an Indian Shawl.

Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts

3. Miniature painting (1789-1907)

Barbara Meyer, dated 1802 and inscribed Barbara Meyer aged 59, Eliza Anne Paye Pinxit. Watercolours on ivory



Jane Austen described her writing as being done with a fine brush 'on a little bit (not two inches wide) of ivory'. This refers to miniature paintings which were highly fashionable at the time, painted on thin ivory wafers. Explore other miniatures on display for examples of fashionable clothing and hairstyles.

Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts

4. Bust of Edward Salter aged six, John Michael Rysbrack, 1748 WA1999.22



Edward Salter was a prebendary of Winchester Cathedral (died 1812 aged 70). The clergy often feature in Jane Austen's work, as do the Royal Navy. Jane Austen's father was a clergyman, as were her brothers James and Henry. Becoming a clergyman was a respected profession. Austen is buried at Winchester Cathedral. Through her father's church connections, she would undoubtedly have known Edward Salter.

Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts

5. Mr Suett as Dicky Gossip in 'My Grandmother', c.1797 Samuel de Wilde (1748-1832) WA1924.1



Jane Austen frequently attended the theatre when visiting London, including the Theatre Royal, Drury Lane. Her letters mention actors and actresses she had seen. Although Mr Suett was not directly referred to, she would certainly have heard of him. Austen and her family often performed amateur theatricals in a barn at her childhood home.

Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts

6. Miss Elizabeth Keppel, later Mrs Thomas Meyrick, Sir Joshua Reynolds, 1782 WA1885.157



The artist Sir Joshua Reynolds (1723-1792), was one of the greatest portrait painters of the time. Jane Austen visited an exhibition of his work in London in 1813 and afterwards wrote to her sister Cassandra that she was disappointed not to find a likeness of 'Mrs D', Elizabeth Bennet from *Pride and Prejudice*, in the show.

Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts

7. Teapot WA1957.24.1.60



Tea, imported from China, was an expensive commodity, kept under lock and key by the mistress of the house. At Chawton Cottage, Jane Austen was in charge of the tea chest and making tea in the morning. Tea drinking features in many of her novels, often during the afternoon or after dances. In *Mansfield Park*, Henry Crawford declares 'But indeed I would rather have nothing but tea'.

Gallery 51: Oil Sketches

8. Water Meadows near Salisbury, John Constable (1776-1837) WA1929.32



Constable was a contemporary of Jane Austen. Salisbury is the main city in the vicinity of Fullerton, the rural home of the Morlands in *Northanger Abbey*. Mrs Allen tells Henry Tilney how far it was to travel to Salisbury to shop. Constable was famous for his landscapes. His paintings relates to popular ideas about the picturesque in the late 18th century, referred to in novels such as *Sense and Sensibility* and *Northanger Abbey*.

Gallery 40: European Ceramics

9. Dessert table



A table set for dessert in a prosperous English middle class household in 1760-1770. Laid with Worcester dessert plates, dishes of the period, wine and syllabub glasses and silver from the 1730s. Dessert was the final course and wealthy families would use a different porcelain service to the main course. Dessert included fresh, stewed and preserved fruit, sweetmeats, fondants, nuts, biscuits, jellies and syllabub (a dessert of wine, whipped cream with orange or lemon), served in glasses.

Gallery 39: Music and Tapestry

10. Violin, Nicolas Lupot, 1816 WA1999.24



Music played a key part in Jane Austen's world, particularly in the context of social events. Much of the drama, romance and intrigue in her novels takes place at dances. The violin plays the main melody in the music performed by chamber music ensembles which accompanied dances at large balls and events. It would also have been played at more intimate domestic music parties.

Literature in context

Card games were a favourite pastime of the aristocracy. Card tables, card games and card rooms are referred to in Austen's novels. People would typically play cards after a dinner party. In *Pride and Prejudice*, Elizabeth Bennet is described as 'despising' cards and preferring to read books. Find two card tables in Gallery 52: 18th Century Arts. Learn about and play card games from the time.

Research clothing and costume from the time and explore the way different characters' clothing is described in Jane Austen's novels.

Find out about food, drink and tea drinking and the changing patterns of mealtimes. Compare and contrast the diet of wealthy people as described in Austen's novels with that of less wealthy people.

Learn about the range of accomplishments young women were expected to have which included playing a musical instrument, painting, drawing and needlework.

Explore the role of the church in Austen's family and society at the time. Research characters who are connected to the church in Austen's novels.

Explore how trade is presented in Austen's novels. Explore the operation of plantations, the role of slavery and the business of companies such as The East India Company.

Use the Ashmolean's dessert table in Gallery 40: European Ceramics to inspire a short piece of writing describing an imaginary dinner party in Jane Austen's writing style.

Characters from Austen's novels lived in grand country houses. Visit Gallery 44: European Art and Gallery 52:18th Century Arts to imagine their rooms and expensive furnishings.

Further resources

Ashmolean Education Learning Resources:
www.ashmolean.org/learning-resources

Working with objects: key questions

- Who made it?
- Where and when was it made?
- What materials is it made from?
- How was it made?
- What was it used for?
- How was it used?
- Who used / owned it?
- What was its significance at the time it was made?
- How might it be interpreted by different people at different times?
- Why is it on display in a museum?



Sugar bowl and cover 1778-1780. WA1957.24.1.355

There are many references to Antigua in *Mansfield Park*. Sir Thomas Bertram, the wealthy owner of the estate of Mansfield Park is also the proprietor of a sugar plantation in Antigua. There is a brief mention of slavery in the novel which was integral to the sugar trade.

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