

# MARTIN FOLKES

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This is a portrait of Martin Folkes (1690-1754), the only person to have been President of both the Society of Antiquaries of London and of the Royal Society. What would being President of a society dedicated to the material past have to do with leading a society dedicated to science? In the 18th century, the ability to observe nature was thought to make scientists ideal to understand the empirical details of ancient artefacts and how they were created. Science and archaeology were seen as one, the Society of Antiquaries and the Royal Society had many common members and held their meetings

on the same day, and Folkes tried to unite the two groups into one organisation. If he had succeeded, the humanities and sciences would perhaps be more united today.

This oil on canvas, purchased in 1999 by the Society from a private collection, was painted in 1718 by Folkes' friend Jonathan Richardson the Elder (1667-1745). At this point in his life, Folkes was a well-regarded astronomer and mathematician in his twenties, a protégé of Sir Isaac Newton and already a fellow of the Royal Society. He would be involved in the debates about revising the Gregorian calendar, served on the [Board of Longitude](#), and worked on mathematical probability. Several of Folkes's friends asked him for his advice about gambling, games of chance, and winning at cards! Folkes also became known for his expertise in coins or numismatics; as Newton served as Warden of the Royal Mint, it was natural for Folkes to follow the interests of his patron and hero. Folkes's book, the *Tables of English Silver and Gold Coins* (1763) was the first attempt to compile a work recording English coinage.

This portrait is unusual in that it has no papers, books or scientific instruments – common symbolic props a painter would use in portraying a mathematician and astronomer. Indeed, later portraits of Folkes show him next to a bust of Newton, or sitting in the Presidential Chair of the Royal Society. Richardson instead painted this portrait to commemorate his and Folkes's friendship, not as an official image.

The [mezzotint copy](#) of this portrait also gives us a clue to its meaning, including Folkes' personal life motto, *qui sera sera* (who will be, will be). Son of a Member of Parliament, Folkes did not want for money, which gave him the freedom to reject societal norms. He is dressed in fashionable and lux blue velvet with a physique that indicated he liked the pleasures of the table; he was a patron of the Royal Society Dining Club that met at various London taverns. A notorious freemason and Enlightenment freethinker, Folkes was the first member of the gentry to marry an actress, Lucretia Bradshaw, whose debut performance in London was in 1696 in *The Royal Mischief*. Folkes went on to a glittering career, spread the ideas of Newton in Italy and France, served on the board that established the Foundling Hospital, and amassed a huge collection of books and art. He owned a [First Folio of Shakespeare](#) (now at the John Rylands Library of Manchester). Folkes was treasured by his friends for his intelligence, amiability and easy nature. Sadly, his overindulgence in food and drink caught up with him, and he died of the effects of a stroke. This portrait, however, shows Folkes in his prime, ready to be a major participant in the world of Georgian science and antiquarianism.

*Read more about this painting (and all the Society's paintings) on [ArtUK.org](#).*

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#### **Further Reading:**

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