

Sir Joshua Reynolds and the Indian Cashmere Shawl

Date/Time	Tuesday 13 th January 2026 (18.00)	Price	N/A
Venue	Zoom	Lecturer	Dr Jennifer van Schoor

In 1761, Sir Joshua Reynolds became the first known European artist to depict a European subject in Britain wearing an Indian Cashmere shawl. This marked the beginning of a seminal period in which the Indian Cashmere shawl emerged as a motif symbolising British social status in British portraiture. Nearly two decades before French painters such as Antoine-Jean Gros, François Gérard, and Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres began including these luxurious accessories in their society portraits, Reynolds had already incorporated them into his own work—not once, but three times. These exquisitely soft, hand-woven shawls—long prized within the Mughal court as symbols of rank and integral to their gifting traditions—were more than mere decorative elements. Their presence in Reynolds’s paintings reveals a sophisticated awareness of empire, taste, and social distinction. This lecture will explore how the Indian Cashmere shawl entered British visual culture as a subtle yet potent sartorial motif. By closely examining three key portraits—Captain John Foote (1761–64), Mrs Horton, later Viscountess Maynard (1769), and Mrs Baldwin in Eastern Dress (1782)—we will consider how Reynolds used the shawl to suggest refinement, worldliness, and imperial reach. In doing so, we’ll trace how this prized textile was appropriated into British identity, becoming a fashionable signifier that would endure and evolve across the next century of British visual culture.

Lecturer

Dr Jennifer van Schoor was awarded her PhD from Birkbeck in 2019 with much-appreciated support from the Art and Humanities Research Council and under the supervision of Professor Lynda Nead. Having taken time out of academia to pursue her work as an art director and graphic designer, Jennifer is pleased to finally share some of her research with the London Art History Society.