

Journeys with Te tere o Mai

Ruth Spindlow

The Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford

Journeys with Mai is a partnership project between the National Portrait Gallery, Bradford District Museums and Galleries, The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge and The Box, Plymouth.

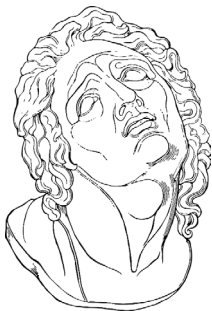
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In July 1774, a pivotal moment in Anglo-Pacific encounters occurred with the arrival of Mai (also known as Omai) in England, marking him as the first Polynesian visitor to reach Great Britain. Mai, a native of Ra'iatea, an island within the archipelago of contemporary French Polynesia, had an early life profoundly shaped by conflict. His displacement began when neighbouring Bora Bora invaded Ra'iatea. This conflict led to the death of his father and forced Mai and his surviving family to seek refuge on the island of Tahiti.

Mai's narrative of upheaval continued even in Tahiti. In 1767, the island became a centre of European exploration and expansion when Captain Samuel Wallis, commanding HMS Dolphin of the British Royal Navy, made the first recorded European landing. Claiming the territory for King George III, Wallis initiated sustained European interaction with Tahiti and its inhabitants. This initial contact set the stage for subsequent voyages and, ultimately, Mai's remarkable journey to Europe, transforming him from a displaced islander into a figure of academic and public interest in Georgian England. His presence offered an unprecedented opportunity for British society to engage with, interpret, and understand the cultures of the Pacific through the perspective of a victim of European exploration.

Mai's two-year stay in England marked a period of remarkable public prominence, elevating him to an almost celebrity-like status. His presence captivated British society, leading to an audience with King George III at Kew and regular attendance at the Royal Society as a guest of Joseph Banks, the British neo-classical sculptor. This period also saw Mai become a compelling subject for numerous British artists, eager to capture his likeness. Most notably, Sir Joshua Reynolds's 1776 masterpiece, *The Portrait of Omai*, stands as a seminal work from this era (fig.1, 1776).



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Figure 1. Joshua Reynolds, *Portrait of Omai*, 1776, Oil on Canvas, 236 x 145.5 cm, installation view. The Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford, 2025. Author's photograph.

Reynolds depicted Mai in ceremonial Tahitian attire, set against a dramatic, evocative backdrop that subtly references the Pacific landscape. This striking painting, an enduring emblem of 18th-century British portraiture and a testament to the intricate relationship between artist and sitter, achieved the distinction in 2001 of becoming the second-highest-valued British painting ever sold.

In 2025, *The Portrait of Omai* embarked on a new journey. Following its acquisition by public and institutional funds in 2023, which prevented it from being sold into private hands, the painting left its customary home at the National Portrait Gallery in London. This strategic relocation will see the portrait travel to three regional institutions across the UK: firstly at The Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, in Bradford, before continuing to The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (add dates) and The Box, Plymouth (add dates). This deliberate move away from the capital aimed to give Mai's portrait new contextual meanings and facilitate engagement with local communities, including those from the Pacific Islands and those who feel an affinity with Mai's struggles. Each temporary exhibition was complemented by an extensive programme of public and community events, many of which were developed by and for the local populations, fostering a deeper connection with the artwork and its broader themes.

The exhibition's inaugural regional stop in Bradford, designated as the UK's 2025 City of Culture, presented a particularly illuminating curatorial approach. Housed within a dedicated, temporary exhibition space in the Cartwright Hall's Hockney Galleries, Reynolds's nearly 2.5-metre-tall *Portrait of Omai* commanded the space, creating an immersive and awe-inspiring experience for viewers (fig.2). The gallery's decision to utilise three temporary internal walls to construct a smaller, purpose-built area solely for the display of the portrait minimised distractions, allowing for an intimate encounter with the artwork. This focused presentation drew attention to the nuances of Reynolds's technique, from the subtle, soaring mountains in the background to the meticulously rendered traditional Polynesian tattoos adorning Mai's hands in the foreground.



Figure 2. *Journeys with Te tere o Mai*, installation view. The Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, Bradford, 2025. Author's photograph.

The re-contextualisation of *The Portrait of Omai* in Bradford also provided curators with a unique opportunity to highlight aspects of Mai's time in England that might otherwise be overlooked in broader national narratives. Supplementary wall texts within the gallery emphasised Mai's experiences in Yorkshire during the summer of 1775, including his visits to horse racing in York, swimming in the sea at Scarborough, and hunting on the Mulgrave estate near Whitby with Joseph Banks. Such granular storytelling underscores the enriching potential of re-locating and re-contextualising prominent artworks within new institutional settings.

Within the specific milieu of the Cartwright Hall Art Gallery, various thematic strands of Mai's portrait gained renewed prominence. As a local, council-owned, free-to-access, community-oriented institution dedicated to celebrating Bradford's diverse immigrant communities, industrial heritage, and citizen narratives through innovative and exciting contemporary exhibitions, Cartwright Hall provided a fitting temporary home for the artwork. The surrounding gallery spaces, designed to celebrate inclusivity and the growing diversity of Bradford's population, further amplified the contemporary relevance of Mai's story—a narrative of arriving in a new town and country for the first time.

This exhibition, though modest in scale, proved to be a resounding success for both temporary exhibitions and touring artworks. The decision to relocate *The Portrait of Omai* to Bradford created an exciting opportunity for new interpretations of the work. A human life, historically marked by upheaval and displacement, now actively reclaims these experiences to engage contemporary communities.