

# James



**B**orn in London around 1723, he was the son of Henry Cox, a tailor. He became Free in 1745, at which time he was described as a goldsmith. Cox also called himself a "jeweller", and a contemporary considered that he had "acquired great knowledge of precious stones, etc. by mere force of uncommon natural genius".

In December 1745, Cox married Elizabeth Liron. In June of that same year he had set up shop in Racquet Court, where he remained until 1756. An elaborate trade card has survived from this period; with a text in English, French, and German, it offers a "Great Variety of Curious Work in Gold, Silver, and other Metalls; also in Amber, Pearl, Tortoiseshell and Curious Stones".

In 1756 Cox entered into a partnership with Edward Grace and moved to larger premises in Shoe Lane. However, Cox & Grace declared bankruptcy in November 1758. The list of Cox and Grace's stock, which was advertised for sale in 1760, was said to comprise "things in the jewelling and toy business suitable both for foreign and home trade". The Cox & Grace bankruptcy did not stop Cox from advancing; on the contrary, he retained the premises in Shoe Lane and continued working. In July 1763, his bankruptcy proceedings terminated with his discharge.

It was during the 1760s and early 1770s that Cox became famous for a very specific genre: elaborate and luxurious musical and automaton clocks and watches, made of precious metals and studded with precious stones, destined particularly for the Ottoman, Indian and Chinese empires, and especially for the court of the Chinese Emperor himself. The first record of such activity on Cox's part is a "notice of two curious Clocks" which appeared in the *Gentleman's Magazine* of December 1766. During this period, and until 1773, Cox's chief "mechanic" was a brilliant Belgian, John Joseph Merlin (1735-1803). Merlin is generally considered to have been Cox's "right hand man", and any pieces signed by Cox which can be securely dated to before 1773, may be designed or even made by Merlin. Later, many clock, watch, and singing bird movements were made for Cox by the Jaquet Droz firm.

Cox earned great renown through the Museum he maintained in London's Spring Gardens from 1772 to 1775. It was a lavish venue draped with crimson curtains, whose ceilings were decorated with "chiaroscuro paintings of the liberal arts", by a "celebrated artist" of the day, probably Angelica Kauffmann.

In 1769, Cox purchased the Chelsea Porcelain Works, intending perhaps to further diversify his trade it has been suggested that he planned to collaborate with Matthew Boulton in the making of ormolu-mounted porcelain vases. However, for reasons that remain unknown but may have to do with Cox's persistently precarious financial situation, the porcelain works were sold again only five months later.

Both profits and demand continued to decline, and Cox soon found himself in difficult financial straits, with insufficient cash at hand, and a large stock in which he had invested hugely.

To remedy this situation, Cox held two sales of items from his stock at Christie's, in July and December 1772. In addition, early that same year he had opened his mechanical museum in the Great Room at Spring Gardens. For the three years of its existence, "Cox's Museum", with its astonishingly high entrance fee of half a guinea, was the talk of London.

# Cox

*lots 93 to 96*

James Boswell, who went to see it in April 1774 at the insistence of Dr Johnson, found it "a very fine exhibition" for "power of mechanism and splendour of show", while Fanny Burney, considered it impressive but somewhat heartless. Satirical verses by William Mason compared Cox's power to that of contemporary politicians:

"...when great Cox, at his mechanic call,  
Bids Orient pearls from golden dragons fall,  
Each little dragonet, with brazen grin,  
Gapes for the precious prize, and gulps it in.  
Yet when we peep behind the magic scene,  
One master-wheel directs the whole machine.  
The self-same pearls, in nice gradation, all  
Around one common centre, rise and fall..."

The museum's success was not sufficient to redress Cox's finances, however, and in 1773 petitioned parliament for permission to sell the pieces by lottery. He explained that after having "designed, and caused to be made ... a Number of curious Pieces of exquisite Workmanship, known by the Name of Cox's Museum, in Spring Gardens" at a cost of over £ 100,000, he had "suffered greatly by the present general Distress and Stagnation of Trade". On this occasion, it was stated that he had exported goods to the East Indies worth £ 741,317, of which £ 557,448 had been realized. The list of pieces offered at lottery was published in 1774, the lottery was drawn in May-June 1775, and the museum closed in December 1775.

Although Cox continued his exports of elaborate mechanisms to the East, the situation did not improve there, and in November 1778 he was declared bankrupt for the second time. A further sale of his stock was held by Christie's in March 1779.

Cox's son John Henry traveled to India and China, remaining many years in Canton, in an attempt to facilitate the recovery of money owed. He was to a degree successful, but unfortunately died prematurely in late 1791, while still in China. The firm of Cox & Son vacated a portion of the Shoe Lane premises in 1794, and gave up their main shop in 1797. James Cox died in Watford in early 1800 and was buried in the family vault in London's Bunhill Fields on February 26 of that year.

We are indebted to Roger Smith for information contained in his article "James Cox (c. 7123-1800): a revised biography". Burlington Magazine, June 2000.

Also see Clare Le Corbeiller, James Cox: A Biographical Review, Burlington Magazine, June 1970, v. 112 (May-Aug 1970), p. 351-358.

