

## **Abstract — Emma Walshe**

Title: Paper Politeness: the Currency of the Visiting Card in Eighteenth-Century Visiting Culture

In the performance of visiting within the long eighteenth century, the visiting card, or calling card, is often figured as no more than a purely practical bit of paper ephemera which facilitated a larger phenomenon. A reappraisal of their appearance, their function, and their use, however, reveals their true significance to social enactments of politeness. Visiting cards were embedded with layers of meaning as a result of the way in which they circulated in the domestic sphere. By leaving a visiting card behind, the owner could offer a delicately constructed attempt at self-presentation. Moreover, to receive a visiting card meant more than to simply acknowledge a visit. Rather, a collection of cards could be catalogued, displayed, and ingeniously recycled within the home in order to create or support one's own polite identity.

Calling cards were numerically and qualitatively valuable. They were constantly mobile both inside and outside the house, and circulated far beyond their initial use. The manner in which they were counted, valued and recycled proves them to be part of a social and domestic culture which was surprisingly mathematical. Card racks, card albums and tabular account books were deliberately used and displayed within the home to both the sender's and the recipient's advantage.

Visiting cards circulated as a kind of paper currency: they were the evidence of social debts, they could purchase a temporary sort of popularity when rearranged in card racks, and they acted as records of exchange. They had a place in household business. Studying them, as both small objects and as part of a larger culture, contributes to notions of domestic accountancy, to the commodification and numerical measurement of sociability, to processes of falsification and early identity fraud, and to methods of polite self-fashioning.

This paper draws on the British Museum's collection of calling cards; on contemporary artistic depictions; on conduct manuals; on novels by Frances Burney, Jane Austen, and Margaret Bayard-Smith; on the series of card racks recently discovered at the National Trust property Attingham Park. It reveals the importance of the visiting card to eighteenth-century notions of domestic accountancy, and to the commodification and numerical measurement of sociability.