

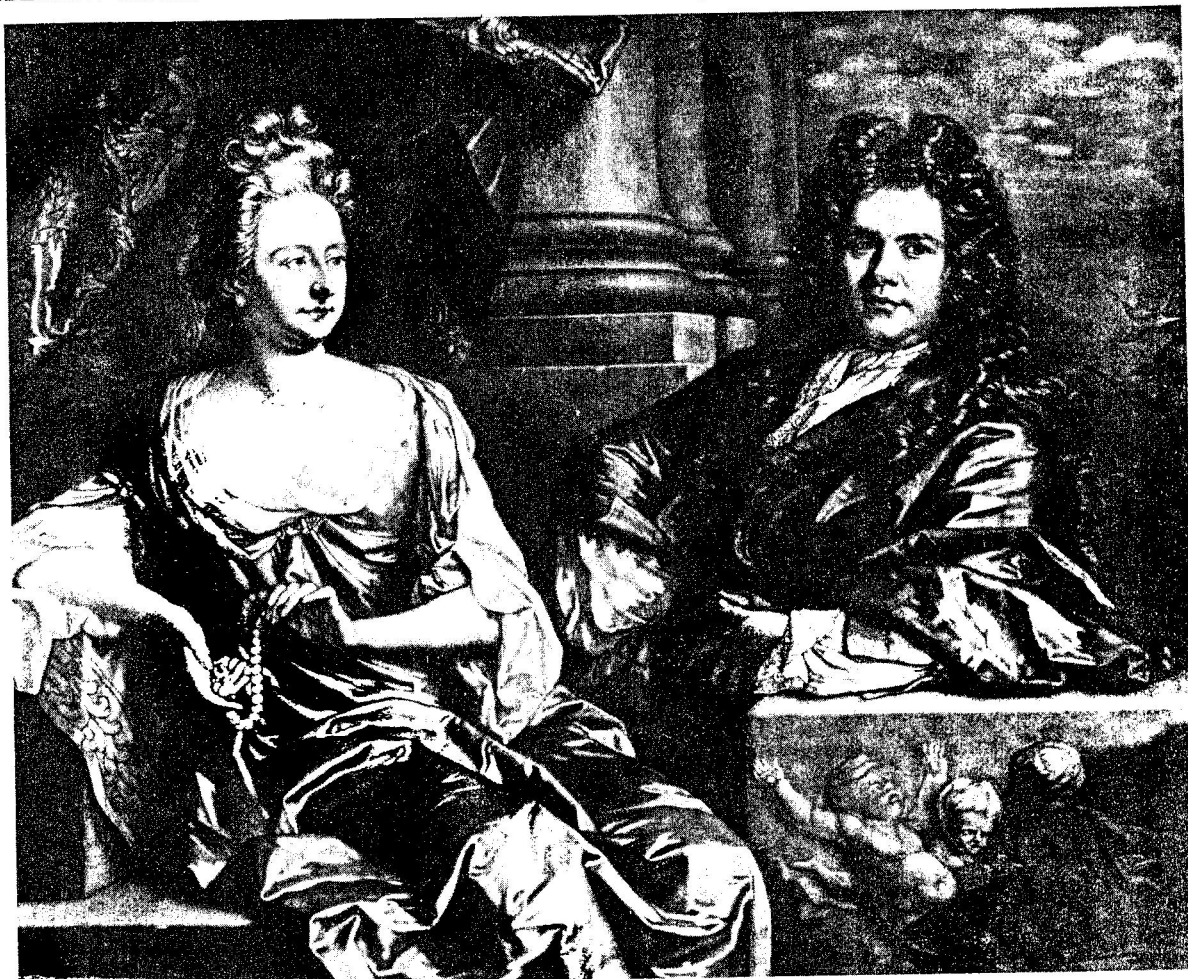
REVIVING A REPUTATION

JOHN CLOSTERMAN EXHIBITION AT THE N.P.G.

By GILES WATERFIELD

THE ultimate degradation of the Lelyesque" was Collins Baker's summary of the work of John Closterman. This summer the National Portrait Gallery is helping to salvage the artist's reputation in an exhibition (until October 4) devoted to his painting. It centres on two works by Closterman recently acquired by the Gallery, one from the recent sale of a large part of the contents of St Giles's House, Wimborne, the ancestral seat of the Earls of Shaftesbury. The Gallery has mounted an excellent exhibition, intimate and elegantly designed: there are some 20 objects on display, including oil paintings and drawings, with prints to represent pictures lost or unobtainable. The catalogue was written by the organiser of the exhibition, Malcolm Rogers, and provides a lucid introduction.

John Closterman is one of several late-17th-century portraitists in England whose reputations have been eclipsed by Lely and Kneller. For many years he was confused with his brother, John Baptist, also an artist, about whom comparatively little is known, although they are recorded as working at St Giles's House at the same time, presumably in collaboration. Like many London artists of the period, Closterman came from abroad, being born in Osnabrück in north Germany in 1660, the son of a painter. After early training from his father, he moved to Paris in 1679, where he worked in the studio of François de Troy. He came to England in 1681.



1—GRINLING GIBBONS AND HIS WIFE ELIZABETH: A 1691 MEZZOTINT BY JOHN SMITH AFTER JOHN CLOSTERMAN. From the exhibition "John Closterman: Master of the English Baroque", at the National Portrait Gallery, London, until October 4

It was common practice in the 17th and 18th centuries for the routine parts of portraits to be executed by studio assistants, and many aspiring artists began their career as "drapery painters". This was the case with Closterman,

who for some time worked in partnership with John Riley, a gifted painter who dominated portraiture in England during the 1680s. The exhibition includes one work from this period: a portrait,

of Katherine Elliot, who acted as a nurse to the future James II in 1635 and much later as Woman of the Bedchamber to both his wives. An old inventory of the content of Kensington Palace lists this picture as by "Riley the head Closterman the drapery", suggesting that, in this case, the contribution of the junior artist was acknowledged. Dr Roger dates the painting between 1681 and 1683. The result of the partnership seems a little clumsy, the pale face looking as though it had been cut out and stuck to the dark background.

By the mid-1680s, Closterman was working independent and becoming established. Many of his early clients were drawn from the professions and the art world and included a number of notable men. The portrait of Grinling Gibbons and his wife Elizabeth—the carver was a friend of Closterman, whose portrait of the Proud Duke of Somerset Perworth hangs in a Gibbons frame—is unfortunately now known only through Smith's mezzotint 1691 (Fig 1). According to Vert this was the "first piece [Closterman] that gained me credit". Though the setting



2—HENRY PURCELL A drawing from life, which was previously attributed to Kneller



(Left) 3—SIR CHRISTOPHER WREN. This portrait was presented to the Royal Academy in 1750