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# Portrait of a Lady

LINING THE CORRIDORS of university buildings and old homes are the forgotten remnants of America's once flourishing portrait painting tradition. For the two and a half centuries before the invention of photography, unknown numbers of itinerant artists worked to record the likenesses of prosperous Americans, and many of the surviving examples of their work—remarkable mostly for their unimaginative compositions, dull coloring and awkward technique—seemingly justify the neglect shown them by both passers-by and art historians.

Occasionally, however, among the ranks of uniformly expressionless faces there will be one which has a human immediacy for the viewer. A fine portrait owned by the Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia<sup>1</sup> exemplifies both the best and worst aspects of this tradition: the features are conventionally immobile, the composition is arranged according to formula, and so forth, but nonetheless our nineteenth-century matron is portrayed with a presence that is more than the mere recording of her image.

The portrait shows a woman seated, her arms resting on the arms of a chair, so that beneath her right hand is visible the scroll forming the end of the chair arm. She is presented in the conventional three-quarter view and is placed before a background of light brown with red and yellow tints. To break up the solid ground, the artist used the common compositional device of a vertical line, which represents a corner of the room.

The hands have a rubbery look, and their streaked highlighting and boneless form resemble the drapery seen under her left arm and behind her shoulder rather than the flesh of the face. The latter exhibits a loose brushwork, in contrast to the smooth linear treatment of the dress, and it is painted in yellow, pink and white, applied in dots. The lace of the cap, crowned by a bow lined with orange, is also handled in this sketchy, impressionistic way. It was common for itinerant portraitists to have their canvasses pre-painted except for the head, which they filled in after they

received a commission, and this could account for the different ways in which the two parts of the canvas are treated in the Missouri portrait.

Contrasting with the directness of presentation, however, is the mystery that surrounds the sitter's identity and the portrait's origin. Not only is the work undated, untitled and unsigned; but thus far an attempt to trace it back through previous owners has been totally unsuccessful. However, even without a known provenance, it is possible to place the portrait in the historical context of American portrait painting.

The earliest tradition in the New World, that of the untrained "limners," dates from the Colonial period and reflects the conscientious effort of the artist to record the features of his sitter. Puritanically rejecting such concerns as color, texture or flattering likeness as being vain and "Catholic," they concentrated on recording unmercifully every wart and wrinkle. As they were unschooled, their shading fails to attain any semblance of three-dimensionality; instead, their pictures become maps of facial depressions and protuberances. Traces of this style still persisted in isolated cases as late as the 1830s, even though it had long been subordinated to other portrait painting traditions.<sup>2</sup>

The inferiority which many American artists tended to feel toward their counterparts in Europe may account for the expatriation of many of them just before 1776. Benjamin West, John Trumbull, Gilbert Stuart and John Singleton Copley all followed this trend, only to return years later to the United States to practise their art and spread European ideas of style. The Van Dyck tradition, with its broad masses of light and dark, graceful poses and aristocratic overtones had some followers; though by far the most important influence on painting in the late eighteenth century was the baroque Grand Style of Gainsborough and Reynolds. Also aristocratic in concept, this style is most easily recognized by the careful concern these artists show in rendering the luxurious sheen and texture of fabrics. Their paintings have a self-conscious delicacy and grace, tending toward a



*Portrait of a lady, anonymous, Museum of Art and Archaeology, University of Missouri-Columbia.*

rejection of realism in favor of idealization and prettiness. They sacrifice the focus on the face to a concern for clothing, or for elaborate architectural or landscape backgrounds.

The most important trend in Early American portraiture, however, revolves around the monumental figure of Gilbert Stuart. This artist, who painted the portrait of George Washington that appears engraved on one-dollar bills, also studied in England under West, but quickly showed a real distinctiveness of style and ability. In 1792 he returned to America and began to paint the works that transformed the fashionable mode of portraiture. Stuart's major contribution came in shifting the emphasis back to the face—and specifically to character expression. In order to do this he disregarded excessive emphasis on clothing and replaced the illusionistic background with a plain field of a dark neutral color; he insisted that his sitters disarrange perfectly combed hair and wear ordinary clothing. He still attempted to make the effect pleasing to the eye, however, mostly by using warm colors and concentrating on the translucent flesh tones which he portrayed so convincingly. Still, his primary concern was always the representation of the transitory expression that revealed character.

It can easily be seen that our portrait is closely tied to this tradition. It has the same emphasis on the face, limiting the background to a brown field and toning down the sheen of the taffeta dress which the sitter wears. Also there is a distinct difference between the painterly handling of the flesh of the face and the precise linear treatment of the rest of the picture. This concentration on the face shows the influence of Stuart's hierarchical approach to portraiture.

But though this explains historically the origin of some of the motifs used in the Missouri portrait, stylistic connections do not help us very much in attempting identification. There were so many portraitists at work in America,<sup>3</sup> some completely isolated and developing on their own, others traveling all over the country assimilating and spreading ideas, that it is impossible to discern from known schools much about date or origin. Instead, the most important evidence we have for dating relies on a field much better documented than that of American portraiture, namely fashion trends in women's clothing.



*Portrait of Anne Pollard by a "limner." The small plaque states that she was 100 when the portrait was made in April 1727. Photo courtesy Massachusetts Historical Society.*

Costume history can often establish precise limits for the period in which a given style was popular. For example, in our portrait the sitter wears a black taffeta dress with "leg-of-mutton" sleeves, and both this kind of sleeve and the black dress are known to have come into fashion in 1820.<sup>4</sup> In the opinion of E. P. Richardson, the cap could not be earlier than 1825.<sup>5</sup> However, if the collar and waistband are velvet, as they appear to be, we can narrow the dating somewhat in that "Black velvet came into fashion for trimming, for belts, for wristlets in 1832."<sup>6</sup> This date then, would seem to be the earliest at which our portrait can have been painted; as for the latest possible date, it must be 1835, when both this type of hat and the leg-of-mutton sleeves suddenly disappeared from fashion.<sup>7</sup> Of course, a dress can survive after a change in fashion, but well-to-do women (and

only these could afford to have their portraits painted) were very conscious of new trends in clothing.

BY FAR the most fascinating clue discovered in studying the portrait, however, is a name written in pencil on the stretchers as well as on the frame, which, from its script, appears to be quite old.<sup>8</sup> It seems to read:

Mrs. G. Hume 912 St. Paul

And on the frame, partly obscured by a nail, one can make out the first part of the same name. At the suggestion of the Missouri State Historical Society, I began to trace the name genealogically through the Hume family.<sup>9</sup>

The Humes, descended from Scottish nobility, were a prosperous, widely scattered family, highly conscious and proud of their family history.<sup>10</sup> The most common name in the family is George, and owing to the large size of the families, there were a great many women named Mrs. G. Hume at one time or another. Unfortunately, the book I consulted is confusing, besides being without indices, so it was not of much help. Thus far I have been unable to locate those Humes who have the family records.

Street guides for cities in the nineteenth century are relatively rare, and it was possible only to determine that New York has never had a street named St. Paul and neither has St. Louis (where many Humes settled). Boston acquired one sometime after 1856, but the city directories list no Humes living there. Baltimore, one of the few cities founded by Catholics, seemed a likely location for a St. Paul street, and indeed it has a main street of that name. From information supplied by the Maryland Historical Society, however, it appears that no Humes ever lived in Baltimore before 1850.

Early hopes that it might be possible to identify the artist of the portrait by stylistic analysis were virtually destroyed by the advice received from Mr. Richardson:

There were scores, even hundreds of artists capable of painting good portraits at that time (1825-35). Unless you can trace this canvas back to a place of origin, I should despair of narrowing down the list of possible artists. Chester Harding,

Waldo, Inman, William E. West, why go on?

This admonishment made the search seem vain, as did the dearth of information on American portraitists beyond the usual ten or so that are frequently discussed and reproduced. Consequently, I was surprised when I did find an artist whose work exhibited remarkable parallels to our portrait.

The artist's name, barely known outside his home state of Vermont except for one-line references in general works, is Benjamin Franklin Mason (1804-1871).<sup>11</sup> In the example of his work shown here one can immediately sense its close relationship to our portrait: the turn of the head, the relationship of the size of the head to the canvas, and the large dark eyes of the two women. One can see similarities in the handling of the chair drapery as well as in the sheen of the hair. The authors of the article on Mason also remark on the distinction he makes between the texture of the black taffeta and the black velvet of Mrs. Wainwright's dress. Other portraits by Mason from 1832 show a similar rubbery treatment of the hands, and one shows the same use of drapery over the subject's left shoulder.<sup>12</sup> Even more convincing, however, is this statement:

The portrait of Judge Fay . . . brings out, for the first time . . . a very characteristic device—that of placing a small highlight on the upper surface of the under eyelid. This device, which we have not observed in the work of any of Mason's contemporaries . . . serves plastically to place the eyeball of a painted subject definitely and surely behind the lid. Mason's eyes are often very large, and without the lid-spot they might easily seem to come forward.<sup>13</sup>

The University portrait also has this lid-spot device. However, though these parallels are striking, it is impossible to propose a secure attribution.

RECENT RESTORATION of the painting has returned to us a considerably older woman.<sup>14</sup> It seems that an attempt was once made to soften the lines of the face, and in so doing the aging jaw was painted over. Now this paint has been removed along with the overpaint of the background, and the work restored to its original condition. The result,



*Portrait of Mrs. Rufus Wainright, by Benjamin Franklin Mason. Photo courtesy of the Sheldon Museum, Middlebury, Vermont.*



Details showing the face of the Missouri portrait. Left: before cleaning and restoration; right: present condition of the portrait.

though somewhat less grand, is rather more interesting in the unflinching realism that shows the artist's acquaintance with the limner mode.

The portrait's identity has not been discovered despite the restoration and careful cleaning. All in all, an attribution probably will have to wait until the field of American portraiture is better documented.

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<sup>1</sup>Acc. No. 68.456. 86.7 x 68.5 cm. Gift of Mr. Russell M. Arundel. See *Muse* 3 (1969) 13, for a reproduction of the painting before restoration.

<sup>2</sup>See, for example, portraits in the *North Carolina Portrait Index* (Chapel Hill 1963) 62, 124.

<sup>3</sup>For example, one book on the subject is entitled *1440 Early American Portrait Painters* (Newark 1940).

<sup>4</sup>E. McClellan, *Historical Dress in America, 1607-1870* (New York 1969) 160; E. Burris-Meyer, *This Is Fashion* (New York 1943) 234.

<sup>5</sup>This information came from Mr. E. P. Richardson, author of *Painting in America*, who wrote on November 29, 1971, a reply to my letter asking his opinion of the Missouri portrait. His help was very much appreciated.

<sup>6</sup>McClellan, *op. cit.*, 14.

<sup>7</sup>Mr. Richardson is the source of the information regarding the hat; for the sleeves, see McClellan, *op. cit.*, 160. Hair dyeing became popular at this time, which may account for the fact that the subject of our portrait looks older than her dark brown hair would suggest.

<sup>8</sup>Discovered by Mrs. Barbro Evans, whose help has been invaluable to me.

<sup>9</sup>I am grateful to the staff of the Missouri Historical Society, particularly Mrs. Oliver Howard and Mrs. James Comfort, for their time and help.

<sup>10</sup>At least two books have been written on the Hume genealogy by members of the family: E. E. Hume, *Hume. A Colonial Scottish Jacobite Family* (Richmond, Virginia 1931) and J. R. Hume, *History of the Hume Family* (St. Louis 1903).

<sup>11</sup>A. Frankenstein and A. K. D. Healy, "Two Journeymen Painters," *Art in America* 38 (1950) 7-43.

<sup>12</sup>From *North Carolina Portrait Index*, 70.

<sup>13</sup>A. Frankenstein and A. K. D. Healy, *op. cit.*, 23.

<sup>14</sup>The painting was cleaned and restored by James Roth.