

Charles Sumner (1811-74), 1865

William Willard (1819-1904)

oil on canvas

30 x 25 (76.20 x 63.500)

signed l.r.: 'W. Willard/1865'

Gift of Charles Taylor Tatman, 1933

Weis 110

Hewes Number: 115

Ex. Coll.: artist, in 1904 to his attorney, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1875, exhibited in the private home of T. W. Wellington, Worcester, Massachusetts.

c. 1890-1904, loaned by the artist to the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, exhibited occasionally.

The United States Senator Charles Sumner, famous for his outspoken views against slavery, was elected to membership in of the American Antiquarian Society in 1843, long before he gained recognition as a politician and orator. He was elected a councilor in 1852 and as the Society's Secretary for Foreign Correspondence in 1867. In 1861, in an attempt to aid the Society and other libraries across the country, Sumner introduced a bill in the Senate that would eliminate duties on books more than thirty years old. After the bill was defeated, one of its opponents commented, 'If all books one hundred years old were destroyed, no valuable knowledge would be lost, there is nothing in an old book of any value.'¹ Sumner strongly disagreed and continued to support institutions like the American Antiquarian Society. A fellow councillor, recalling the Society's perception of its nationally famous member, stated: 'To us he was our associate and to many of us our personal friend. We have felt the warmth of his heart; we have sympathized with his great purposes. Suffice it to say that in the procession of great events which have illustrated the history of our country during the last twenty-five years, he marches always in the front rank.'²

Sumner, who was born in Boston and graduated from Harvard College, was elected to the U.S. Senate by Massachusetts voters in 1851. In Washington he embodied the view of the northern liberals on slavery and, in his booming voice, delivered numerous speeches supporting the abolition of slavery and the introduction of civil rights for all citizens. During his years in Washington, Sumner was also the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and

helped shape the Republican party into an entity strong enough to challenge the Democrats. Part of Sumner's correspondence from his Washington years is housed in the American Antiquarian Society's manuscript collection.³ Copies of many of his orations and published writings can be found in the Society's book collection.⁴

In 1865, when this portrait was painted, Senator Charles Sumner was at the height of a battle for civil rights. He supported universal emancipation for the Southern slaves and helped draft the thirteenth amendment, which was approved by Congress in January 1865. In April, General Lee surrendered at Appomattox shortly before Abraham Lincoln was assassinated. Sumner, more of a reactionary than Lincoln, had battled with the president over Reconstruction policies, but was at his bedside when he died. Eight months later, on December 18th, the thirteenth amendment that states that 'neither slavery nor involuntary servitude shall exist within the United States' was ratified and became law.

The Massachusetts painter William Willard (cat. #152) had several sittings with Sumner, probably in Boston during the summer months of 1865. This portrait of the Senator was considered one of the artist's most successful likenesses. A critic wrote, 'I went the other day with a good many misgivings to see Willard's portrait of Senator Sumner, now on exhibition in Boston. I was, however, greatly delighted with the picture, which is the only really satisfactory portrait of Mr. Sumner that I ever saw. It has not only the air and color, but a certain suggestion of reserved power which was always felt in the presence of the original. Sumner's very self seems [to be] looking at you from the canvas.'⁵ After exhibiting the painting in Boston after Sumner's death, Willard arranged for a private showing in Worcester at the home of one of his patrons. after which it was noted Worcester newspaper remarked of Sumner's likeness, 'Mr. William Willard, already highly esteemed here as a painter of many admirable portraits, has in this surpassed the best of his previous efforts. The concurrent testimony of many competent art critics and near personal friends of Mr. Sumner pronounces this unquestionably the best and the only satisfactory portrait of him that has yet been painted.'⁶

Willard kept the original likeness and made at least one copy.⁷ Around 1890, the aging artist loaned his original Sumner portrait to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston, where it was

exhibited occasionally.⁸ At Willard's death the portrait became the property of his attorney, who presented the painting to the American Antiquarian Society in 1933.

¹ Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (April 1861): 25.

² Joseph Sargent, 'Charles Sumner,' Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (April 1874): 27-8.

³ Charles Sumner Papers 1834-1874, American Antiquarian Society Manuscripts Collection. Most of Sumner's papers are housed at the Houghton Library, Harvard University.

⁴ For more on Sumner see Charles Sumner, Works (Boston: Lee & Shepard, 1875-1883) and Beverly Wilson Palmer, ed., Selected Letters of Charles Sumner (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1990).

⁵ 'Art Matters,' unidentified newspaper, c. 1875, American Antiquarian Society Newsclipping File.

⁶ Unidentified newspaper, Worcester, October 6, 1875, American Antiquarian Society Newsclipping File. The writer saw the portrait at the home of T. W. Wellington.

⁷ James L. Yarnell and William H. Gerds, Index to American Art Exhibition Catalogs vol. 5 (Boston: G. K. Hall & Co., 1986): 3910. A portrait of Sumner by Willard, which was owned by E. L. Bates, was exhibited in 1876 at both the Boston Art Club and the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition.

⁸ The artist offered to sell the painting to the Museum of Fine Arts in 1903 and 1905, but the museum declined to purchase. See M. S. Pritchard to Charles Tatman, June 3, 1905, William Willard Papers, 1889-1912, American Antiquarian Society Manuscripts Collection.