

Benjamin Franklin Thomas (1813-78), c. 1900

Joseph R. DeCamp (1858-1923)

after a photograph

oil on canvas

30 x 24 7/8 (76.20 x 63.18)

signed, u.l.: 'J. DECAMP, After Photo.'

Gift of Francis Peabody Abbot, Agnes Ann Abbot, Mary Perkins

Abbot, and Charles B. Abbot, 1944

Weis 113

Hewes Number: 119

Ex. Coll.: Commissioned by Richard Olney (1835-1917) under the direction of his daughters Agnes Minot (b. 1861) and Mary Olney (b. 1864);¹ to his grandchildren, the donors.

Benjamin Franklin Thomas was a grandson of American Antiquarian Society founder Isaiah Thomas, Sr. (cat. 123 et seq.), and the youngest son of Isaiah Thomas, Jr. (cat. 122). He became a member of the American Antiquarian Society in 1840 and served as both a councillor and the secretary for domestic correspondence before being elected vice president in 1867. Benjamin Franklin Thomas and the other heirs of Isaiah Thomas, Sr., gave legal ownership of the first Antiquarian Hall to the Society in 1831. Many years later, he summarized his grandfather's motivation for founding the American Antiquarian Society: '[Isaiah Thomas's] observation and experience had shown him how quickly the sources of our history were drying up, how rapidly the monuments to the past were crumbling and wasting away. He saw and understood, no man better, from what infinitely varied and minute sources the history of a nation's life was to be drawn; that the only safe rule was to gather up all the fragments so that nothing be lost.'²

Benjamin Franklin Thomas was born in Boston and attended Brown University, graduating in 1830. He was admitted to the bar three years later and began a highly successful legal career in Massachusetts. His skills as an orator and keen legal mind made him one of the best trial lawyers in the state. '[H]owever great his merit as a thinker or debater on legal questions...it is as a jury lawyer that he must be awarded the palm of special pre-eminence...[H]e unconsciously exhaled a sympathy with his client's cause which was infectious and charged the atmosphere of the court room and...he spoke, not as a well-graced actor reciting his part nor with any simulated passion, but with an earnestness and fire which were real and genuine.'³ He left his lucrative legal practice after appointment as a justice of the Supreme Court of Massachusetts

in 1853. He was also elected to the United States Congress in 1861 but returned to Boston and the legal profession after serving one term.⁴

Thomas commissioned charcoal portraits of himself (fig. 30) and his wife (fig. 31) in 1851. The Society's portrait was painted from a photograph after Thomas's death at the request of his son-in-law and biographer, Richard Olney.⁵ The photograph and painting capture Thomas in his middle years, when he was described as a man 'of rather more than medium stature [who] had the stoop of the student and the man of books. His presence was striking, being marked by a massive and well-proportioned head, lustrous eyes deep set under jutting brows, a mobile mouth, and the reddish hair and florid complexion that go with the sanguine temperament.'⁶ The artist was Joseph R. DeCamp, who was born in Cincinnati, Ohio, and attended the Cincinnati School of Design, where he studied with the painter Frank Duveneck (1848-1919). Decamp became one of the 'Duveneck Boys,' a small group of Americans under Duveneck's direction who attended the Royal Academy in Munich, travelled to Florence and Venice, and explored the trends in contemporary painting.⁷ Decamp returned to the United States and settled in Boston in 1880. When he made the copy of Thomas's portrait, he was a teacher at the Massachusetts Normal School and was firmly established as a portrait painter in the area. Some of his later sitters included Theodore Roosevelt and Frank Duveneck.⁸

¹ The portrait was deposited as a loan to AAS by Agnes Minot 'from the Estate of Richard Olney' in 1940. (See Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society 50 [October 1940]: 203.)

² Benjamin Franklin Thomas, 'Memoir of Isaiah Thomas,' Transactions of the American Antiquarian Society 5 (1874): lxxxiii.

³ Richard Olney, Memoir of Benjamin Franklin Thomas (Cambridge: John Wilson & Son, 1900), 6.

⁴ For biographical information on Thomas, see Olney's memoir and an obituary in Proceedings of the American Antiquarian Society (October 1878): 11-14, 61-64.

⁵ The photograph is illustrated as the frontispiece in Olney, Memoir of Benjamin Franklin Thomas. When the portrait was given to AAS, one of the donors noted: 'There seems to be general agreement that it was done from a photograph, Mrs. Olney and Mrs. Minot superintending the progress of the work more or less to make sure that the coloring should be characteristic of Judge Thomas.' (See Agnes A. Abbot to Clarence Brigham, July 2, 1940, AAS Archives.)

⁶ Olney, Memoir of Benjamin Franklin Thomas, 8.

⁷ For more on Duveneck, see Michael Quick, An American Painter Abroad: Frank Duveneck's European Years (Cincinnati: Cincinnati Art Museum, 1987).

⁸ Dictionary of American Biography, s.v. 'Thomas, Benjamin Franklin'; and Laurene Buckley, Joseph DeCamp: Master Painter of the Boston School (New York: Prestel Press, 1995).