

Isaiah Thomas (1749-1831), 1859

Benjamin Kinney (1821-1888)

plaster, black paint

25 (h) (63.50)

incised on right side: "Hon. ISAIAH THOMAS/Founder & first President/of the/American Antiquarian Society/By/B. H. Kinney/1859."

Gift of Peter Mack Brown, 1975

Hewes Number: 129

Ex. Coll.: artist, early ownership unknown, acquired by the donor's father in the twentieth century.

Exhibitions:

May-June 1859, studio of the artist, Worcester.

June 1859, Antiquarian Hall, Worcester.

1985, "B. H. Kinney. Gravestone Carver and Sculptor,"
Worcester Historical Museum.

Publications:

William D. Wallace, B. H. Kinney, Gravestone Carver and Sculptor, (Worcester: Worcester Historical Museum, 1985): 31.

In May of 1859 Benjamin Kinney, a sculptor working in Worcester, Massachusetts, completed this plaster bust of Isaiah Thomas.¹ Kinney exhibited the plaster cast in his studio, where it received favorable notice. The local newspaper reported, "It is with no ordinary degree of satisfaction that we are enabled to announce another highly successful effort in sculpture, by our townsman B. F. Kinney. We have already noted the fact that he was engaged on a bust of the late Isaiah Thomas. The original model of it having been completed, he has made a cast from it, which, since it was finished, is pronounced by good judges the most successful of his works; and this is no small praise. So perfect is the likeness that it was instantly recognized by one of our elderly citizens . . . As a work of art, the bust is creditable to Mr. Kinney's talent and skill – as a faithful representation of [Thomas], it is invaluable."²

¹ Massachusetts Spy, May 25, 1859, p. 2. For inspiration, Kinney may have visited Antiquarian Hall to study the American Antiquarian Society's portrait of Thomas by Ethan Allen Greenwood (cat. #123).

² Massachusetts Spy, June 1, 1859, p. 2.

The public success of this plaster bust, which acquired a coat of black paint sometime after it was completed, helped Kinney to secure a commission for the same composition in marble. In June of 1859, Isaac Davis (cat. #39), a member of the American Antiquarian Society who had patronized Kinney in 1855, arranged for the artist to complete a marble version of the bust of Thomas for the American Antiquarian Society (cat. #130). The plaster bust remained in the possession of the artist. In 1975 it appeared in a private collection in Washington, D.C., and was offered to the Society by the owner. The director of the American Antiquarian Society wrote, “[W]e are extremely happy to have this cast to add to our collections To our way of thinking the plaster cast is more pleasing in that its detail is somewhat finer than the marble rendition which we have had since 1859.”³

³ Marcus A. McCorison to Peter Mack Brown, December 12, 1975, American Antiquarian Society Archives.