

Abigail Leonard West (1796-1879), c. 1796

Christian Gullager (1759-1826)

oil on canvas

21 x 17 (53.3400 x 43.1800)

Bequest of Henry Winchester Cunningham, 1930

Weis 137

Hewes Number: 144

Ex. Coll.: David and Abigail West; to their daughter the sitter; to one of her sons: James, Horace, or David; to James's son, the donor.

Exhibitions:

1948, 'Early American Portraits of Children,' New York Historical Society.

1949, 'Christian Gullager,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 25.

1971, 'Early American Paintings from the Collections of the Worcester Art Museum and the American Antiquarian Society,' Worcester Art Museum.

1977, 'Wellsprings of a Nation,' Worcester Art Museum, no. 263.

Publications:

Louisa Dresser, 'Christian Gullager,' Art in America (July 1949), 170-71.

Rodger D. Parker, Wellsprings of a Nation (Worcester: American Antiquarian Society, 1977), 139.

Abigail Leonard West was born in Boston, the only daughter of the bookseller and publisher David West (cat. #146), who died when she was fourteen years old. A year later, in 1811, her mother married Andrew Cunningham, Sr. (1760-1829), a widower with a twenty-five-year-old son who was active in maritime commerce. Young Abigail fell in love with her step brother and in 1816, at the age of twenty, she was married to Andrew Cunningham, Jr. (1786-1861). Her husband became a successful Boston ship owner and merchant dealing in foreign goods. The couple eventually had eleven children, six of whom survived to adulthood.¹

This portrait and the painting of Abigail's older brother David (cat. #147), were probably commissioned by the sitters' parents while the artist Christian Gullager was completing a likeness of David West, Sr. Gullager, who started painting in Boston in 1789, often placed advertisements in newspapers offering his services as a decorative painter, a designer of engravings, and a profile artist.² Gullager left Boston sometime between

January and the autumn of 1797, when he appeared in New York City.³ Abigail West was born in February 1796, so it seems likely that Gullager painted this portrait at the end of that year, or early in 1797 before he left Boston.

The three Gullager portraits, which were owned by the sitters' parents, descended to the grown-up Abigail West Cunningham, who hung them in her house on Mount Vernon Street in Boston.⁴ In an 1876 codicil to her will, she directed that the three portraits be divided among her three sons, James, Horace, and David.⁵ They eventually were all owned by her grandson, the historian and American Antiquarian Society member Henry Winchester Cunningham (cat. #36), who left them to the Society in 1931.

¹ Henry Winchester Cunningham, 'Andrew Cunningham of Boston and Some of his Descendants,' New England Historical and Genealogical Register 55 (October 1901): 422.

² Columbian Centinel, May 5, 1792, p. 4.

³ Marvin Sadik, Christian Gullager: Portrait Painter to Federal America (Washington, D.C.: National Portrait Gallery, 1976), 20-21.

⁴ An 1849 drawing of the exterior of the brick house by David West Cunningham is in the collections of the Massachusetts Historical Society. See Proceedings of the Massachusetts Historical Society 53 (April 1920): 177.

⁵ Louisa Dresser, 'Christian Gullager,' Art in America (July 1949): 171.